

Connected Communities and Covid-19



Viral Connectivity - research for a new politics of community

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Introduction

In the face of human tragedy, Covid-19 has invoked a tapestry of mutualism; a plethora of new connectivities. Research on Connected Communities points to ways in which this social turn can be built on for the future. But first we need to critically appraise the effect of a corrosive politics for deliberate public sector invalidation then consider how the counterweight value of connected citizen engagement can contribute to sustainably replacing it.

New Connectivities

It has taken a public health disaster on a global scale to crystallise *connectivity* as a universal value for our existence. That the virus does not discriminate appears as a source of sudden commonality; of fellow feeling for the public good. The life threat that strikes at both royals and lay people, suggests a moment of shared vulnerability; a blitz spirit sense of social levelling in crisis. The evidence that prime ministers and 'ordinary' people can fall prey to identical forms of incapacity can be seen as the new life blood of common cause; circulating oxygen to respire a failing individualism.

The fact of a virus whose potential is presented as indiscriminate has spawned in many, perhaps most local communities a response of seemingly indiscriminate generosity; a new connectivity closely linked to a replenished sense of shared place. The recognition that our predicament is a collective one has laid bare a sensibility to 'the other' from which a vast, if haphazard tapestry of philanthropic effort and civic generosity has arisen at speed. In 'lock down', we have seen an unlocking of mutualism; in physical distance, new routes to social proximity. To subvert the grimmest of cold war maxims, we sense widely a new openness to assured mutual construction, spreading virally and in this case, visibly.

But before we become seduced by this idea of 'herd community' as a cornerstone of the post-Covid future, in a world of revived competing interest we should consider how the new connectivity will need to be claimed as a tool for socially progressive change; how it will take its place as a broad constituent within the social movements that the crisis must generate. We need to ask how the role

of connectivity at community level will become a bridge to a future transformed by environmental sustainability, local citizen democracy and social justice.

The 'In It All Together' Myth

Despite appearances, neither the origins nor impact of Covid-19 speak of justice, equality or the common good. Its possible origin in live animal markets evidences the impact of species exploitation, as just one example of the disregard for a sustainable global environment while the stay-at-home enjoinders for containing viral spread were delivered, initially at least, with little respect for those without homes to stay in, or those for whom the experience of inescapable abuse, over-crowding or poverty would make for lives felt unworthy of living.

While there has been justifiable applause for the heroic dedication of NHS staff in rallying to meet a tsunami of critical need, the 'hero' sobriquet highlights vividly the long term neglect of the working conditions of these staff and the inequitable risk exposure that they have been expected to bear as a result. Meanwhile, an invocation of public respect for similarly exposed social care workers has appeared, even in comparison with this, as shockingly marginal, illustrating the corrosive power of dividing services by organizational history rather than combining them for obvious common purpose. Moreover, the over-representation of black and minority ethnic citizens in the low paid work of both these and other core services in the urban areas worst hit by Covid-19, speaks clearly to a grievous disregard for the disproportionate impact on these individuals, their families, friends and wider social networks.

While government now conjures discovery of the state's public service value as epiphany, this follows more than a decade in which much of that public asset value has been appropriated for private gain and the historic ethic of public good has been consistently undermined. However remarkable this moment of informal community-level social solidarity is, it highlights powerfully the contrasting attrition of formal institutions in the public realm and its divisive impact. A Covid-19 mortality rate that in poorer areas could be twice that for wealthier ones stands as an appalling, if unsurprising outcome for a country with a record of startling inactivity in addressing some of the worst health inequalities in the developed world (Marmot, M. Allen, J. Boyce, T. *et al*, (2020).

Small-government politics and the public realm

Given its own role in addressing inequalities - directly and through the voluntary and community sector that it both supports and depends on, there is little surprise that local government has borne the brunt of this unravelling of the public fabric. As in the midst of crisis, it seeks to link or scale up a plethora of new local pro-social activity; coordinate the educational safety net efforts of its schools; deal with the crisis of care home infection; manage the provision of shelter for those on its streets or provide assured recreational public space for its population, it does so, from the position of a budget baseline halved in those areas of greatest need, and with service levels that consequentially have long since become unable to meet expressed need, let alone prevent it.

Moreover, in relentlessly paring their capacity to meet local need, national government has critically undermined the ability of local councils to respond to their own local democratic mandate. With a duty for social care that is no less universal than that of the NHS for healthcare, and in spite of a tireless decade - long government discourse on the virtues of health and social care integration, local government has been systematically incapacitated by the antipathy of central government to publicly funded institutions and the public domain more widely. Corona and its attendant focus on the role of public health, provides the clearest possible mirror for this impoverishment; the sector's failure of readiness at the moment it was most clearly needed, to undertake, the local public health work for which as a devolved service it was surely designed, has been stark. (Pollack, A. 2020).

Disinvestment in the public realm, the dis-integration of public assets and a retreat from the very idea of the public good makes for a systemic capability that is a pale shadow of the new community connectivity, entirely unequal to the scale of its mutualizing potential. If the pandemic shares a moment at which the end of war in Europe is being memorialized, it also shares the familiar context of a shattered post-war values consensus; an impact defined by features of entrenched inequality in access to wealth, income and opportunity - and the multiple forms of social division that are its inevitable consequence. It is a context in which some six weeks into the crisis, the Department of Health and Social Care appeared to have found itself unable to provide either basic data on Covid-19 related deaths in social care, or procure necessary medical supplies from sources geographically or ethically closer to home than Myanmar. As Richard Horton, Editor-in-Chief of *The Lancet* says:

'Austerity blunted the ambition and commitment to protect its people. The political objective was to diminish the size and role of the state. The result was to leave the country fatally weakened'
(Horton, R. 2020)

Slightly more subtly perhaps, it has also been a context for the displacement of collective values by individual ones; for the devaluation of our *inter*-dependence against the assumed gold standard of independence, with its often mistaken promise of self-determination and personal choice. This is the context too in which the aim of national disconnection from our supranational obligations has prospered. Systematically politicized as economically and socially vital and justified by often grandiose imaginaries of entitled national influence, severance of the 'vertical' connectivities - those to the international institutions that depend on collaborative member state subscription, speaks of a national form of self-isolation that can only foreclose broader social solidarities.

So while in adversity we see diverse communities connected through multiple, often spontaneous forms of active citizenship, this stands in sharp contrast to the structural *disconnections* of a national politics with an increasingly populist disregard for the value of international humanitarian institutions and their connective authority. As things stand, this isolationism might look to be something of a barren landscape for realizing the transformative potential of the new mutualism.

Connected Communities and the 'Common Sense'

Yet we know from practical research on connected communities (Parsfield *et al*, 2015) that to expose, and actively build the pro-social qualities of mutualism and cooperation within connected community networks is to reveal a potential for extending the impact of these qualities through network effect. From the local examples of Preston, West Cumbria, the West Midlands and elsewhere, we know how building community capital through networks can generate a powerful capacity 'dividend'; a multiplier effect for active citizenship outcomes in many domains. Life in the post-Covid environment will surely demand the further illumination of this potential.

There is great potential richness and diversity in the patterns and outcomes of local connectivity. This is likely to form a sharp contrast with the singularity of argument for the ways in which economic stability should be recovered in the crisis aftermath. Unlike the complexity that was invoked daily to explain the challenges of epidemiological forecasting or rationalize the failures of protective equipment supply chains, these arguments are likely to be based on an appeal to a popular sense of what 'obviously' has to be done. The scale of the pandemic's economic toll has forced a liberal economic establishment to confront the impossible consequences which it has created. Laying bare the cruelty of an austerity politics of non-intervention, there will be a rush to proclaim - and control a heroic new 'no alternative normal,' recruiting a proverbial 'common sense' to its legitimation. As Rebecca Solnit notes:

'The idea that everything is connected is an affront to conservatives who cherish a macho every-man-for-himself frontier fantasy' (Solnit, R, 2020)

In a narrative that seeks to set aside the distracting complexity of inter-connectivity for the reductive 'truths' of economic necessity, it will be crucial to ensure a voice for a more authentic common sense: the lay knowledge of a million inter-connected acts of citizen agency and its unifying social purpose.

Consolidating the Social Turn

We have seen a desire for popular participation itself spread virally, along with a fundamental re-appraisal of the respective worth of working people. The great challenge will be to defend and nurture this in all its complexity; to fuse the active citizenship of a new connectivity with the new local citizen democracy that it invites, in a systemic approach to sustainable social and environmental change.

Meeting this challenge will demand a state that is active in privileging collective social value over sectional interest and that engages communities realistically in achieving it through forms of citizen participation and devolved governance that include citizen assemblies, local panels and neighbourhood councils. The sudden *volte face* assertion in the midst of turmoil, that public services are, after all, indispensable, points up the immensity of public sector achievement. Taken together with the unavoidable expedient of re-framing austerity as a construct now beyond its sell-by date, it might well signal a long term reappraisal of public services investment levels. Certainly, undoing the consequences of systematic public sector impoverishment at pace and scale is imperative. A civic togetherness momentarily ignited will only be as strong as the reversal of these consequences is incisive. Equally though, the potential role of local mutualism needs to be understood and grasped for its contribution to the future of this change of course.

Academic Community

If our role as citizens is to resist a return to business as usual, a major aspect of our role as academics in this field, is to work in, with and alongside communities in enabling this transition; helping to sustain the connectivity to place and people that we have seen, and using our knowledge and that of communities con-jointly to understand and evidence its beyond-monetary value. Equally, we have a role in articulating not only the risks of return to the *status quo* but also those associated with aspects of the current crisis becoming habituated in a new anti-libertarian normal. As the strategy for reducing viral spread has impacted uniquely on all our personal freedoms, we have a part to play in highlighting the risks of these public control precedents becoming established as the norm. Today's pragmatic enforcement of social distance must not be used to quash tomorrow's necessary social protest.

Most importantly, academia needs to shift its gaze to the citizen social movements that will draw, from the experience of the virus, the collective power from which meaningful societal change can be summoned. The work of the Centre for Citizenship and Community and RSA has evidenced the importance of a 'catalyst' in unlocking the potential of the connected community not least to co-provide, with local public service agencies, approachable forms of informal social support in meeting local need. However, the *strategic* potential of this moment will itself also need to be catalyzed through the force and influence of citizen social movement; a network of networks with the capacity to inspire connected change. Based on the knowledge and conviction of what communities can do for citizenship and democracy when in the company of a state properly invested in doing what *it* should properly do, this will be a movement for transformation; for enabling the potential of these strengths to be unlocked for sustainable societal change.

We should rise urgently to the occasion of this challenge, framing our role in building, with communities, the constituents of this collective for social change. The sociologist Steven Lukes foresees ‘a feasible, reachable future that will involve *‘something like a conceptual reawakening – a revival of a sense of mutual interdependence’* (Lukes, S.,2019). If the future to which we reawake is dominated not by the shibboleth of economic growth but by meeting need socially and sustainably through re-distributed power, academia should be ready to connect its own community to that cause.

It seems clear that the forms of connectivity revealed by the response to the Corona virus can be seen as a social turn, with its own positive viral trajectory. Reflecting the long familiar tenets of a community assets – based approach to public health and social work, this is however, an enormous step-change beyond it. More than either a necessary and overdue corrective to capitalism, Covid-19, for all its tragic effect, is an urgent invitation to a different way of organizing our mutual social assets; to sustainably meeting human, civic and environmental obligations that can only grow. It is also an extreme reminder of how little we have done this to date.

References

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