

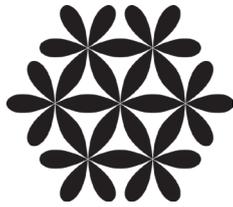
Inclusion and the Commons

Exploring the spaces beyond market and state

A DISCUSSION PAPER FROM THE CENTRE FOR WELFARE REFORM

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Foreword

Thomas Allan's short paper is an important one because it helps to map out the territory we need to rediscover between the State and the Market. The post-war period has been dominated by the conflict between these two forces and the result is a No Man's Land where community, citizenship and most of the good things in life wither.

How we bring this warfare to an end will involve, as Thomas Allan suggests, three different strategies:

1. Recognise and respect the limitations of the Market, not by treating it as the enemy, but by recognising that productivity and efficiency give no measure of human worth.
2. Recognise the role of the State in ensuring our common welfare, but help it redefine its role as Partner, not as a substitute for community life.
3. Identify, reclaim and start to cherish the Commons, the space we all share, the space in which we meet, grow, learn, worship, take care of things and foster the sense of community, belonging and action without which human life becomes empty.

The Centre and our partners in Citizen Network are seeking to make this a reality, not just by our campaigns and advocacy, but in particular by showing that we can choose to cooperate, grow and develop. The imperative to compete and pursue self-interest – pressed on us as much by the State as by the Market – can be rejected. We can believe in citizenship, community and inclusion, and we can live by those beliefs.

Simon Duffy

Director of the Centre for Welfare Reform

I. Introduction

Inclusion is a principle that demands we recognise the value of all people, regardless of difference. Yet in the absence of a public philosophy, a political culture and social institutions that recognise the intrinsic value of the engaged citizen and their diverse living, learning and caring environments, its power becomes severely diminished. Worse, it becomes broken down by the language and monoculture of the free Market – “the political vocabulary of consumerism” (Patel, 2009) – as we relinquish control over our lives to destructive Market forces.

When Markets fail or deliver unfair and inequitable outcomes, as they invariably do, we pursue social justice by demanding a reluctant, clumsy State, or the courts, to enforce action – often at a cost. Despite the important (albeit receding) presence of consumer, employment and citizen protection, it is an inherently disempowering institutional model. Inclusion is displaced by obscure workplace instruments and practices of risk mitigation, surveillance, performance management, cost efficiency and competitive tendering. Plausible rhetoric of ‘participation’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘change’ from our leaders abound, yet it must be said: we are not the co-producers of social change (at least not in ways that are socially beneficial morally acceptable or ecologically sustainable), merely subject to a higher order.

The welfare state, meanwhile, a key agent in the protection and enhancement of the wellbeing of citizens, has over recent decades been reshaped into something else. Originally conceived of as a catalyst for inclusion, equality and social justice – a form of political resolution between Market and State to ensure the material welfare of all citizens – it has now been “reshaped into an agent that causes destitution” asserted Frank Field MP, Chair of the Work & Pensions Select Committee:

“Far from a welfare state which protects the weaker underbelly in society, it is attacking them...we have now got a welfare state which is causing destitution...”

Field (cited in Morris, 2017)

Neither the State, which disempowers and dehumanises; nor the Market, which captures and commodifies human relations and nature, in its pursuit of profit, can empower us to make the changes so urgently needed. In fact, the opposite holds true. Both State and Market actively distort the common bonds between us by propagating the fiction that we are competitive, self-interested and individualistic by nature (Habermann, 2012). This, in turn, leads to widespread suffering, neglect and distress, and breakdown in

trust as community bonds are broken and inequality of income and other resources consolidate or grow (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). In truth, the State must still play a key role in the inclusion and protection of its citizens, but must radically redefine its role and objectives.

To realise Inclusion, we first need to learn to look and live beyond the individual motives, actions and behaviours of the so-called ‘rational’ citizens of standard economic theory. We need to look holistically at some of the deeper dynamics and structural exclusions at the heart of our Market economy and society, and towards a new public philosophy. To be clear: fighting for Inclusion to keep protecting the rights and shining the lights on the experiences of vulnerable, marginalised people is a vital cause – one we must continue. Yet ultimately, it is a losing battle when a wider political, economic and managerial consensus is causing:

“...the fabric of society [to] wear thin as people increasingly find themselves in a world of widespread and mounting unemployment, harsh corporate downsizing (sometimes called ‘right-sizing’), growing income and wealth disparity and alarming environmental deterioration.”

Lutz (1999)

Ongoing engagement with the dysfunctional outcomes of Market culture in personal life and in social care has convinced me that we are structurally alienated from some of the core values that constitute a truly inclusive social experience. Sensibilities such as civil discourse, empathy and cooperation are marginalised and devalued by the dominant narratives of our political culture and policy choices. We now need to build an alternative, more humane vision for change beyond the current limitations of conventional economic thinking, Market governance and managerial practice.

2. The State and the Market

The dominant vision of change in our society is the modern institution of the Market. This vision holds, as it has since our transition to the era of industrialisation, that the central mechanism around which society must be organised is ‘the economy’. Hungarian economic historian Karl Polanyi (2001) calls this societal transition a “Great Transformation” and used the term “Market Society” to emphasise the fundamental differences in our modern economic mentalities, relations and social institutions to those that preceded them.

One of Polanyi’s main arguments is that, prior to the liberal market economy, markets played a significantly less prominent role in human affairs and social life. It was only after the industrial revolution and the shift in interests, political ideas and public policies that accompanied industrialisation that the notion of human beings supposed predisposition towards rationally-guided self interest, self-regulating markets and rational free trade became prevalent. For Polanyi, the concept of a Market Society is a way of demonstrating that individuals, the market economy and the State were not autonomous, but interrelated parts of an institutional whole. The State and the Market should not be understood as mutually exclusive – as traditional arguments of ‘State vs. Market’ or ‘public vs. private’ tend to assume – but as a single, human construction.

Markets, moreover, are always embedded in social relations, rather than the other way around. According to Polanyi, any attempt to think otherwise would leave us:

“an institution [that] could not exist for any length of time without annihilating the human and natural substance of society”

Polanyi (2001)

Here, Polanyi articulates the social and ecological consequences of the ‘utopian’ attempt to ‘free’ Markets from their social moorings, as advocated by industrialists, classical liberals and free market thinkers. This notion of change was something he views as:

“corrosive...crude utilitarianism combined with an uncritical reliance on the alleged self-healing virtues of unconscious growth.”

Polanyi (2001)

Despite Polanyi’s insights – and despite persistent problems of poverty, unemployment, economic instability, inequality of income and other resources and ecological destruction – the belief in the natural existence

and universal benefits of self-regulating markets and exponential material growth has persisted. Our views may differ as to our priorities or the best ways to achieve them, but discussion is often limited by how to ‘optimise’ the functioning of Markets to achieve certain social goals (Meretz, 2012).

The past forty years has seen the emergence of a more extreme, quasi-religious vision of runaway market change sometimes referred to as Neoliberalism: a free market-fundamentalism that combines an unshakeable belief in the true nature of citizens as *homo economicus* - “a machine-like egoist always seeking to maximise utility” (Weber, 2012) – together with faith in the power of self-regulating ‘free markets’ to provide the elixir to almost any social and economic problem.

“Neoliberalism is now commonly used to describe the epochal shift in political economy from welfare-based government to competitiveness-driven governance”

Birch & Mykhnenko (2008)

Neoliberal theory claims that, with minimal State interference on private Market activity, we can have ever-expanding trade and wealth, including goods and services, financial products, gadgets, upgrades and assistive technologies of all kind. This will be achieved, we are told, through the use of economic incentives (such as low taxes on the wealthy and large corporations, and minimal restrictions on cross-border capital flows) that harness the self-interest of supposedly rational, utility-maximising entrepreneurs. The benefits of growth – the sum total of all Market activity, socially beneficial or socially harmful – will inevitably trickle down to those less well off, at the same time providing us with a material and cultural model of success to which we must aspire.

It will also involve reducing relief to the poor and most vulnerable, since this only distorts market activity, interfering with any rational person’s incentive to engage in productive Market activity (such as starting employment or a profitable business). This is something Albert Hirschman (1991) referred to as the “Perversity Thesis”: the idea that welfare as a way to ease the suffering of the citizenry only increases dependency. Curtailing human rights, keeping costs such as wages low, restricting employment rights and reducing welfare and public expenditure are necessary to ‘free’ the Market of its restraints and, at the same time, free us from our obligation to the poor. Unburdened by the scourge of politics, trade unions or indeed the welfare state – and safe in the moral belief that the plight of the poor, the young, the disabled, disenfranchised and the distressed is a product of their own failings – we have freedom and choice for individual enterprise and leisure, production and consumption. Markets, left alone, will effectively regulate themselves.

Despite a financial crisis associated in large part with its egotistical belief about its own premises, neoliberalism is still strong today in a policy culture that sees human relations as a Market transaction. Through their shared commitment to the “utopian ideal of endless growth and consumer satisfaction” (Bollier & Helfrich, 2012), both neoliberal State and Market have a deep commitment to the rational outcomes of Market competition. These are prescribed widely to solve problems of economic inefficiency and large-scale service delivery in key public services such as health, education, environmental protection and social care.

It can also be detected in the changing structures, attitudes and aspirations of many charities and other community and voluntary sector organisations, many of whom are now required to meet the needs of the people left behind by the austerity policies of the neoliberal State. Their potential for critical engagement with the experiences of the excluded has, in my experience, been severely compromised – seen in their reluctance or inability to voice their opposition to the human cost of the cuts and government austerity programmes.

In the same context, it has been compromised by the paranoid obsession with compliance and cost-efficiency and the resulting loss of capacity for human contact and support. The demand to compete for temporary funding contracts from beleaguered government departments has led in many areas of the sector to the inculcation of a competitive ethos, with technical proceduralism and targets culture displacing human connection. The winners in this zero-sum and self-defeating game being those who can demonstrate their commitment to the Market ethos most strongly: by delivering the ‘product’ as cheaply as possible, while paying lip service to a set of convoluted and, in my view, misplaced accountability objectives.

The subtle creep of neoliberal Market culture has quietly gone about damaging what we value most, further reducing the opportunities of those individuals who already lack the money power or voice to credibly participate. It is straining familial and social relations, uprooting communities, destroying public safety nets, transforming social support institutions in its image and limiting our political imagination for alternatives. It aggressively persists, no matter how many times we review, reorganise, restructure, transform, redesign, reinvent, or even humanise – inclusion wash – our language.

In fact, much of the relentless change, ‘improvement’ and upheaval we have come to accept as normal and inevitable at work is down to our increasing exposure to Market forces. Organisations and their managers across all sectors choose to downsize, outsource, redeploy and ‘flexibilise’ as they try to adapt, interact or thrive within an increasingly hostile financial environment. There is always a human sacrifice. In my experience, those

with less voice, control, or without an assertive family presence in their lives are often the first casualties of economic downturn

“...no money, no social rights!”

Mattei (2012)

Meaninglessness and struggle prevail. Whether a relentless focus on targets and data to guide strategic decisions in the Marketplace. Or the repetitive, systematic need to justify the minutiae of our working lives (or indeed our right to certain public goods or services or claims for welfare benefit) as part of the drive towards cost reduction and a wider culture of blame and litigation. Rather than the corporate mantra of ‘adding value’, anxiety, depression and chronic workplace stress are fast becoming the social cost of 21st century working life, reflecting a wider psychological strain and social rot at the heart of Market society. Balancing the demands of work, childcare, family and social relationships is already enough of a challenge.

And despite the benefits of modern technology, rapid, market-driven technological change is not the answer:

“Despite the convenience and immediacy of smart phones, social media, e-mail, Skype, texting etc, we are not finding our feelings of loneliness assuaged, but rather exacerbated by technology. Feelings of isolation, alienation, aloneness and loneliness are pervasive in the twenty-first century. We apparently still need and miss the human touch, the personal presence and warmth lacking in remote electronic communication.”

Diamond (2014)

In summary, when it comes to the organisation of ‘the economy’, we have got our organising principles and priorities the wrong way around, while making vast, contested assumptions about human nature. Too many lives are spinning precariously around what’s been called the gig economy, in increasingly incoherent and insecure ways. Profound social, psychological and ecological costs shadow our deep-rooted cultural ideals of free-market led progress. Yet one thing seems clear: Despite reluctantly offering citizens a thin layer of protection from the worst excesses of the market, we cannot entrust Inclusion and welfare to an institutional, neoliberal state that, in its ongoing commitment to free markets and unsustainable economic growth, turns a blind eye to these social costs and real-world consequences.

But what if we were to instead challenge these assumptions and organising principles of the formal economy? What if we could instead steer away from this political rationality? Rather than choosing between rational actors or rival factions competing for scarce resources, our real ‘tough decisions’ might instead revolve around the following questions that help us redefine

our essential relationships to each other and the natural world:

- How might thinking differently and critically open public spaces for Inclusion?
- How can we organise resources and production in really people-first and sustainable ways?
- How can we reconnect with our inner selves and also those we support in more sustained and meaningful ways?

3. Reclaiming the Commons

For P2P ('peer-to-peer') theorist Michel Bauwens, one of the consequences of Market culture is that:

"efficiency and productivity based on scarcity have taken over the sphere of intimacy [leading to] a dramatic destruction of social knowledge, skill and cultures."

Bauwens (2005)

Not only are we seeing the Market ethos encroach into those public necessities of social survival that represent citizenship, but it is also devaluing

"..[community] activities which are the very fabric of society, caring for children or the elderly, community engagement and volunteering, contributing to public debates and criticism, creativity in arts, music or literature are subjected to the Market evaluation of the 'bottom-line'; nothing has intrinsic value."

Boland & Griffin (2018)

How do we rethink Inclusion in light of the clear limitations of the neoliberal State and Market? Bauwens suggests that the functioning of 'the economy' should not necessarily result "in commodities sold to consumers but [instead] in use value made for users" (Bauwens, 2005). This rethinking of value is forming the basis for the idea of the Commons: a holistic paradigm that reflects the value and the intrinsic worth of all human beings, as well as nature, community, livelihood and interdependence. In short, the discourse and practices of the commons show us that not everything is a commodity intended for exchange in the Marketplace. Being treated as such can diminish its use value, viability and sustainable use, while alienating and excluding us from the affective, cooperative and creative capacities intrinsic to its *social* existence.

The Commons are resources that are produced and managed collectively by a distinct community of users, according to their rules, and functioning independently of State control or privatisation. The Nobel Prize winning work of Elinor Ostrom (1990) and many contributors since have demonstrated that, in contrast to the *Tragedy of the Commons* hypothesis (which assumes that what we share will always be overexploited or mismanaged by rational actors) (Hardin, 1968), certain resources, under certain conditions, are best managed by voluntary cooperation. Ostrom considered mainly natural resources, such as meadows, forests or irrigation

systems. These have since been extended to cover digital commons such as free, open-source platforms such as Wikipedia; and social, cultural and civic commons such as community support schemes, social care coops, playgrounds, public spaces, knowledge and ideas, public schools, libraries and parks amongst many others.

As policy strategist and commons advocate David Bollier (2011) has pointed out, the commons paradigm – taking inclusion and equality as its starting point – offers a perspective that is missing from the logic of the neoliberal State and Market, namely:

“the ability to set and enforce sustainable limits on Markets; the ability to internalize the “externalities” that Markets produce; and an ability to declare that certain resources are inalienable – that is, off-limits to Markets.”

Bollier (2011)

From the perspective of the Commons, the initial challenge for welfare reform is to re-orientate welfare systems, cultures and practice beyond the damaging myths of *homo economicus* and the growth economy. Instead, it must be focused on enabling the collaborative, productive potential of civil society and its living, caring and learning environments (see Bauwens et al, 2017). Commons don't just happen on their own, but are enlivened by these practices of 'Commoning': the generative power of social action and cooperation:

“...activating the power of social cooperation to get things done and that bring us together [while refuting that] what's bought and sold in the Market economy is the only way to provide fundamental meaning and sustenance in our lives...”

Ristau (2011)

To be clear again: the intention is not to return to some pre-industrial utopia, nor to return to the post war era of publicly controlled goods and services. Neither is it to suggest that we should live life without markets as part of social and community life. But it is to transform our current, extractive models and strategies of economic development, where a relentless focus on material expansion and the bottom line is rendering qualitative, non-market value such as care, human relations and community engagement as effectively 'value-less' (Bollier & Weston, 2013). Matters of public interest and social justice need to be brought under democratic, citizen-led control, rather than left to the free play of market forces or a dysfunctional state. Sadly for proponents of austerity, this does not mean the state continuing its withdrawal from responsibility for public welfare, leaving communities to fend for themselves; rather, its reorganisation and reorientation along environmentally sustainable and humane principles.

To begin taking steps towards the Commons, I would recommend Hilary Cottam's *Relational Welfare* (2015) as an excellent starting point and useful guide.

Her *Five Principles*, abridged and adapted below, outline a theoretical (and hopefully practical) guide for a future welfare State based on a new vision for Inclusion and the Commons:

1. Take care of root causes:

Cottam starts by suggesting that a debate first needs to take place on the boundaries between the economy and human welfare. What are the limits to the Market? What can be bought and sold?

“Any new imaginings about the welfare State will be only a sticking plaster at best without an economic strategy that takes care of root causes, and a debate about the boundaries between the economy and welfare.”

Cottam (2015)

Taking care of root causes also means properly addressing inequality. Yet in order to do so, we need to move beyond notions of ‘inclusive growth’ to challenging and displacing

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) itself as a marker of human social development. Promising alternatives here include Bhutan's ‘Gross National Happiness’ (GNH) Index, which measures the physical, social and spiritual health of its citizens, as well as the natural environment. Similarly, Happy City, a small UK charity, has put together a ‘Thriving Place Index’ for local authorities across England that attempts to measure our progress towards a more inclusive, sustainable economy; a society that puts people, place and planet first and measures value in its truest sense.

2. Adopt a developmental approach:

According to Cottam, we need to take a more caring, developmental approach in key areas such as care, education, welfare, food and energy. This is not only about changing attitudes, practices and behaviours. It must be done alongside experimentation with cooperative organisational forms and democratic governance that build resilience and promote human socio-

emotional development. Citizen-led efforts to raise political awareness, understanding of how the economy really works (or doesn't for too many, as is the case) and eco-literacy will also be important.

3. Be infrastructure light (relationship heavy):

Abandon the preoccupation with centralisation. Cottam articulates how the obsession with large scale bureaucratic structures – often with very little structural capacity for reflective thinking or practice – is the basis from which many resource and service models are currently designed and politics debated:

“... [a] future welfare state will need to relegate to the background this traditional infrastructure and the culture, systems and politics which revolve around it.”

Cottam (2015)

This transition will need to be supported by the “distributed possibility of modern technology” (Cottam, 2015) such as P2P networks where peers collaborate to create social forms of value in the form of shared resources (Bauwens et al, 2017).

4. Seed and champion alternative models:

Cottam suggests we need to invest in and prioritise alternative models that draw on the value of community, social diversity and local knowledge, rather than the current, neoliberal State obsession with measurement, auditing, targeting and surveillance. Real change towards a more inclusive, caring society will only happen with significant State investment in systems of social provisioning that practice real, participatory organising models, explains Cottam, rather than abstract peculiarities with exclusion at their core. Importantly:

“...short term ‘pilots’ that don’t survive beyond the term of the latest government will not deliver the change needed...the State need[s] to actively provide living models of different ways of organising, valuing and providing.”

Cottam (2015)

5. Facilitate the dialogue:

Finally, politics has to create the conditions for this new Relational Welfare State, helping us move beyond the human sacrifices of the cuts and government austerity programmes in the name of ‘efficiency’. A form of 21st century Green New Deal (following on from the settlement of 1945) will need to gain popular support. In this final principle, Cottam asserts politics will need to lead on the development of

“...a welfare State defined in principle and practice by human possibility and relationships rather than the agenda of institutional reform and efficiency.”

Cottam (2015)

4. Commonfare

As with Hilary Cottam's *Relational Welfare* and the emerging international cooperative Citizen Network, I am convinced that the system changes outlined here must be accompanied by a new form of politics and political organisation. As the above has hopefully helped make clearer, Inclusion, welfare and citizenship are too important to be left to misleading dichotomies of 'winners vs. losers', 'shirkers vs. strivers', 'boom vs. bust' or even 'public vs. private'. All the while, leaving those marginalised by the global economic order at the mercy of fiscal crisis, shrinking opportunity, management efficiency consultants and labour Market flexibility gurus. We need to rethink what we understand as 'the public', and organise as free citizens away from the dominant cultural narratives of the market, or the limitations of the state.

Thankfully, as well as the Transition, Slow Food and Solidarity Economy movements (to name but three), new forms of Commonfare are pointing the way forward:

"Commonfare, or "welfare of the commons", is a participatory form of welfare provision based on collaboration which enfranchises all of society, even those not tied to the labour market. Commonfare addresses the exclusionary, hierarchic and bureaucratic shortcomings of the welfare model by creating open-source, democratic, and multi-constituent social provision networks and practices. Labour mutuals, freelancer coops and prefigurative solidarity networks are in the vanguard, but Commonfare mechanisms would ideally be financed by a Partner State."

P2P Foundation Wiki

Supporting such initiatives as the unconditional basic income, Commonfare is part of a wider Commons Transition Plan that seeks to establish more caring and nourishing forms of economic and social organisation. The specific role of Commonfare is part of a proposal for radical changes to welfare to confront the harmful, neoliberal dismantling of the solidarity mechanisms around which much of daily community life revolves. The concept of the Partner State, meanwhile, is one that maintains its funding responsibilities, and proposes that democratically restructured 'public authorities play a sustaining role in the direct creation of value by civil society' (Bauwens, 2012) to protect and enhance sources of value and wealth common to all of us.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Inclusion is not a tool or a technology, something we uncritically ‘do to’ abstracted, problematic parts of society. Nor is it about tweaking, revising or reforming parts of an otherwise well-functioning social system. It is less a ‘thing’, more a process; embodying what Karl Polanyi calls the social nature of reality (Block & Somers, 2014). This is above all connections between people, place and community. Inclusion conveys a sense of presence, intimacy and reciprocity; an innate sociality that runs deeper than the individual motives, actions and behaviours of the ‘rational’ citizens of standard economic theory. As created in diverse community settings, it represents the value of intrinsic human worth, principle of social interdependence and a generative power for democratic renewal; together providing real potential for people, communities and organisations to work in sustainable, compassionate and equitable ways. In this sense, it is best understood in light of the commons paradigm.

Inclusion is also a broad topic that will mean different things to different people. There will inevitably be areas not covered here, still to be developed further or still to be discussed. If anything, it is hoped that this discussion paper might provide a useful starting point to think about it from a different, perhaps unfamiliar or even uncomfortable perspective.

But ultimately, if left to the perils, delusions and gridlocks of the free Market and its State partner, Inclusion will always remain something of an attractive moral ideal, yet ultimately powerless and ineffectual. With right-wing populism and exclusionary rhetoric (e.g. towards immigrants) one of many alarming themes currently poisoning the public sphere, hopefully some of these new ideas can equip us with a more enriched understanding, and help move us towards a more caring, effective, inclusive and long-term political action.

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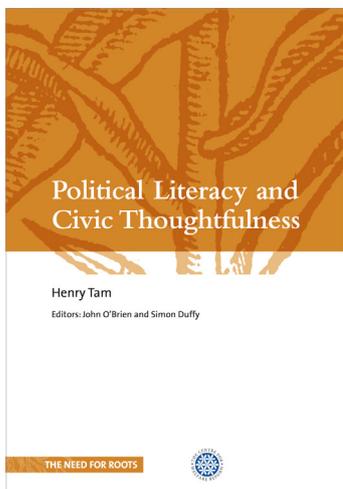
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