

Notes for Devolve!/ Network Project Meeting
held in the Department of Sociology London School of Economics
(LSE) on 25th November 2006.

This was a joint meeting between The Network Project and Devolve! The intention was to explore the possibility of sharing ideas between groups involved in considering alternatives to orthodox economics and politics.

The discussion group consisted of Ian Brown, Catharine Perry, Woody, Gian Andreone, Chris Rogers, Maureen Boustred, Mary Fee and Peter Haslegrave.

Morning Session.

Introduction: a Narrative of Stewardship?

Ian Brown explained that The Network Project was originally concerned with the alternatives to Neoliberalism. The Network Project, however, had now collected enough ideas to begin to put forward a cohesive set of alternative ideas, recognising particularly the link between local and global ideas and movements on the one hand, and the centrality of the idea of human responsibility (Stewardship) on the other. The Network Project is now concerned with working out the theoretical basis of an alternative Narrative of Stewardship, whilst recognising the practical nature of politics, economics and culture at both the local and global levels.

The Three pillars of Neoliberal Theory.

Before moving on to the alternatives to Neoliberalism, Ian briefly sketched the content of Neoliberal theory. The three pillars of Neoliberal theory are:

1. Competition Theory: this is the theory that competition, free markets and the intentional maximisation of individual selfish good facilitates the emergence of the best and most efficient of all possible economic systems.
2. Legal Democracy: this theory states that the role of government is to create a framework within which the competition for selfish good can operate.
3. Democratic Exclusion (Public Choice Theory): this theory justifies the exclusion of all associations and institutions from interfering with competition, free markets and the maximisation of selfish good.

Stewardship: an Emerging Alternative.

Ian then moved on to the alternative of a Narrative of Stewardship, which contrasts with the Neoliberal Narrative of Competition. In Network Project thinking, the alternatives come down to the choice between a Framework of Competition or a Network of Responsibility (Stewardship Theory).

Stewardship Theory suggests that human beings are quite capable of creating Relationships of Responsibility, built on:

1. Balancing interests and responsibilities through conflict resolution systems such as Fair and Sustainable Trade.
2. The facilitation of emergent associations and institutions of interest to negotiate in conflict resolution systems.
3. The facilitation of emergent associations and institutions to represent and focus responsibility (Stewardship).

Scientific, Moral and Theistic Credibility of Stewardship Theory.

Stewardship Theory claims scientific, moral and theistic credibility, and is therefore available to both spiritual and scientific "human types".

Stewardship Theory is by no means a new idea. The moral and scientific position has been made (amongst others) by Sydney Webb:

"[The Labour Party] abhors and repudiates the unscientific and immoral doctrine that the competitive struggle for the means of life is, in human society, either inevitable or requisite for the survival of the fittest".

The point was made that the Labour Party no longer abhors and repudiates the competitive doctrine, nor does the Fabian Society or indeed, the LSE.

The Theistic credibility of Stewardship Theory is indicated by a quote from the Koran:

"Woe to those who stint the measure: in the balance ye should not transgress. Weigh therefore with fairness and scant not the balance".

- and from Confucius:

"What Heaven has conferred is called the Path of Duty. When one cultivates the principles of his nature and exercises them on the principle of reciprocity he is not far from the path. What you do not want to be done to you do not do to others."

Stewardship Theory is also justified by new scientific work on human development, natural conflict resolution, social neuroscience, and in continuing theoretical development of systems and complexity theory. These all confirm that human beings are naturally social and naturally seek to create:

1. The associations and institutions that facilitate Stewardship.
2. The associations and institutions that facilitate conflict resolution.
3. The associations and institutions that facilitate fair and sustainable economics
4. The associations and institutions that facilitate local and global governance and economics.

Fair and Sustainable Trade; the Balance of Opposing Forces.

A slightly deeper indication was then considered in the relation of opposing interests. Opposing interests are a fact of nature. However, Stewardship Theory suggests that there is a tendency for these to become balanced through the institution of conflict resolution systems. This is because there is almost always a zone of overlap in which both sides can compromise to the benefit of each. This can be expressed in a model, such as:

Fair Wage:

<WORKERS, INTERESTS

ZONE of OVERLAP

EMPLOYER'S INTERESTS>

Fair Price:

<CONSUMERS, INTERESTS

ZONE of OVERLAP

SELLERS' INTERESTS>

Sustainable Price:

<ENVIRONMENTAL NEED

ZONE of OVERLAP

RESOURCE USE>

The balance of opposing forces leads, through the associations and institutions of conflict management, to collective agreements, mutuality, and ultimately to Stewardship: the conscious and deliberate protection of the social and natural environment.

Other Areas of Stewardship Theory.

The ideas noted above, while constituting what the Network Project sees as central ideas for alternative human relationships, are not the whole picture. Ian mentioned some of the ideas that the Network Project also sees as crucial areas of alternative thought. These are (note some repetition):

- Another World is Possible (basic assumption).
- The World as One Economy
- One World containing Many Worlds
- Systems/ Global Thinking
- Interconnections
- Local and Global
- Local Economics and Democracy
- Community
- Enfolding of Politics, Civil Society and Economics
- Associations and Institutions
- Association of Associations = Global Humanity
- Gender
- New Economics, Morality, Science
- New Philosophy and Historicism

Conclusion: The New Paradigm.

In concluding, Ian pointed out that these ideas were by no means exhaustive, and that, in working them out, more tended to come to light. Nevertheless, the centrality of Stewardship in modern alternatives to orthodoxy represented a new paradigm that went beyond Marx and Adam Smith. The concluding remark was that **Balance equals Global Justice.**

Questions and Comments.

- Gian noted that the list did not include Monetary Reform. This is significant area of alternative theory, which directly deals with the competitive aspect of Neoliberal orthodoxy. As Global Capitalism stands, there is competition for money; money reform is therefore basic to change (accepted by group without reserve).
 - Woody doubted the link between reason and science (accepted; all ideologies present themselves as reasoned science and even as morality).
 - Chris noted that there was increasing competition over technology, and that this was a significant driver in capitalist progress (accepted).
 - Peter mentioned the importance of semantics (accepted).
 - Mary considered that orthodox economics is about power, and that there was a contradiction between responsibility and power (accepted). Also confirmed Network Project idea of bringing groups together to consider common ideas and aims.

This led to a discussion of the relationship between responsibility and power, the need for a non-violent set of ideas, to which Catharine added the importance of values to this end.

Afternoon Session.

Devolve!: Devolution or Centralisation?

Woody led the afternoon discussion by introducing the focus of Devolve! thinking. Devolve! was originally concerned with the problem of regional devolution for England, with the potential for a development of an English identity as opposed to a British identity, and with the prospects for practical devolution of power to regions or indeed, sub-regions. Woody noted that areas such as Cornwall had sufficient identity to be considered a region in its own right.

The significant element in devolution is the ability and potential of people to become empowered. Devolve! thinking suggests that the equation for Empowerment is:

Empowerment = Confidence + Responsibility & Structure + Resources.

The problem to be overcome in order to create a healthy, empowered devolved system of governance is the problem of the centralisation of power; and Devolve! see the British “Westminster Model” as being fundamentally centralised and historically flawed.

This Westminster Model owes its form to the fact of the Norman conquest, in which power was centralised in order to facilitate the Norman elite in their conquest and domination of the Anglo-Saxon culture.

The result of this centralisation and domination was a major loss of English identity and a development of an Imperialist British identity (although Wales, Ireland and Scotland retained some national identity, and areas such as Cornwall retained some regional identity). The Westminster Model led to cultural oppression through the centralisation of economic, legal and political power in the hands of a ruling elite.

This Westminster model is of more than historical significance, because it is the developmental precursor of the present Neoliberal Anglo-American Model of government.

As Devolve! see it, this centralisation needs to be countered by passing responsibility back to the people through a process of Territorial Devolution, with attention paid to functional sub-regions.

As Woody explained, the concern of Devolve! is with an awakening of responsibility at various levels of governance, and with the associated development of a re-established Civil Society, in which culture, economics and democracy work together through empowered human beings to reflect our common responsibilities.

Culture.

Catharine took over from Woody to describe some elements of Devolve! thinking on culture.

Beginning with the historical Devolve! focus on Englishness, Catharine posed the question of the English identity and culture; what is it, and has it gone forever? Identification with a culture reflects a choice. The Imperial culture of Britishness reflects a problematic identity, which no longer seems to be good identity to choose. What is a good English identity and a good English culture? What have we got, and what do we want?

Catharine suggested that top-down culture change is questionable, and that effective culture is generated from the bottom up, at community level. Culture is developed meaningfully to support the community we want.

It is good to have communities; culture is a part of the development of community, community and culture linked in self-generating and maintaining identity - and as such there are many sources of identity as there are many influences and parts of community and many routes of community development.

At this point, Peter questioned Englishness as such as a basis of identity. Cultural identity can act as an isolating device, and can create a prejudicial attitude to other identities. There are other identities rather than Englishness in England.

Chris noted the problem of identification if we work and sleep other than where our identities lie. Chris noted that he works and sleeps outside London, but he is still a Londoner by identity.

It was acknowledged that there was indeed a tension in Devolve! between Englishness as such and general devolution concepts. Nevertheless, the need for general devolution suggests that such problems need to be addressed in the actual development of cultures and the relationships between and amongst them.

It is for this reason that Devolve!'s thinking is turning towards the idea of "Englander" to denote a cultural affinity with a cross-cultural identity based on community responsibility rather than with Englishness as such.

The problems of cultural relationships exist, but devolution is seen as a way of facilitating the cohesive and interconnecting development of diverse cultures in England, as of course elsewhere.

For Devolve!, culture is an important aspect of devolution. The development of local theory is just as important. At this point, Woody took over from Catharine to discuss Devolve! ideas on Very Local Democracy.

Very Local Democracy.

A significant element in Devolve! thinking is the importance of structures which interlink to form a cohesive system of levels in which responsibility is, on the one hand, passed down from the governmental level, and on the other hand, taken up from the most local level.

Very Local Democracy is concerned with the expression of this local responsibility. In Very Local Democracy, the primary groups involved in expressing local responsibility are the elements that form local associations in local civil society: Residents, Associations, Tenants, Associations, Faith Groups, Traders, Associations etc. Clearly these will vary from place to place.

As it happens, Tony Blair is committed to the idea of devolution and local government has been instructed to pass power to local residents etc., through devolution to area committees. There is therefore some elements of political will to allow for devolution to take place. This can be treated cynically; the area committees have to go back to the Council for funding; and there is some evidence in Leicester that some political players are not too happy at sharing power with local groups.

Nevertheless, Devolve! is working to organise primary groups to create an organisation that will be able to meet devolved political structures from the bottom up, to coincide with the devolved powers coming from the top down. Ward-based community alliances are being formed, which influence Councillors.

As Woody notes, these Very Local Democracy structures are different from voting democracy in that they are accountable to the community through the structures of the primary groups that make them up.

Summary.

The afternoon session ended with a discussion as to whether the model of presentation had worked, and it was felt that it had.

The aims of the meeting had been to discuss alternative ideas to Neoliberalism (from the Network Project position) and to the Westminster Model (from the Devolve! position), and to explore the possibilities of co-development and sharing of ideas between two such groups. This was felt to have been a success, and a commitment to work together was indicated from both groups.