

# ‘Big Society’, ‘good culture’, and aspiration

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With the election in May 2015 of the first Conservative majority Government since 1992, attention is firmly fixed on new rounds of austerity. Gone are the references to the ‘well-being agenda’ and claims of social progress being devolved to civil society through ‘Big Society’. The Government’s ideological commitment to a stripping back of the state, the fetishisation of certain forms of life, and the reluctance to uphold and promote broader social goods, have highlighted the need for a more thorough examination of the value of grounding public policy in ‘good culture’.

The notion of ‘good culture’, initially developed during my British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship, is

that people’s culture ought to promote well-being in their particular circumstances. Culture, in this sense, consists of the shared understandings that shape institutions in any human group. These institutions can include, at the smallest level, family systems, and at the largest level, international political and economic systems. Societies uphold ‘good culture’ through commitment to three key values – equality, solidarity and non-domination – which check and balance each other and other values. This commitment can look very different when realised in different societies, but must underpin whatever other ends and whichever other values the societies pursue. Without equality, people develop pathologies associated with generalised feelings of superiority or inferiority; without solidarity, people are alienated from one another and are unable effectively to co-operate empathically; and, without non-domination, people are subject to the arbitrary will of others. In addition, culture must be sustainable and, while upholding key values, people must not fetishise particular goods that stand in the way of responses to changing circumstances.

This idea has been examined in a participatory project



**Figure 1**  
Carl Burton (left) and Fiona Rowley (right) from Ashington, at a cultural awareness event in Queensland, together with Paul Craft, an Aboriginal Cultural Facilitator Educator. In March 2015, the group of participants from Ashington visited Brisbane, where they shadowed their Aboriginal counterparts in their professional and social lives, visiting organisations and conducting research on a range of topics of importance to the communities.



**Figure 2**  
Matthew Johnson (left, author of this article) with two of the co-researchers, Archie Moore (middle) and Matt Calder (right), at the exhibition ‘Relocating Land, Memory and Place: A Cross-Cultural Exchange’, at System Gallery in Newcastle, in June 2015. The exhibition sought to examine the two artists’ respective memories of clay and the land. Moore sought to articulate his experiences of life as an Aboriginal Australian in an often hostile rural Queensland town, Tara, while Calder sought to articulate his experiences of engaging with the Northumbrian landscape.

involving academics and non-academic community co-researchers from two groups that have suffered disproportionately in their respective countries in recent times: people from Ashington, Northumberland, which has seen its traditional source of livelihood decline in the wake of the dissolution of the mining industry; and people from Aboriginal Australian communities, which have seen their traditional lives destroyed during colonialism.

Ten community co-researchers, five from Ashington and five from Brisbane, spent two years developing relationships with one another in advance of one-month embedded visits to each other's communities in mid-2015. During these exchanges, the co-researchers lived in their counterparts' communities, shadowed their hosts in their workplaces and social environments, and conducted research on their (often overlapping) areas of interest: relationships, employment, health, education, environment and arts (Figures 1 and 2). The groups engaged in interviews, focus groups, daily group meetings and weekly seminars as they developed their ideas. At the end of the visit to Ashington in June 2015, the co-researchers sought to explain the lives of their families and communities within the context of their deep history during a conference at Lancaster University – funded through a British Academy Rising Star Engagement Award – which aimed to outline and explore the potential value and application of participatory research. Academics from a range of backgrounds and disciplines participated in the contextualisation of the co-researchers' narratives at the event; and interviews, presentations and discussions were recorded on film during the production of two documentaries on the project by a filmmaker, Roger Appleton of Brightmoon Media. The documentaries and over 60 hours of other material accumulated in advance of, during and after the visits will form a YouTube archive of material (due for completion in early 2016) for use by communities and academics examining issues of disadvantage and alienation in a range of contexts.<sup>1</sup>

The reason for focusing on the two communities as a means of exploring these broader issues is that they are both very different and surprisingly similar. While they are distinct in history, geography and culture, they both lived lives which, within serious environmental constraints, can be seen by any reasonable measure to be economically productive and self-sufficient. These lives were informed by similar commitments to values of solidarity, equality and non-domination, which shaped the ways in which the groups dealt with their collective challenges and which lie at the heart of my account of 'good culture'. People from both groups had their traditional ways of life interrupted by conflict with the state, and then faced unemployment and migration onto welfare programmes. This entailed a shift to predictable and damaging lives oriented around public programmes, often accompanied by significant and increasing micro-management of lives by external bodies, and the absence of social mobility. They both face cuts to welfare and

1. Further information about the project, about the two communities and about the participants can be found via <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/good-culture/>



**Figure 3**  
Bob Weatherall from Queensland (left), and Tony Bennett from Ashington (right).

social services at a time in which the private sector seems unable or unwilling to provide sufficient levels of employment. They have been subject to critical public discourses regarding welfare dependency, and both have seen programmes like Big Society come and go as political efforts to deal with social problems.

This project provided the groups with an opportunity, in environments they would not otherwise be able to work in, to explore these similarities and differences, in order to think collaboratively and politically about the ways in which their traditional cultural resources might assist them in dealing with challenges in the present. One key conclusion that has arisen out of this process concerns the ability of people from these communities to be 'successes', and the importance of those who are 'successes' in recognising a broader range of social goods themselves.

### Big Society, autonomy and well-being

The project began by examining Big Society, since it was a key feature of Coalition policy in the UK, and had been endorsed by Noel Pearson, a prominent Aboriginal Australian political figure, in Australia. It alluded to ideas which many across the political spectrum would applaud: empowerment of communities, an emphasis on voluntary action, support for co-ops and alternative economic models, and transparent government. Yet, the concept itself was necessarily amorphous and directed at dealing solely with the symptoms, rather than causes, of social malaise. In essence, as Tony Bennett, a 51-year-old employment worker from Ashington (Figure 3), noted, 'it never sought to tackle "big societal" issues which were caused by the central tenets of the market economy.' Indeed, the Government's ideological reluctance to invest directly in communities meant that it opposed the sorts of social investments needed to promote 'well-being' in places of little interest to private investors – if, indeed, well-being could be equated with growth.

Looking towards an immediate future of further cuts, the project participants felt that this position has created a moral void which needs to be filled with a discourse of

'good culture' that deals with truly 'big societal' issues and makes the moral case for the priority of social goods and the value of socially-oriented investment.

When the well-being agenda was at its height in the last Parliament, it was apparent that there was no consensus on what constitutes well-being and how it should be promoted, nor even whether it can or should be a concern for Government – an issue which necessarily split the Coalition partners. Big Society assumed that people's well-being is linked to their autonomy, but some of the basic assumptions about that relationship proved problematic. Often, it was assumed that autonomy could be reduced to material or financial independence and that growth could increase autonomy by increasing material resources throughout society.

Well-being, in the tradition of Aristotle and expressed today by the likes of Professor Martha Nussbaum FBA,<sup>2</sup> assumes that people develop autonomy by nourishing socially their innate capabilities in order that they can live and do well. The community co-researchers, from both groups, believe that they operate on deeply ingrained cultural presumptions of the validity of this position. Like Nussbaum, they hold that, without supportive social, political and economic systems, people cannot develop healthy forms of, say, practical reason and imagination by which to navigate their lives, make good decisions and shape new creative, constructive and mutually beneficial relationships. As the groups suggested throughout many discussions and presentations, it is apparent that the dominant social, political and economic systems, around which Government policy is oriented today, often lack the culture required to support people in developing their capabilities. In particular, Mary Graham, an Aboriginal Traditional Owner (a person with legally established historical and cultural rights over a tract of land or 'country') from Southport, Australia (Figure 4), argued that Aboriginal people's recognition of three key values of equality or 'balance', solidarity and non-domination had historically enabled people to realise capabilities and ought to be deployed in the present to achieve the same end.

The problem the co-researchers highlighted with Big Society and similar programmes is that, by equating autonomy with financial independence, assuming that growth promotes independence, and believing that growth is best promoted by an unencumbered market, they do not adequately deal with causes of human suffering. They do not deal with a market society in which inequalities in resources and status are translated into social systems which lack concern for relationships, and which actually magnify domination through the often arbitrary patterns of the economy.

## Collective action and change

In response to these deficits, the participants argued that the development of 'good culture' may involve all of the supposed goods identified by Big Society, but should

2. Martha Nussbaum is Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, at the University of Chicago. She was elected a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy in 2008.



Figure 4  
Mary Graham, Chairperson of Murri Mura Aboriginal Corporation.

not be limited by Big Society's concern for the market to a charitable or philanthropic afterthought. In line with elements of my original articulation of the position, 'good culture' means prioritising human well-being over abstract goods, interrogating the content of all institutions, and trying to shape them in such a way as to meet the particular needs of particular people in particular places. Outside of government, it may mean communities ignoring or rejecting government with regard to such diverse issues as economic activity and dealing with drug problems where the state endorses harmful policies, and gradually carving space for people to act autonomously, in the Aristotelian sense, as their reputation for collective activity develops.

This is what the Mondragon Corporation has done in the Basque Country, gradually achieving what governments in the UK and Australia purport to defend – the marginalisation of central government activity – in ways that contradict directly the advice those governments provide on economic and social development. By acting collectively and shaping a whole range of institutions, Basques have created an economic model grounded in solidarity, in which the interests of all members are deemed important and the fundamental equality among community members is recognised. This has actively prevented people being arbitrarily dominated by each other or by socially destructive economic behaviour.

The problem in the two communities which participated in the project is that they felt that their capacities to act collectively had been undermined historically through experiences of colonialism in Australia and the dissolution of collectivist organisations in the North, and that they have no ability to deal independently with processes over which they believe they have no control. The most tragic legacy of Big Society is that people most affected by politically-led processes now assume that community action is cleaning

up graffiti and dog mess, and that the 'big societal' issues can never be touched.

The associated problem with the loss of collective organisation and aspiration is that at least a significant proportion of people in the communities have not had the necessary supportive environment to develop the requisite capabilities for individual aspiration. Put simply, people struggle to take basic steps which other people in their respective societies, myself included, take for granted. People are alienated from – and lack the confidence to attend – educational institutions, are unable to access employment opportunities in their local area, and do not wish to move for fear of disrupting family relationships and the informal welfare services they provide. While we might criticise these individuals for their inertia or lack of individual aspiration, we have to appreciate that communities which have organised themselves collectively require a radical shift in their understandings in order to participate effectively. At a time in which they have been subject to radical changes in their way of life, it is to be expected that 'success' is more distant than for others.

### **Aspirations and work**

The complication with this situation is that party politics makes supporting change ever more difficult. Most clearly, the post mortem to Labour's General Election calamity has been dominated by the claim that Ed Miliband failed 'aspirational' individuals who seek to get ahead. By this, people mean that Labour failed to demonstrate to ambitious go-getters that they would receive greater recognition and remuneration for their hard work. The election as party leader of Jeremy Corbyn hardly satisfies those concerns, with polls consistently suggesting that the electorate believes that Labour supports 'down and outs'. However, adhering to this vision of aspiration actually risks painting a pessimistic vision of Britain's future as one dominated by unhappy and self-destructive 'success' stories in mainstream society as well as unhappy and self-destructive 'failure' stories in the sort of communities engaged in this project.

In amongst the many benefits it provides, the market economy, the cultural core of modern societies, promotes some ways of life that appear self-destructive. In certain, but by no means all, cases, the notion of intrinsic value is swept away before instrumental concerns for recompense. Various studies of bankers have cited dissatisfaction with pay as a key site of discontent, despite the fact that the profession is remunerated relatively well in comparison to others. It could be argued that some 'aspirational' people not only deprive themselves of the work qualities which are intrinsically rewarding, such as realising higher capabilities and forming solid social bonds with others, they also enter into a never ending pursuit of a golden carrot. The more they work, the more money they expect to receive. Not only are they more unhappy because their lives are instrumentalised and because they have no time for activities which mitigate the suffering, they also confront the fact that no amount of money can compensate for unhappiness.

This form of alienation from intrinsic goods in work and social life not only challenges the equation of well-being with material independence, it also leads people to become pathologically disinclined to display generosity of spirit to others, particularly those who appear to have lives they envy, such as, counter-intuitively, those who are time rich, but money poor: the 'non-aspirational' welfare-dependent, such as those involved in this project. It was apparent that the least 'aspirational' community members in the project now feel themselves doubly punished for not receiving remuneration for individual aspiration in the first place and then for somehow stumbling upon a good – time – that the 'aspirational' seem to want or want others not to have in quantities greater than themselves. One co-researcher, an intelligent and sincere unemployed young man from Ashington, felt guilty when inactive, wished dearly to be active, but lacked the confidence and capabilities to take advantage of opportunities which appeared accessible to those, like me, with tertiary education and experience. In an earlier age, he would have had opportunities through the traditional industries, and would have known how to take advantage of those opportunities through the example of family members and friends who had gone before him. Now, he is alone.

The confusion over goods and the effect that this has on the most vulnerable in society is evidence of 'bad' culture – an affluent society condemning people it itself regards as 'successful' to affluent unhappiness, while denigrating its 'losers' out of, among other things, envy for a good to which the 'successful' choose not to have access. The successful have very little autonomy by pursuing success, while the losers have very little autonomy in part because the successful insist on their lives being the only lives worthy of recognition by the state. As a consequence, losers have the misery of being excluded from recognised economic activities compounded by being micromanaged for receiving tax money derived from the wages of 'successful' people. All of this means that they have even fewer of the capabilities needed to strike out from their communities and enter into mainstream society.

Politicians who call for aspiration to be rewarded run the risk of neglecting the broader problem facing a key constituency – the successful. In both the UK and Australia, there is a growing need for the successful to reflect upon their own lives in order to understand more fully the broader social goods which all people need to access.

### **Intrinsic goods and basic income**

In general, the project has suggested the need for greater concern for intrinsic goods capable of restoring balance in people's lives by reducing the incentive for self-destructive careerism and supporting a wider and less individualistic range of lives to which people could aspire more easily.

One policy option is support for basic income, as endorsed by the Green Party. This controversial position holds that conditional welfare systems should be

abandoned and that all citizens should receive automatic regular payments from the state. This would provide a basic minimum for those outside the 'real' economy and a tax rebate for those within it.

This could create space for people to pursue ways of life independent of instrumental monetary reward, and to recognise that there is little point in working 90-hour weeks for well-paid unhappiness. The notion that people should have incentives to have miserable lives is replaced by the notion that people should pursue good lives of intrinsic worth and greater generosity of spirit. Monetary rewards can still exist and might be deployed in other areas where they are needed. For example, by removing the obligation of people to provide labour for little monetary reward, basic income may encourage better pay for essential, but dangerous or unsanitary careers, such as those in caring and cleaning, strengthening their status in the process. Perhaps the clearest consensus in the groups was belief that restoring balance through 'big societal' changes can help the aspirational as much as the presently 'non-aspirational'.

The benefits of engaging with communities in examining issues such as this are three-fold. (1) Academic ideas are applied, examined and revised by those who experience the subjects of the ideas in their everyday lives. (2) By engaging in formal research processes, previously alienated and apolitical community members garner practical experience of participation in academic and political forums. And (3), their contribution adds powerful substance to discussions which are all too often detached from real-world conditions. As such, while participation requires additional time and effort during the research phase, the findings and outcomes it can produce can help academics to address topics more dynamically, shaping impact throughout the process.

This is one of five articles in this issue of the *British Academy Review* that reveal how British Academy Rising Star Engagement Awards have enabled early career scholars to explore and share innovative methods of research and communication.