Communities of Resistance:
Resistance is not futile Understanding how neo-liberalism can be challenged by common and reciprocal action

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Abstract

How can we build resistance and alternatives to the current political orthodoxy? The neo-liberal regime is becoming pervasive in the North and South. It seeks to privatise public goods and common land, outsource welfare services and introduce competitiveness deeper into our lives. Citizenship and rights become challenged and conditional. This regime's power is embedded in structures of trade and governance, which make local opposition difficult. Civil society organisations can resist but the spaces are becoming smaller. But this essay argues that 'resistance is not futile' and provides examples from the South and North. Activist *practices* including: community organising, reciprocal working, commoning and conviviality can build spaces for relationships and learning. They offer ways of doing and thinking differently. This essay points out that even here there are attempts at colonisation by the dominant regime and argues for a strong defence of the social commons.

Key words

Neo-liberal regime, resistance, civil society, commoning, reciprocal working.

Introduction

How can we build resistance and alternatives to the current political orthodoxy? At times it seems that neo-liberalism is the only game in town: you can choose any political and economic system you like - as long as it's neo-liberal. This analysis is vital for discerning the structures holding the edifice in place. But the danger is that we accept the mental cage it implies: that there is no alternative.

So this essay looks in another direction. It considers possible sites where full colonisation by neo-liberalism has not yet taken place. We consider the practices of community organising, reciprocal working, commoning and conviviality in the South and the North (see Table 1). These may represent innocent holes, perforations, or disjunctures in the neo-liberal regime. On their own they may present no serious threat, however, they provide counter examples at a micro level of different ways of thinking and learning and alternative ways of doing. These practices are often taking place in – but also around the edge of – formal civil society organisations. Taken together they represent the 'social commons' – which contains an enormous resource of tangible

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processes and intangible inspiration. There have even been, unsurprisingly, attempts to wire the activities within this realm into the neo-liberal circuit. This essay alerts us to the importance of these spheres, points to where they are under attack, and how this may be resisted.

Is resistance to neo-liberalism futile?

Neo-liberalism can appear like a nightmare scenario: all pervasive, totalising and unstoppable. This powerful messaging is even reinforced at times - understandably - by those of us who are activists and resistors. We are keen to alert the public to the apparently relentless march of the neo-liberal regime and the destructive effects this can have. In countries of the South, we see it threatening our lives and communities, our land and rivers, leading to increased disparities between elites and the poor. In the North, we seek to fight attacks on trade union rights; the demonising of immigrants and minorities; and the dismantling of public services and welfare safety nets. Meanwhile, 'public' policy is increasingly shaped by private corporations and bypasses the remnants of democratic process (e.g. Farnsworth & Holden, 2006; Crouch, 2011).

These threats can hardly be minimised. Nevertheless, the narrative can present a picture of undiluted – and largely annonymous and invisible – power (Wainwright, 2014). It is power embedded in structures of trade and governance managed by an interconnected set of individually obscure rules that are hard to attribute to particular political or corporate leaders (George, 2013). This can all serve to further strengthen the nature and exercise of what seems like Gramsci's ultimate hegemonic power. *'Resistance is futile'* is the celebrated call of the cinematic extra-terrestrials as they invade the hapless human world.

Resistance is not futile

We argue that resistance is not futile. Let's take an extreme example to illustrate the case. Consider a young soldier taken prisoner and placed in a concentration camp during the fascist era of Franco and Mussolini in 1938. Hungry and fearing for his life he was ushered into the dungeons. He recounted later that he would:

> '…[never] forget the feeling of relief and inspiration that I felt when I heard the thin chorus of the "Mountains of Mourne" being sung to welcome us by men in the adjoining cell…we grinned at each other in the half-dark…The men were evidently singing their own version as "Musso" and "Franco" cropped up frequently…We've got something here that Franco, backed up by all his fascist gangsters with their sticks and rifle butts, will never be able to cage or imprison' (Norton, 2011).

Even in this quite impossible situation, deprived of liberty and all tangible resources, these prisoners found a space for resistance and inspiration through their solidarity and common purpose.

Structure of the essay

This provides the starting point for this essay, which considers less dramatic - but equally important - spaces for expressing or exercising the intent that 'There is Another Way', to reverse Margaret Thatcher's famous dictum. First, we remind ourselves of some of the tangible effects of the neo-liberal regime. This is followed, second, by a

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discussion of the way that neo-liberal adherents conceal the ideological basis of their project. Third, we turn to a brief overview of the scale of civil society organisations in the UK and their important link to practices such as community organising and reciprocal working. Fourth, the threats from the neo-liberal regime to this sphere are sketched in the fifth section. Examples of resistance – including commoning and conviviality - are discussed fifth. The threats to these practices are discussed sixth and this is followed by some concluding remarks.

Table 1: Terms as used in this essay

Community organising

This is a broad term used to cover a range of voluntary practices and collective action undertaken by people at a local level aimed at improving life for the common good without individual or distributed profit. It aspires to confront disadvantage, oppose inequality and combat discrimination (based on gender, race, disability, class, sexuality etc), and to engage in learning about the social causes of disadvantage. This would be close to principles of community development that arose from the 1960s and is allied to approaches pioneered by Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal.

Reciprocal working

This is understood as 'an ongoing process of exchange with the aim of establishing and maintaining equality between parties' although it finds different expressions in different cultures (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson, et al, 2008). For example, in Mexico, one kind of reciprocal work is 'Fajinas' defined by Solórzano (2014) as 'periodic community work without remuneration performed by a community member.'

Commoning

This refers to activities associated with promoting, defending, advancing or modelling pro-commons behaviour in relation to 'ecological equilibrium, human survival, personal development and social cohesion' (Quilligan, 2014). In this essay the focus is on the social cohesion dimension and in particular 'public goods' (Olson, 1971) and 'common pool resources' (Ostrom, 1990).

Conviviality

This is part of wider voluntary action. It is used here to refer to particular practices of being together which are not about service provision or social change work but concerned with building informal links between citizens in shared spaces for fun or mutual benefit – 'an ungoverned space outside of state control and the pressure of markets' (NCIA, 2011:1).

Solidarity

This is understood as 'oneness of interests' or aims marked by 'joint and several responsibility' (adapted from Chambers 20th Century Dictionary, 1983). It is a much stronger version of conviviality and involves people working together in common cause.

Social commons

This term is introduced to apply to this sub-set of the commons. It refers to tangible and intangible collective community assets. Examples include a community building as much as a traditional annual street festival. These represent the sum of aggregated historical and contemporary voluntary and activist labour, and constitute common social goods held in trust for common purposes.

The neo-liberal regime

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The 'neo-liberal regime', international in scope but with national variants, has become a familiar brand and a formidable foe. In broad terms, the belief system holds that there should be 'free markets in which individuals maximise their material interests…and that markets are…to be preferred over states and politics…' (Crouch, 2011:vii). We see it propelling the outsourcing of welfare services by privatising public goods. Citizens face commodification into individual consumers stripped of collective identities - mere 'customers' for welfare products (Clarke et al, 2007). International structures, like the North American Free Trade Treaty (NAFTA) a generation ago forced countries, like Mexico, to re-write parts of their constitution (Puga, 2004). Today, the Investor-State dispute settlement within the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), threatens public services, health and safety measures and workers' rights across Europe. Competitiveness and efficiency are driven ever deeper into our lives while the ideas of being 'a citizen' and 'having rights' are challenged as being contingent and conditional rather than integral (Newman & Clarke, 2009). Even our friendships, social connections and associational life face being commodified into fictitious marketable products (Polanyi, 2001) by internet corporations such as Facebook and Google which operate at times as extra-territorial and extra-judicial agents.

The collapse of financial institutions from around 2009, and the ensuing public sector rescue of the banks, provided no 'Berlin Wall' moment for the system. The deregulated financial market, a cornerstone of the neo-liberal ideology, was implicated as an important reason for this collapse. Yet the blame for this catastrophe, with the greatest of irony, was placed upon public sector spending. So it appears that when neo-liberalism fails what is needed is…even greater neo-liberalism. As a result, in many European states, austerity programmes sought to extend marketisation and reduce public expenditure, which has dramatically affected the poor.

In the UK, for example, provisions in the Health and Social Care Act in 2012 opened the public health service to competitive contracting with private sector corporations. Outsourcing accounted for '15% of public spending and 5% of UK GDP' by 2013 (Preston, 2013). Meanwhile, in the six years up to 2013 unemployment rose by 2.5%; involuntary part time work rose by 2.2% (the 4th largest rise among OECD countries); wages 'fell more strongly than in other countries'; with cuts in welfare benefits 'more likely to hurt the poor than in other countries' (OECD, 2014:1). One indicator of the effect on poverty was that '492,641 people were given three days' food and support' by one charity in the six months up to September 2014 (Trussell Trust, 2014). This is occurring in a country with the sixth largest economy in the world (World Bank, 2014a).

Meanwhile, elites and High Net Worth Individuals (George, 2013) see little diminution in their incomes. Carolos Slim remains one of the richest persons in the world. Yet just over half of the population (52.3 per cent) of his home country, Mexico, were counted as poor in 2012 and this ratio continues to rise according to the World Bank (2014b). Overall, neo-liberalism involves a fundamental shift in power and resources away from democratic governance to powerful elites within transnational corporations (George, 2013).

The (shy) ideological role of neo-liberalism

Those opposed to the threat of marketisation of public services and the financialisation of voluntary organisations can be pilloried as 'ideological' while the pursuit of neo-liberal ideas is presented as 'common sense.' This is part of the pervasive thematic

victory of the neo-liberal narrative. To oppose it, or to question it, becomes simply irrational and unthinkable. Neo-liberal adherents appear reluctant to concede their approach is itself ideological.

In opposition to this there is a body of critical thinking which points to this curious shyness. Centeno & Cohen (2012:328) argue that 'neo-liberalism is not strictly an expression of accumulated technical knowledge or the simple imposition of class advantage' it is a project exercised in the academic world, within policy and government circles, and (most importantly) as an expression of popular culture. It is noteworthy that voluntary organisations are faced with injunctions from national umbrella organisations that they should be: 'improving their work', or 'raising their profile' (NPC, 2011:10). On their own these may seem commonplace, however, such performance management criteria appear privileged. There do not seem to be parallel demands to 'engage in strong advocacy', 'speak out against injustice' or 'project the voice of service users loudly on the public stage.'

Kendal's (2010:251) analysis suggests that the UK Labour Party's approach to civil society organisations was to 'picture the sector primarily as a source of "superior performance" comfortable with the challenges of commercialization.' Meanwhile the Conservative position was that it was the 'practical or "common sense" capabilities which are expected to be cultivated' by small-scale community organising and these might hold 'the promise of avoiding politics' (Kendal. 2010:256). Both major UK political parties, under this analysis, had the desire to nurture these organisations as delivery agents. Neo-liberalism is concealed in the discourse while the expression of political concerns is discouraged.

Civil society organisations in the UK: scale and practices

In the 'developed' world, civil society organisations (described as charities, voluntary organisations, and community groups in this essay when referring to the UK) can be the last line of help by offering services with, and for, poor people. They can also play a role in community organising so that people can understand their circumstances and take collective action or advocacy. Furthermore, they can encourage convivial community activities and reciprocal practices by providing spaces or small amounts of in-kind support. This has often been an important role for small and medium-sized – and some large - civil society organisations. The sector is a significant social, but also economic, agent. This is a fact that has not gone unnoticed by the government. This essay argues that this realm of activity has increasingly been subject to colonisation by neo-liberal structures.

First, it is important to understand the scale of this area of work. By 2014 the 164,097 charities in England and Wales had a combined income of £64,839.9 million. The biggest 1,900 charities, with incomes over £5m per year, gained nearly 70% of all income that came into the charitable sector in 2013 (Charity Commission, 2013). There were also over 52,000 small voluntary organisations (incomes below £100,000) and nearly 84,000 groups with incomes below £10,000 (Kane, Bass, Hayward, et al 2013). These small organisations might undertake activities such as: running a small community centre, providing an advice line for people suffering domestic violence or supporting reciprocal or self-help activities such as food co-operatives.

Second, it is also important to consider associations of people in smaller 'below the radar' or micro groups and informal reciprocal practices. These include small informal

groups engaged with everything from social activity, including hobbies and other enthusiasms, to campaigning against welfare cuts and privatisation, and self-help or mutual activities. One exploration of the informal micro range uncovered '58 self-organised activities operating in and around just 11 streets' in one English city (Soteri-Proctor & Alcock, 2012:386). These activities are the bedrock of community and associational life – they are a part of the social commons and exhibit values beyond commercial consumption.

Third, taken together the practices of these organisations, groups and informal associations touch communities of place (with a focus on local neighbourhood life), communities of interest (concerned with particular themes such as the environment), or communities of identity (with a commitment to Gay and Lesbian, or a Black and Minority Ethnic constituency). In some cases the focus is on convivial and reciprocal work in their local community, which may be purely social in nature. For others an important - and distinctive role – has been to engage in community organising which may involve advocacy and campaigning, or learning more about the causes of social inequality or environmental threats (Aiken, 2014).

Fourth, it is important to not over-romanticise the roles described above. These aspirations and practices may not always be 'achieved' in their full form and may remain latent. Indeed, to see these groups in purely instrumental terms is to succumb to precepts of neo-liberal thinking which exhorts a mantra of 'efficiency and performance' above values such as playing an expressive role on behalf of localities and constituencies or working together in convivial ways.

Threats to civil society organisations: illustrating some trends

The arms of the neo-liberal regime have, however, been extending into the civil society sector, first to the major charities and latterly into the large and small organisations. There are even attempts to co-opt reciprocal practices or informal mutual aid into the regime. This essay argues that the following are some of the tendencies occurring.

Contracting and outsourcing: overview
Civil society organisations have been increasingly contracted to deliver highly specified centrally determined public services. The 'contracting out of public services initially appeared to be an innocuous rhetorical change from 'grants', which were offered for services that were additional or complementary to mainstream provision. Voluntary organisations had undertaken such roles for many years with a relatively light touch co-operation with the state. The move to 'contracts' meant that their role was now to be the direct agent in delivering a legal 'contract' to government. It is also now frequently about delivering what remains of mainstream public services rather than additionality. Several important challenges emerge for civil society organisations that have engaged heavily in contracting process and these are sketched below. This builds on a longer report (NCIA, 2014a)

Contracts: challenges in working for the needs of poor people
Contracting presents a number a number of challenges in relation to the disadvantaged people with whom these organisations are working. First, performance measurement regimes and targets associated with contracting processes entail an increasing specificity of activities and outcomes, which leaves less room for discretion in working with service users. Second, in effect, their role as direct agents for the delivery of statutory services means they are necessarily complicit in implementing

government initiated cutbacks, or enforcing more stringent conditions which government has decided upon in relation to which people are permitted access to those services. Third, contract processes have tended to reduce organisations' self-determining ethos – they find it harder to advocate or campaign for communities or issues. This can be due to legal reasons (they are contractually obliged to stay silent) or due to informal pressures (they will not be given further funding if they are seen to be critical or express dissent).

Contracts: challenges to internal working methods
These processes also present challenges to organisations' own internal operations. First, there is an increasing use of business practices in internal organising relating to 'efficiency', 'brand', and 'competitiveness.' Second, there is an increase in mergers and acquisitions in order to 'compete' in the welfare market. Third, they start to sub-contract from private corporations or themselves subcontract part of their own work to other private or civil society organisations. Fourth, at a governance level, there is an increasing introduction of more 'business people' onto boards of governance to harness business skills.

Contracts: challenges to wider collaboration between organisations
There are challenges too in relation to the wider ecology of organisations and groups engaged in communities. First, there can be a reduction in any collaborative working that is not contractually specified or, second, with other agencies outside the bidding consortium. This greater secrecy and distance is not necessarily of any benefit to disadvantaged people.

Contracts: challenges to avoid full integration into a business market
As a result of these processes civil society organisations gradually become part of a trade lobby – not to advocate for the rights of poor people or to point to suffering – but to demand better terms and conditions for contracts or a 'level playing field' in bidding against larger private sector organisations. They can become an active agent calling publically for greater privatisation and at greater speed in order to satisfy their own business needs. They may also be implicated in 'payments by results' contracts including social impact bonds, engage in loan finance, and may start to engage in speculative social finance markets for funds.

Contracts: summary
In this sense, civil society organisations move steadily into the position of being fully integrated into the business of welfare delivery. They face morphing into a role in a fully commercialised market for social goods and tend to align with private sector organisations in arguing for even greater privatisation in their own business interests. They have become – wittingly or unwittingly – complicit in the dismantling and semi-privatisation of public services. Meanwhile, there is the obvious risk that they become constrained in voicing issues in vital social policy debates about criminal justice, employment or elderly care as they have, and are perceived to have, a strong financial vested interest.

From this perspective, community organising and the encouragement of convivial working or reciprocal work appear some distance from the concerns of major and large civil society organisations engaged in the contracting sphere. It might be assumed that the primary attention of neo-liberal interests would be directed to shifting welfare services into a financial market and then scooping up lucrative contracts. However, there have also been initiatives to penetrate further into other realms too.

While the Conservatives 'Big Society' project is now rarely mentioned in the UK, the precepts behind it are increasingly evident. Three examples show the direction of travel. First, local communities are faced with a sharp choice in relation to certain services: if you want them then volunteer to run them! Hence, volunteers are being asked to run and manage local libraries following the redundancy or redeployment of professional staff. Second, in health care, patients are now encouraged to help other patients with the same medical condition on a reciprocal basis, or to help other patients on a voluntary basis, in schemes that borrow from quite progressive peer-to-peer projects in the past but which now may be heavily contractualised. Third, the government's workfare scheme, from which many civil society organisations accept unemployed people for 'work', in effect distorts the whole notion of voluntary action. These schemes 'force unemployed people to carry out unpaid work or face benefit sanctions that can cause hardship and destitution' according to the Keep Volunteering Voluntary campaign (KVV, 2014). It was striking how few large civil society organisations in the volunteering field objected.

While the picture is not uniform or totalising, the evidence from the recent NCIA Inquiry into Voluntary Services indicates that all of these tendencies are occurring in certain circumstances in certain places (NCIA, 2014a). We do not yet have full details about the precise depth of these initiatives but we know that they are all present to some extent. Taken together these tendencies, when fully realised, would amount to a full-scale integration of large numbers of civil society organisations into a neo-liberal market with a neo-liberal logic of operation. This represents a gradual appropriation of this part of the social commons and a slow financialisation of civil society organisations. It would represent a privatisation of the generations of voluntary labour that went into establishing these organisations. There is also likely to be a loss or diminution of an important voice of resistance against the worst affects of austerity.

Are there examples of resistance?

This essay argues that resistance is not futile so where might we look for examples? We can turn to practices in many places in the South and the North. Inspirational protests by Los Indignados in Spain (and their heirs), the Outraged in the USA, and the Aganakismenoi in Greece have stirred public debate (Chomsky, 2012; Powell 2013). Environmental protests in India, pro-democracy campaigns across the Middle East, and land seizures by indigenous groups for cultural rights in Mexico (see table 2) show the scale and divergence of action. Whitfield (2014) summarised a range of strategies that groups deployed including: strikes, demonstrations, occupations, direct action, and exposing the impact of privatisation through symbolic acts or artwork.

Table 2: Cherán: Direct Action in a Mexican indigenous village (Aiken, 2013)
Cherán is a remote village: 2,400 metres above sea level, with 16,000 inhabitants and located in the Mexican state of Michoacán. The majority of people are indigenous Purépecha people with a history and language stretching back to before the Spanish conquest. The mountainous hills are covered by forest, which they have farmed sustainably and reciprocally as a communal resource for centuries. Illegal loggers were depriving them of their resource and threatening villagers' lives. The local police took no action to stop the logging. In April 2011, exasperated by deaths and the destruction of forest, villagers in Cherán, and women in particular, decided to set up blockades at the entrances to the towns. By night they kept watch at fogata vigilance posts, placed at street corners. The blockade was staffed by shifts of volunteers all night, every night, for nearly two years. Meanwhile they began deliberating upon their own development plan on

Frierian principles for a sustainable future.

Exploring the UK scene

In the UK context we explore four (anonymised) groups presented to illustrate practices related to the four approaches to resistance in which they were engaged. They each had a relation to resistance to neo-liberal pressures although this took different forms. These are drawn from research available in a fuller form elsewhere (Aiken, 2014). &&

Commoning and reciprocal work: Local Citizen Action

Local Citizen Action is a network of local people in an inner city area in England with a core group of 20 people who are residents, activists or members of nearby community groups. It has no funding but works from a reciprocal and mutual basis. They say of their work: 'I wouldn't call it a campaign, no, rather an idea, the tag matters, but less than actions I think…the core idea is sharing or "commoning"…it took a while identifying what it was exactly!'

They undertake a variety of activities which include: touring the neighbourhood fortnightly and using music, film, reading groups and discussions; providing places to 'free shop' by swapping or recycling goods; organising people's hearings on planning issues; defending open spaces threatened with development; and developing a local charter. It has also supported other groups on issues such as anti-immigration raids, and anti-police violence. They call their film and discussion work 'political education' and point out that '…capitalism seeks amnesia…so we're reclaiming our own history and experience - to say it in grand words!' Nevertheless, they reported that it was difficult to engage with local mainstream voluntary organisations.

For Local Citizen Action reciprocal practices both in their sharing of goods and their support for other campaigns are quite evident. Convivial actions through social events and political education are clear. 'Commoning' provides an explicit guide to their work.

Community organising, advocacy and conviviality: Bright Home Multi-Centre

Bright Home Multi-Centre is a multi-purpose, neighbourhood-based service delivery organisation, located in the top 10% of disadvantaged areas in England. It is a registered charity and had an annual income of just over £1.1 million in 2013 derived from more than 12 charitable trusts, statutory funding including (for example, Ministry of Justice funds) and local authority support from grants, service level agreements and contracts. They say that 'The local authority has taken a hammering with cuts and the policy making framework is much weaker….[it] ran a competitive contracting service: we didn't win it so fell off the radar…'

It has been active for over 50 years and currently works in particular with young people and people with disabilities and has facilitated dialogue between young people and the local council on conflictual issues. It is highly engaged with local action: over 500 people come to the centre each week for services, convivial meeting places and community organising.

Bright Home Multi-Centre suffered severe stress due to their exclusion from contracts. Nevertheless, they found some routes to resist this and continued to support young people in advocacy. Convivial practices with people in the neighbourhood appear high through the

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emphasis on a 'drop in' culture at the centre.

Community organising and advocacy: Direct Help
Direct Help, a registered charity, works directly to alleviate poverty. It also collects data about the needs of the people it is working with and regards it as an important part of its role to present this evidence to policy makers and the media. It describes itself as an organisation that raises issues of poverty, social justice and the effects of austerity as well as delivering direct help. It had an income of just under £2 million in the year ending 2013 and a very high degree of 'voluntary income' with donations, for example, amounting to nearly 45% of its total income. Its work is undertaken by nearly 50 staff and over 700 volunteers.

This is a faith-based organisation that had taken a policy decision, well before the UK Coalition Government came to power in 2010, that in order to maintain its independence it would not enter the contracting and commissioning culture. They reported being bullied by government in a policy environment that was 'subtle and menacing' and had been told to 'be careful.' It faced strong pressure from policy makers to not engage in advocacy, but with a fairly independent income profile, still managed to advocate on behalf of the people it served.

Community organising and solidarity: Fight Back
Fight Back is a membership organisation, with a local base. It has a mailing list of about 1200 local people with around ten core people at organising meetings who could be called 'activists'. It receives no funding and its budget amounts to less than a few hundred pounds. The Fight Back campaign had a specific aim of combating privatisation and worked, among other activities, through solidarity with workers. It saw defending the common goods of the welfare state as an explicit reason for existing. They found that: '… voluntary organisations were very nervous about saying anything which might compromise their ability to get funding...it would have to be a very confident voluntary organisation today who would support a campaigning organisation….or, say, oppose austerity locally…'

Its activities included public meetings, which attracted around 130 people; monthly newsletters; active use of social media; organising public exhibitions, demonstrations marches, and actions in solidarity with workers. They also organised discussion sessions to increase their understanding and discuss and analyse what was happening locally. They argued that: 'The worrying thing is public sector disintegration – ex local government services are now done by the voluntary sector…those people are all on zero hours contracts… So the welfare state becomes privatised. But the voluntary sector is also privatised.'

Resistance considered
Underlying these practices are a mix and match of approaches to resistance. For example, all four case examples – and Citizen Action, in particular - make some use of an 'expressive and inspirational' domain. This means seizing 'claimed spaces' (Gaventa, 2007) to express a viewpoint. They may also seek to 'produce a narrative of what a good society would look like' (Knight, 2011:127) or undermine domination '…rooted in social institutions, norms, collective identities and cultural values…' (Cohen & Arato, 1992:208).

Fight Back in particular are highly engaged in what we can call a 'protest and policy change approach' drawing on 'political campaigning' through the role of voluntary action, activism and direct action. This tendency gives high emphasis to 'the politics of influence' on civil and political society (Cohen & Arato, 1992:509).

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Direct Help work, in part, from an 'individual and collective advocacy' approach 'to change the root causes, which create individual problems' and provide 'support which provides for challenge and change' (NCIA, 2014b:1). It also relates to collective interests through: '… working with, or on behalf of, local communities in an attempt to influence public policy' (Cairns et al, 2010:194). Bright Home and Direct Help also both made use of a 'show and tell approach' undertaking a demonstration project in a disadvantaged area to show what can be done using advocacy and services. This approach draws directly from the evidence and experience of disadvantaged people and necessarily implies some co-ordination with government in an attempt to bring influence to bear.

In each of these approaches we noticed there were stresses – which were extreme at times – however there were also signs of where the practices of those involved found some space to manoeuvre. To some extent they share in common an emphasis on building relationships outside the precepts of the dominant paradigm and none of them are heavily involved in contracting processes. They can all claim to make modest, albeit important, small steps to seek change for the people for whom they are working.

The argument is neither that these activities, if pieced together, would comprise a rainbow tapestry capable of suffocating the neo-liberal regime, nor that small individual acts of resistance might 'crack' the regime (Holloway 2010). Rather, the discussion suggests we could see them as reservoirs of thinking, actions and education that run counter to the dominant discourse. Further, they all play some part in nurturing the social commons – in terms of the tangible and intangible assets they foster.

From Offe (2012) we can argue that these groups, by analogy with trade unions in relation to employers, that are always in an asymmetric power relation to the public (or private) sector. In other words it can be hard to be an initiator at this scale because there is some dependency upon, and necessary reaction to, the actions of the public and private sector. For organisations like Bright Home and Direct Help – a symbiotic relation with the state is particularly important if they are to seek to influence it. Nevertheless, the contracting relation – if it was to form significant proportion of their funding - might endanger that advocacy role just as strongly.

In effect, all four approaches involve locating spaces for discretion and corners of resistance. Touraine (1983) argued that it was important for activists to attenuate their analysis to the highest pitch. Perhaps this is best illustrated in the extreme conditions faced by the villagers in Cherán who, in effect, set up an alternative local government in the short term. The strong and long history this community had should be noted here - and we can see them holding a strong sense of their social commons. The practices and actions of all these initiatives 'say no', in Galeano's (1992) words, but with many different voices and languages.

Conclusions: Resistance, Practices and Influence

In this essay we have considered the practices of reciprocal action, solidarity, community organising and commoning as approaches, which may provide counter examples of thinking and action to resist neo-liberalism. These are often operating at a micro level and hold a latent potential to perforate or disjuncture the dominant regime. The suggestion was that, taken together, they represent the 'social commons' – which contains resources of tangible support and intangible inspiration.

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We can see how the neo-liberal ideology gains a foothold and subverts aspirations - such as generosity, mutual support and social connectivity – by introducing competitive, trading mechanisms. However, some caution needs to be exercised in case it is thought that this creative, albeit unwieldy, bag of initiatives operates as a collective whole. It is a weakness that 'it' is unlikely to act as a *unified* subject for social change. These initiatives may represent 'small splinter groups' that can provide the long term 'thematic victory' of Beck (1997). They operate in an 'expressive' dimension (Cohen & Arato, 1992) that can counter neo-liberal ways of operating by thinking and doing differently.

We can finish by returning to the young soldier we heard from at the start of this essay: what influence did his actions have over the longer term? According to one observer: '… they did help to overcome the spirit of defeatism that was so prevalent at the time… they inspired millions so that, when the Nazi challenge to Britain finally came, the people knew their enemy and were ready to fight it' (Norton, 2011).

This essay aims to remind us that the effects of our approaches to resistance - and the practices of community organising, commoning, conviviality and reciprocity– may not always be apparent for some time. The attempts to colonise the realms of community organising, commoning, conviviality and reciprocity need to be contested and resisted.

Acknowledgement

Biography

Mike Aiken worked with voluntary organisations such as Community Matters, Save the Children and Development Trusts Association for over 20 years. He was also an activist in local community development, citizen action, urban regeneration, gender and race equality and Latin American solidarity. He gained an MA in policy studies in 1998 (University of Sussex) and a PhD in 2002 for his work examining value-based civil society organisations at the Co-operatives Research Unit (Open University). Since then he has researched co-operative, civil society and social movement initiatives in the UK and internationally, usually from an action research perspective.

His published academic work includes articles, book chapters and reviews on themes including community action, advocacy, co-operatives, and the encroachments of the neo-liberal ideology. His essays, for magazines such as Red Pepper and Voices of Mexico, have discussed resistance by indigenous groups and civil society challenges. As an active member of the National Coalition for Independent Action (UK) his recent reports have covered threats to community action by the outsourcing of welfare services and the constrained role of campaigning. Mike now works as an independent researcher, co-edits the practice section of Voluntary Sector Review and undertakes community action in the UK and Latin American. He has lived and worked in Germany and Mexico and speaks German and Spanish to intermediate level.

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