

Briefing Paper 13

Losing Political Innocence? Finding a place for ideology in understanding the development of recent English third sector policy

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The relationship between the third sector and ideology in England is vexing. Some of the most influential promoters of the third sector as a public policy actor in Britain have appeared to favour its strengthening precisely for the reason that it is, by (most) definition(s), neither part of the market, nor part of the state. On this view, some years ago built up as a component of ‘third way’ thinking by some commentators, it can and should be pictured as an essentially pragmatic ally, at a distance from or even ‘beyond’ ideological disputes framed in terms of ‘market fundamentalism’ and ‘statism’.

On the other hand, the two constructs could be argued to be fundamentally related. Many third sector activities have long been recognised as irreducibly political – as the institutional vehicle of choice for relatively organised formations, carrying new ideas and often acting as the ‘significant groups’ which help constitute ideologies, flexibly understood. Accordingly, the sector could be expected to act as an important player in helping constitute the socio-political space in which both reformist ideas and actions come into play, but also clashing with powerful established actors and their agendas in the state and in business. Indeed, the academic framework most developed for considering the role of these organisations in fostering change – social movement theory – often tends to define their role in adversarial terms. A strengthened ideological sensibility more generally could be expected to follow, so that - whether or not actors understand themselves as ‘ideologists’ or ‘ideologues’, they could at least be more likely to recognise

ideological tendencies in the positions of others. Confrontations over ideology seem, therefore, to become foundational.

The goal of this paper is to propose a way of representing the contemporary developmental trajectory of the relationship between ideology and the third sector in England that helps us to see how both types of claim are *partially* accurate, but that each has oversimplified and incompletely represented the nature of the linkage.

First, it is important to acknowledge that, while the ideological dimension must be understood in part in terms of conflict, this does not exhaust its application. Attending to ideology should also mean, as expressed in the analysis of Michael Freeden, recognising the ‘de-contestation’ process: the extent to which actors may engage and mobilise in a co-operative way for explicitly or implicitly ideological reasons. The paper reviews the ways in which such ideational or value oriented processes have unfolded in recent years in the case of ‘horizontal’ or cross-cutting policy in England.

At the same time, this does not mean we should revert to a conflict-free mode of analysis. We must also attend to the reality that some values or ideological positions may be hard to reconcile with one another – or be even fundamentally incompatible. Thus, the possibility that principled reasons to contest or even actively obstruct State third sector policies, individually or collectively also needs sustained attention.

The paper tries to address this gap by sketching out one of the strategically important ways in which, especially since the middle of the decade, a contentious ideological dimension of policy has more explicitly reasserted itself. It points to contrasts in the beliefs of key political figures and some third sector allies in relation to the policy emphases that have been put in place in recent years. Drawing upon the cultural theory of Mary Douglas, three 'constellations', or 'camps' with contrasting ideational or value orientations can be differentiated in the context of the current Government's discourse and practices: a 'consumerist' orientation, embracing quasi-market solutions; a 'civil order renewal' stance, with a premium on hierarchical order; and a 'democratic life renewal' tendency, most closely connected with support for more fluid and open political and policy interactions

The meaning of each in a third sector policy context can be fleshed out. First, the 'consumerist' approach. This has pictured the sector primarily as a source of 'superior performance' comfortable with the challenges of commercialisation, strengthened by lessons drawn from business in quasi-market contexts, and as a primary route for the enhancement of user choice. Accordingly, this position has tended to favour consumer choice over citizenship-related activities, implicitly bracketing the intrinsic significance of voluntarism as a quantitatively different way of forming social relations. In political and electoral terms, this has fitted with New Labour's drive to privilege the improvement of public services for voters understood essentially as increasingly demanding consumers - and only in passing acknowledges features of the sector which do not allow it to be portrayed as part of a 'consumer society'. Rather, the basic goal has been to use the sector to extend the 'reality' of such a society to socially excluded constituencies.

Second, the 'civil renewal' strand, by contrast, has sought to support the sector especially as a vehicle for elaborating traditional citizenship, and has been at ease with the extension of the scope and scale of rules from above to this end. Such an approach pictures the State and the third sector as allies coordinating in a relatively regimented style at national and local levels, and involves a preference for organisation which enhance policy boundedness, predictability and stability. Pursuant policy commitments have included the adoption of national third sector targets and the detailed elaboration of national rules for public service purchasing policed from the centre. We seem to have witnessed a mixture of consumerist and civil order renewal 'biases' in place at the Treasury, at least under Brown's decade-long leadership there.

Finally, 'democratic life renewal' is a different position again which seems to have taken a distinctive shape under New Labour, with a more open-ended and reflexive style. This emphasises group action as predominantly bound up with local empowerment, where this is understood as built around collective communication and deliberative processes. Voluntary action here in principle is espoused as precisely avoiding compulsion; and limiting the imposition of well defined a priori rules or centralising fiat. Its promoters are more comfortable with delegation and reflexive agenda-shaping debate.

Table one makes an attempt to round off this discussion and connect it more explicitly to the academic discourse. In a stylised but hopefully didactically useful way, it seeks to compare and contrast some of the elements to be encapsulated in each of the three New Labour discourse and practice orientations we have been discussing.

Table 1: Differentiated third sector emphases in New Labour thinking

| Quasi market consumerists | Civic order renewers | Democratic life revivalists |
|--|--|---|
| Principled emphasis on third sector as 'delivering' service providers, helping to develop services primarily through demonstration and innovation effects. | Recognition of multiple roles steered decisively through authoritative structures. | Fluid on roles, more room for argumentation and contestation within service delivery contexts, and outside them. |
| Third sector as essentially a quasi-market, or market, participant. | Grateful 'partner'– third sector strengthens deferential citizen-consumer? | Ally with appropriately democratic State – third sector strengthens challenging citizen? |
| Responsive to pre-determined needs, preferences emerging in 'consumer society'. | High status consultee in shaping of insulated political-technocratic decisions. | Co-designer of societal needs and preferences, in necessarily slow and involved process. |
| Contracting and trust hand in hand, parcelled and professionally packaged. Contracts should <i>replace</i> grants. | Advice from sector makes bureaucratic system run better, more trustworthy and better implementer; or faith in state-funded third sector as co-regulator Implicit: space for grants to support these roles | Trust mainly through open ended deliberative processes. Suspicious of isomorphic 'contract culture' ; space for grants explicit? |
| Social capital – <i>a la</i> Coleman: contractarian rational choice instrumentality, with third sector supplying 'appropriable organisations' | Social capital – Etzioni | Social capital – new institutional Putnam (mark 1, Italy), with shades of Habermas . |

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