IPS

THEY DON'T CARE ABOUT US! 21.11.2017 | Paul Collier

The importance of belonging

Politics 'for the many, not the few' needs to be rooted in people's communities and their sense of home

Most people have a powerful sense of belonging to place. I grew up in Sheffield, then, as now, the least fashionable city in England. Like me, the famous British playwright Alan Bennett was the son of Yorkshire parents with little education. The History Boys recounts his story of social mobility from humble origins to Oxford. But he grew up in more-fashionable Leeds. In order to emphasize the social gulf that he had crossed, he set his play, not in his home town but in mine. Indeed, he set it in my school: I am more authentically a 'History Boy' than Bennett himself.

Sheffield is unfashionable, but that only strengthens the bonding of its people, and that bonding became a powerful political force. Through recognizing that they had a common attachment to the place where they grew up, communities such as Sheffield built cooperative organisations that reaped the benefits of reciprocity.

By putting affinity to use, these organisations grew to include a remarkable range of economic activities that addressed the anxieties of working people. Cooperative insurance societies enabled people to reduce risks; cooperative building societies enabled people to save for a home; cooperative agribusiness and retailing gave farmers and consumers bargaining power against big business. This happened not just in the North of England but across much of Europe.

By banding together, these cooperatives became the foundation of the political parties of the centre-left. Like the cooperatives, their policy agenda was practical, rooted in the anxieties that beset the lives of poor families. But as these political parties became successful, they attracted an entirely different class of participant who became disproportionately influential. These were middle-class intellectuals who were attracted by the utilitarian philosophy devised by Jeremy Bentham. Bentham is now

thought to have been autistic, and so incapable of having any sense of community.

An elitist creed

Utilitarianism offered a vision in which a paternalistic state run by a vanguard of technocrats, would impose policies that achieved 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number'. This was an updated version of the Guardians of Plato's Republic: indeed, John Stuart Mill, brought up as Bentham's disciple and the other influential intellectual, was taught Greek and was reading The Republic by the age of eight. Deliberately kept away from other children, he was probably more familiar with ancient Greece that with the provincial cities of his own society. Their middle-class followers, though not grounded in the anxieties of poor communities, readily saw themselves as the new Guardians: the empowered technocrats who would run society on behalf of everyone else.

As Europe's states became more powerful, and as centre-left parties became dominant, the utilitarian technocrats supplanted the communitarians without even noticing that they had done so. But ordinary families noticed, not least because, divorced from communities, some of the policies favoured by the utilitarian technocrats were damaging and unpopular. The technocrats ran the state from the metropolis, which was thriving; communities were provincial and increasingly faced the risk of being plunged into economic catastrophe.

This indeed happened to Sheffield during the 1980s. When I grew up, my home town was a global centre of specialist steel; its workforce highly skilled and fiercely proud of its tradition. Indeed, my great-great grandfather had been the master of a tiny cutlery works: I treasure the photo of him in front of the dozen youths who were his workforce.

Sheffield was making cutlery in the 13th Century: we know this because of a line in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. This centuries-old tradition was completely smashed within a few years by globalisation, a process that despite such tragedies met the utilitarian criterion of providing 'the greatest good to the greatest number': East Asians were gaining and they were poorer than the people of Sheffield.

Ineligible, unsupported

If you have seen the hit-film The Full Monty, you will have acquired some insight into the consequences for Sheffield: the film is the story of

what happened to my home city. By then I experienced it at one remove, secure in a job at Oxford University, and living the metropolitan life. Back home, our neighbour was made redundant; my young relative could not find a job and moved to the Netherlands. When he returned three years later, he found that under the utilitarian-inspired rules, his absence had made him ineligible for either housing or educational support. Immigrants had greater needs and so were deemed to be the priority.

My entire professional life has been concerned with the needs of people in societies that are poor, as is much of Africa, or beset by violence, as is Syria. Decades of research and experience have gone into my books, such as The Bottom Billion and Refuge, that propose ways of addressing these needs. But my premise has been that any solution must work for the many who stay in their societies, not the few who leave.

The utilitarian technocrats, for their own reasons, insisted on the opposite: a few fortunate people should be 'rescued' from the troubled societies, with little thought for the many. For example, Europe's policies towards refugees currently spend around €135 on each of the tiny minority of those who come to Europe, for every Euro spent on the many who choose to stay closer to home. And we have 'rescued' doctors from Africa: there are more Sudanese doctors in London than left in the entire country of Sudan.

As the utilitarian technocrats captured control of the parties of the centre-left from the communitarians, electoral support melted away. The technocrats, superior in their new globalised class identity, actively denigrated the sense of belonging to place. But since that sense is fundamental to most people, having been discarded by the centre-left it was gleefully seized by the far-right for its own, repellent, agenda with potentially dangerous consequences.

In retrospect, the period of utilitarian dominance of the centre-left will come to be recognised for what it was: arrogant, over-confident, and destructive. The centre-left will recover as it returns to its communitarian roots, and to the task of reconstructing the web of trust-based reciprocal obligations that address the anxieties of working families. Belonging to place is a force too potent, and potentially too constructive, to be abandoned to the far right.



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