'The Big Society' Fact or Fiction? - a Sociological Critique

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Genesis of an idea

"You can call it liberalism. You can call it empowerment. You can call it freedom. You can call it responsibility. I call it the Big Society" (David Cameron, July 2010)

1.1 One of the most prominent 'vision statements' of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Westminster Government has been the idea of 'The Big Society'. This paper provides a synopsis of the main features of the concept before offering some sociological critique. The terms 'volunteer society', 'the reflexive state' and 'the self-transformative state' are introduced. It concludes with brief comments about the contested nature of 'the Big Society' concept.

1.2 Originally introduced by David Cameron in his Speech to the Conservative Party Conference on 8 October 2009, he explained the principles behind the idea in more detail in his *Hugo Young Lecture*, 10 November 2009. The speech offers an intellectual grounding for the idea based around a contrast between Conservative 'Big Society' and Labour's 'Big Government'. He explains that whereas the post-war welfare state was, up until the 1960s 'generally successful' in combating poverty and social inequality, its subsequent expansion, especially during the three Labour administrations from 1997 to 2010, resulted in a progressive hollowing out of the moral centre of society. Big government has ended in 'moral failure':

Human kindness, generosity and imagination are steadily being squeezed out by the work of the state (...) state control is [has become] a substitute for moral choice and personal responsibility, obligation and duty are in danger of becoming dead concepts instead of living value systems (...) What is seen as an act of solidarity, has in practice led to the greatest atomisation [individuation] of our society. (David Cameron, *Hugo Young Lecture*, 10 November 2009)

1.3 Crucially, and although Cameron occasionally invokes the established Tory mantra of 'rolling back the state', he offers what is intended to be a more intellectually sophisticated vision not of a state-less society, or a society where state intervention will be withdrawn until the state 'withers away' entirely, but of the state *continuing to play* an important role in the transition towards 'the Big Society':

We need a thoughtful re-imagination of the role, as well as the size, of the state (...) This means a new role for the state: actively helping to create the big society; directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal (...) We want the state to act as an instrument for helping to create a strong [Big?] society. (David Cameron, *Hugo Young Lecture*, 10 November 2009)

1.4 Cameron's vision that 'the Big Society' is about social transformation provides a central motif for the *Conservative Party Election Manifesto 2010: We're all in this together*. The idea is used a number of times in the Foreword as a device for explaining what the Conservative Party is offering by way of 'change':

It is a change from one political philosophy to another. From the idea that the role of the state is to direct society and micro-manage public services, to the idea that the role of the state is to strengthen society and make public services serve the people who use them. In a simple phrase, the change we offer is from big government to Big Society. (Foreword to *Conservative Party Election Manifesto 2010*)

1.5 There is a separate section entitled 'Build the Big Society' in which several passages are taken verbatim from the text of Cameron's *Hugo Young Lecture*. This reiterates his vision of: 'a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control' (*Conservative Party Election Manifesto 2010*). The essence of the transitional strategy will be devolving decision-making responsibility from 'the top' to 'the bottom' on the grounds that local people know what is best for them: 'Our starting point has got

to be a redistribution of power away from the central state to local communities' (David Cameron Policy Announcement 31 March 2010).

1.6 The idea of 'the Big Society' subsequently became one of Cameron's major campaigning slogans ahead of the UK General Election which took place on 06 May 2010. A lengthy booklet *Big Society not Big Government: Building a Big Society*, was launched by Cameron on 31 March 2010, which described, as he put it, 'a big idea that has informed my whole time as Conservative leader (....) It is a guiding philosophy – a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control'. He goes on to describe who will be the agents of change in 'The Big Society':

To make these reforms work, we need to give new and existing social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups the long-term incentives they need to develop and deliver innovative and high quality public services, and this paper sets out new plans to do that (...) Our ambition for the UK is clear: *we want every adult in the country to be an active member of an active neighbourhood group.* (David Cameron Policy Announcement, 31 March 2010, original emphasis)

1.7 In his presentation of the policy document Cameron also begins to address the question of how the new-found civic virtue will be funded:

We will use unclaimed assets from dormant bank and building society accounts [the Big Society Bank] and get extra private sector investment to provide hundreds of millions of pounds of new finance directly to social organisations. (David Cameron Policy Announcement, 31 March 2010)

1.8 Interestingly, however, in an earlier and less well-publicized statement, the policy of reducing social dependency on the state *includes* charities and the voluntary sector, who will receive funding strictly on a business model of payment by results:

And if we want to break the culture of charities and social bodies being dependent on the state for hand-outs we need to look at how government can use loans alongside grants to help make them more sustainable and effective (...) (David Cameron *Hugo Young Lecture*, 10 November 2010)

1.9 Providing clear evidence of David Cameron's dominant position *viv-a-vis* his Liberal Democrat colleagues, one of the first joint statements of the Conservative-Liberal Coalition Government, issued by the Cabinet Office on 18 May 2010, was a document called 'The Big Society Programme'. This document reiterated Cameron's vision of 'the Big Society', and some of the specific policy initiatives (5,000 new community organizers, Big Society Day, National Citizen Service, Localism Bill) which would be introduced by the Coalition Government to bring it about. A Cabinet Office press release was issued under the heading 'Government puts Big Society at the heart of public sector reform'. Both David Cameron and Liberal Democrat Party Leader Nick Clegg were quoted in support of 'agreed policies for building the Big Society':

1.10 *Prime Minister, David Cameron, said:* "During the election campaign I extended an invitation to everyone in this country to join the government of Britain. I said that the idea of the Big Society would be marching through the corridors of power – and it's happening right now. Today is the start of a deep and serious reform agenda to take power away from politicians and give it to people." (Cabinet Office Press Office, 18 May 2010).

1.11 *Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, said:*

"We need radical change that puts power back in the hands of people. Only by bringing down vested interests and giving people real control over their lives will we build a Britain that is fair" (Cabinet Office Press Office, 18 May 2010).

1.12 Although Clegg's endorsement is clearly less vociferous than Cameron's, and although the Coalition's vision of social change is couched in terms which are broadly compatible with established Liberal principles of devolved political power, subsidiarity, 'fairness', and open government, it is notable how closely the joint policy statement follows what started out as David Cameron's personal political vision. As a bi-product of internal negotiations within the coalition, 'the Big Society' idea was neatly transformed into a set of agreed policy objectives targeted fairly explicitly at reforming the public sector.

Re-launch of 'the Big Idea'

2.1 By February 2011, only nine months later, Cameron was forced to re-launch his 'Big Idea' (for example an article in the *Guardian* newspaper, Saturday 12 February 2011, and in an interview with the BBC political correspondent Nick Robinson) in the face of growing skepticism not only over the measures which had (or had not) been taken to encourage the emergence of 'the Big Society', but also as to whether the concept had any validity and integrity. Critical commentary had been offered by Labour Leader Ed Miliband, TUC General Secretary Brenden Barber, Sir Stephen Bubb, head of the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organizations, Dame Elisabeth Hoodless of the Community Service Volunteers Organization, Matthew Taylor Chief Executive of The Royal Society of Arts, and Dr John Sentamu, Archbishop of York.

2.2 The political judgment seems to have been that sufficient time had elapsed for 'Big-Society' social change to take shape but that this had not, and did not seem likely to, happen. Worse still, scepticism about the policy coincided with a surge of public concern over the withdrawal of public funding for essential social and welfare services. Although Chancellor George Osborne announced the results of his initial 'Spending Review' on 20 October 2010, it was not until Spring 2011 that the impact on jobs and services

was being felt. His Budget Statement scheduled for 23 March 2011 was being anticipated with great trepidation especially by the large number of public-sector employees whose jobs seemed to be threatened, and by the charities and voluntary sector who feared imminent financial melt-down.

2.3 The simple conclusion was reached that 'the Big Society' idea was a cynical attempt to suggest that the shortfall in public provision of social and welfare services would be made up for by the emergence of a large and enthusiastic reserve army of voluntary labour. In the public imagination, 'the Big Society' increasingly came to be seen as 'the Big Con'.

2.4 Clearly there was concern that Cameron's 'Big Idea' would soon become a 'Big Problem' for him, and for the Coalition Government, unless it could be salvaged. Cameron asserted: 'Have no doubt, the big society is on its way (...) the big society is here to stay'. Attempts were made to give the idea substance by talking up examples of *who* might take a lead in developing community-based projects and initiatives, and *how* the reformed coalition state would help them do so:

"For example, if neighbours want to take over the running of a post office, park or playground, we will help them. If a charity or a faith group want to set up a great new school in the state sector, we'll let them. And if someone wants to help out with children, we will sweep away the criminal record checks and health and safety laws that stop them." (David Cameron, *Guardian*, 12 February 2011)

"We're giving nurses, doctors, teachers and police officers much more power over the work they do - scrapping the rules that held them back and giving them the chance to come together, form co-ops and take over the running of public services." (David Cameron, *The Sun*, 08 October 2010)

We can summarize these kinds of examples as "the nine Ps of 'the Big Society'": People, Power, Planning, Public services, Philanthropy, Pubs, Post offices, Playgrounds, and Parks.

2.5 The fundamental difficulty remained, however, that Cameron was struggling to explain how, in the face of spending cuts, the reserve army of voluntary labour would be resourced. Again the solution was to provide more detail so that the idea would appear more real:

(...) We are in the process of opening up billions of pounds' worth of government contracts so charities and social enterprises can compete for the first time (...) We are launching a transition fund to help charities prepare to bid for these contracts and a big society bank to provide some working capital when they're awarded them. (David Cameron, *Guardian*, 12 February 2011)

A sociological critique

3.1 Looking at the vision of 'the Big Society', as described in these key policy documents and pronouncements, from a sociological point of view, it fails as a coherent political vision, and as an intellectual platform for 'public sector reform', because it conflates critical differences between 'society', 'state', 'government', 'community', and 'neighbourhood'.

3.2 (1) First, Cameron's vision of 'the Big Society' seems to presume that society will become more like community but without addressing the fact that society and community operate at completely different levels and scales of activity. In his *Hugo Young Lecture* Cameron correctly notes the difference between the family-like, emotional or 'natural bonds' which characterize 'community', and the more formal and objective relations or 'synthetic bonds of the state – regulation and bureaucracy' which characterize what Ferdinand Tönnies called, in 1887, 'society' or 'association'. What he fails to do in the rest of his analysis is apply this difference consistently, or recognize properly the impact of this difference, on the way that people respond to different kinds of need.

3.3 It is naive to treat modern UK society as if it were a neighbourhood or a community operating on the larger scale. The emotional language of community and neighbourhood is out of place when looking at the delivery of society-wide social and welfare programmes. Referring to "the nine Ps of 'the Big Society'" listed above, for example, many of the examples cited by supporters as evidence of 'the Big Society in action' are micro-level highly local projects and initiatives (Post Offices, Pubs, Parks, Playgrounds) which raise utterly different issues of purpose and organization compared with society-wide institutions and responsibilities like the Probation service, Public transportation, and Policing.

3.4 (2) Second, a similar conflation is evident in the way that 'government', 'the state' and 'the welfare state' are treated in the vision of 'the Big Society'. As clearly indicated by the banner heading referring to the policy as being 'at the heart of *public sector reform*' (Cabinet Office 18 May 2010, emphasis added), the real target of 'the Big Society' campaign, is not so much big government, or even the state, but *the welfare state*. Although Cameron's model for social change is presented as a solution to the problem of 'moral decline' in UK society which he blames on big government, what he really seems intent on doing is reversing the trend towards public-sector employment, and reducing public expenditure of welfare. Notwithstanding the fact that we certainly can envisage a smaller government which has a smaller bureaucracy, and a smaller civil service clearly it would not have been politically sensible for the Conservative Party to have fought the 2010 General Election on a platform of replacing the welfare state with Neighbourhood Watch.

3.5 (3), Third, the vision of 'the Big Society' trades a great deal on the idea that, through positive and active engagement in their neighbourhoods and communities, the good citizens of the United Kingdom will renew their commitment to social responsibility. Notwithstanding the pithy Britishness of these sentiments, and

the evident fact that many if not most people already 'do their bit', this expectation fails to acknowledge that 'social responsibility' also describes the tasks which citizens have charged the government and state to manage *on their behalf*. This is not to suggest that people are selfishly sitting on their hands and passing responsibility 'up', but simply recognizes that fundamental decisions *have already been taken* that, given the scale of the health, education and social welfare needs of a population of 60 million persons, such responsibility *can only be properly discharged* through the society-wide institutions of the modern welfare state. The welfare state does not *exclude* the possibility or social desirability of groups of individuals taking small-scale initiatives in the micro world of their immediate neighbourhoods, but 'social responsibility' requires the intervention of the state at the macro level. 'Social responsibility' is the responsibility which the electorate has charged *the institutions of government and state* to deliver on its collective behalf.

3.6 One could argue further that the emergence of the welfare state in Britain after 1945, a development which, like the social reforms of the nineteenth century which Cameron welcomes, is simply a recognition that, *despite* the very high levels of local initiative and 'pulling together' which characterized war-time and post-war British society, intervention had to be, and could only be, managed at the level of society not community. This is why a new kind of state, the welfare state, emerged at that particular historical juncture. Cameron's vision of 'the Big Society' reflects an image which is important to him personally, of a passed Golden Age of philanthropic welfare responsibility: 'When the welfare state was created, there was an ethos, a culture to our country – of self-improvement, of mutuality, of responsibility' (David Cameron, *Hugo Young Lecture*, 10 November 2009). Although politically enticing, his analysis of the welfare state is weak in explaining how and why the role of social welfare has changed and developed since the Golden Age of the 1940s and 1950s. His conclusion is simply 'too many public sector jobs', 'too much expenditure on welfare', and 'a rupturing of the moral fabric'.

3.7 (4), Fourth, and referring to what we have called the reserve army of voluntary labour, there is a major overestimation of the possibility that individuals will want to get involved in 'community', 'neighbourhood', and 'society' to a greater extent than they already are. Although it is difficult to quantify, it seems probable that "every adult in the country" *already is*, or has been, "an active member of a neighbourhood group". Ironically, given repeated references to the desire to "get government regulation out of the way", 'the Big Society' implies that real activism, real volunteering, real charity work in what we can call 'the new volunteer society' means signing up to an official group or organization; to become members of the "little platoons" of 'the Big Society' (*Big Society not Big Government*, 31 March 2010). Volunteering is redefined as formal involvement in a bidding process geared to payment by results. People also contribute to social and welfare policy collectively through the taxation system. Although this contribution is routine and anonymous, it is something of a misrepresentation to suggest that people only contribute to the welfare of others when they pitch up to organize a street party for the Royal Wedding.

3.8 Referring again to the Golden Age of Welfare, Cameron's analysis disregards important changes in patterns of economic activity and household responsibility. If there ever was a reserve army of volunteers, its numbers might have been seriously depleted by increasing demands on people's time and especially greater labour market participation. We need to reflect on how, for whom and in what ways 'volunteering' is a necessary activity. Asking people to pay taxes to fund services, then asking them to do so *again* through volunteering when they are hard pressed to meet the needs of their own households, seems naïve in the extreme.

3.9 Furthermore, and as critics from the charities and voluntary sector have pointed out, there is a serious risk that in the new 'volunteer society' people in disadvantaged communities will become even more marginalized since they are unlikely to have the personal and financial resources necessary for 'volunteering'. 'Transforming lives through transforming communities' requires more not fewer resources and, regrettably, communities in greatest need of regeneration, are least well placed to raise these resources for themselves. And this is likely to be the case *despite the fact* that neighbourliness and local participation are not the preserve of the middle-class rural communities which the Conservative Party regards as 'its' type of community.

3.10 (5) Finally, the underlying strategy of the withdrawal of the state which underpins the vision 'the Big Society' is very much at odds with that of other areas of Coalition Government strategy. Space precludes an adequate analysis of it here, but we can note that its approach to economic reform most certainly *does* recognize the fact that the redistribution of economic and social opportunity across UK society as a whole cannot be achieved through local initiatives. It is a structural economic challenge which requires society-wide intervention. Similarly, the principle that the state should withdraw is most definitely *not* applied in the area of national security. If society-wide intervention is recognized as legitimate, necessary and expedient in bringing about economic recovery and security of the citizen, then why should it be rejected so vehemently as a way of providing social and welfare security?

'Society' – A contested concept

4.1 The nervousness which many political opponents of 'the Big Society' idea feel, (for example, the very cautious approach of the Labour opposition at Westminster) stems from the fact that critics do not themselves want to be criticized for being 'against society' or 'anti-society'. What is at stake are sometimes quite subtle differences in perceptions of the changing nature of society, and the role of the modern welfare state. A clear example of this is the occasional slippage which occurs both in the *Hugo Young Lecture* and in the *Conservative Party Manifesto*, between the terms 'the Big Society' and 'the strong society'. Whereas the former remains an awkward and obscure conception for the reasons we have been discussing, 'the strong society' conveys a much more positive and accessible image of 'society'. Most importantly, it helps resolve three of the most obvious design faults of 'the Big Society' idea. First, 'the strong society' acknowledges that despite attempts *politically* to assert that state will be required to withdraw, *socially and economically* the active intervention and support of the state remains essential. Second, it confronts the

issue of resources, not by imagining that citizens will simply 'do more to help out', but by prioritizing the central provision of funding for social welfare. Third, it acknowledges that much more consideration needs to be given not to shutting down the welfare state, but to understanding how 'the reflexive state' or the 'self-transformative state' can undergo its own process of renewal.

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