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Daniel Sage

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A challenge to liberalism? The communitarianism of the Big Society and Blue Labour

DANIEL SAGE

University of Stirling, UK

Abstract

This article explores how in recent years both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party have begun to argue that the institutions of civil society and community should be reinvigorated and strengthened. Such arguments take inspiration from the theories of communitarianism, which stress the importance of community and civic life over the more liberal claims of individual rights. For the Conservatives, these ideas have been synthesized under the banner of the 'Big Society', while 'Blue Labour' - a relatively new political tendency - argues that Labour must stand for a more cooperative and reciprocal civil society based upon community action. It is subsequently argued that although both concepts unquestionably represent an engagement with communitarian ideas, they face significant challenges. Ultimately, the article concludes that the Big Society faces more profound impediments than Blue Labour which, if it is able to overcome its own difficulties, may well support the foundation for a powerful, communitarian social democracy.

Key words

community, conservatism, neoliberalism, social democracy, welfare-to-work

Corresponding author:

Daniel Sage, School of Applied Social Science, University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, Scotland.
Email: daniel.sage@stir.ac.uk

Introduction

From both the right and left of British politics, one of the most notable trends in recent political and policy discourse has been a concern that community life, social relationships and the institutions of civil society are in need of reinvigoration. For the Conservative Party (2010), these ideas have been captured under the concept of the 'Big Society': an agenda which seeks to move conservatism beyond its association with Thatcherism by emphasizing a centre-right commitment to 'decentralize state power, empower local communities, increase social justice and reduce poverty' (Ellison, 2011: 45–46). Labour meanwhile, though still coming to terms with its heavy electoral defeat of 2010, has spent a large part of its time in opposition debating the emergent ideas of 'Blue Labour' (Glasman et al., 2011). Driven by a diverse group of politicians and intellectuals – such as Jon Cruddas, Maurice Glasman and Stuart White – Blue Labour seeks to renew social democratic opposition to both the free market and the bureaucratic state in the name of revitalizing and protecting community life, social bonds and cherished traditions.

Taken together, the Big Society and Blue Labour represent a largely intertwined shift in political debate: beyond notions of individual opportunities and rights (both economic and social) and towards the more collective concerns of community and a common good. Goodhart (2011) argues that this constitutes the first signs of a 'post-liberalism', with widespread political and public concern with liberal economic and social policy. Such developments arguably represent a 'communitarian turn' in political and policy debates. This article examines the main arguments of communitarianism, the central ideas of the Big Society and Blue Labour and whether, ultimately, these tendencies have the potential to amount to a genuine communitarian shift in social policy.

The foundations of communitarian theory

At first glance, an emphasis on community by both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party might seem unremarkable. The concept of 'community', like so many others, has been plagued by overuse; to many, it may seem too vacuous to seriously apply to theories of society and social policy (Levitas, 2000). However, during the 1970s and 1980s a group of political philosophers with an interest in community developed a theory, which came to be known as communitarianism, which aimed to formalize a cogent and coherent defence and celebration of community life. The first communitarian theorists were drawn primarily from Anglo-American political philosophy (Taylor, 1979; MacIntyre, 1981; Sandel, 1982), but by the 1990s communitarian ideas had penetrated sociology and were most commonly associated with Etzioni (1993) and Putnam (2000).

The starting point for communitarian theory is the basic tenet that the existence of strong community life – expressed as a state of affairs in which individuals belong to and participate in a wider group (or groups) of common interests and shared goals – is of inherent value in human society. According to Buchanan (1989), the value and worth which communitarians attach to community life stems from two sources. Firstly, there is the ontological view that individuals, as inherently social beings born into group identities, ‘strongly desire community, or at least find it deeply satisfying or fulfilling when they achieve it’ (Buchanan, 1989: 857). Secondly, there is the subsequent view that if humans are intrinsically social, then desirable goods will flow from strong communities. This is stated by Calder (2004), who argues that communitarians believe that strong communities help promote social stability and cohesion and prevent social ills, such as alienation and anomie. Based upon these two foundations, Driver and Martell (1997: 29) argue that communitarians advocate a social policy approach which ‘recognizes the embeddedness and interdependence of human life, and promotes social and civic values above individual ones’.

As much as the communitarian thesis is a statement about the desirability of certain social goods, it is also a forceful critique about the perceived hegemony of the liberal worldview. At its simplest, the liberal worldview holds that society consists, or should strive to consist, of an association of free individuals, detached from imposed duties and obligations and free to form their own aspirations and interpretations of the good life. For liberals, the role of the state is not to impose a vision of the common good, but to recognize and protect individual rights from interference by others. In the UK at least, since the 1980s the liberal tradition has seemingly swung back towards its most radical form – in the guise of ‘neoliberalism’ – through policies which aim to expand the role of markets and reduce the contours of the state.

Margaret Thatcher, who argued that ‘there is no such thing as society, there are individual men and women’, most infamously captured the neoliberal view of social life. However, Thatcher also claimed that in addition to individuals, ‘there are families’ and, essentially, this is at the heart of the communitarian critique. On the one hand, we are all individuals: but we are individuals who belong to and are an inseparable part of wider groups, such as the family, religion or nation. As Michael Sandel (1982: 172) believes, humans can only truly understand themselves ‘as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of this history, as sons and daughters of that revolution, as citizens of this republic’. By emphasizing the rights of the individual over and above any wider claims of citizenship, communitarians like Sandel believe the liberal view ‘devalues, neglects or undermines community’ and ‘fails to provide an adequate account of certain types of obligations and commitments’ (Buchanan, 1989: 852–853). Although the liberal responds that liberalism, with its inherent protection

of the individual right to association, protects the integrity of communities, the communitarian believes that the liberal conception of the person as 'radically unattached or radically detachable' – an 'autonomous chooser of ends' governed by self-interest – denigrates the collective attachments and notions of solidarity which community life depends on (Buchanan, 1989: 865–866).

New Labour and communitarianism

At the beginning of the New Labour project in the mid-1990s, its key architects were determined to fashion a new politics for the centre-left, ideologically distinct from both Thatcherite neoliberalism and post-war social democracy (Blair, 1994). Driven by this need, New Labour initially looked to communitarian theories with some enthusiasm (Driver and Martell, 1997; Levitas, 2000). By emphasizing the importance of social responsibility and obligation, it seemed that communitarianism rejected both the economic individualism of neoliberalism and the social rights approach of the post-war left, which was deemed to be politically untenable. Thus, communitarianism offered a fundamental challenge to the free market model without resorting to the statist arguments of the old left. Initially, it helped give substance to New Labour's search for a bona fide 'third way' (Giddens, 1998; Blair, 1999).

However, it quickly transpired that in government New Labour would seek a different course of policy. Rather than expressing a communitarian agenda, New Labour fashioned an approach that was often both authoritarian in its emphasis on personal responsibility and neoliberal in its favour for market solutions. Policy debates about welfare-to-work, for example, were dominated by claimant responsibility; collective support for benefit claimants thus became increasingly conditional upon behavioural requirements (White, 2000; Daguette and Etherington, 2009). Subsequently, and perhaps due to the heavy focus on claimant responsibility, public support for the benefits system and solidarity with those reliant on benefits have profoundly dwindled (Sage, 2012). A narrative of personal responsibility was also pursued across other policy areas, such as criminal justice, parenting, education and the family (Driver and Martell, 1997). Furthermore, Driver and Martell (1997: 40) argue that in institutional terms, New Labour was disinterested in bottom-up, community-led policy-making. Rather, policy was 'driven by government and by statute' and was 'prescriptive rather than voluntary ... [whereby] politicians have defined its moral content'. New policies were formulated, managed and delivered by the apparatus of the state, not the institutions of civil society so central to the communitarian thesis.

In other areas of economic and social policy, New Labour championed the virtues of the market. Its macroeconomic approach was characterized by a desire to be seen as comfortable with globalization, supporting greater

flexibility in the labour market and nurturing a pro-business environment at ease with the workings of global capital. In its social policy approach, New Labour also demonstrated a pro-market disposition in two separate ways. Firstly, New Labour extended public sector outsourcing to non-state, often profit-making, organizations. As Sanger (2003) argues, this involved a fundamental reorientation of the state's relationship to service provision. While the state had traditionally been seen as both the financier and provider of public services, the increased use of outsourcing restricted the state to financier, thereby opening up collective provision to private competition. The use of outsourcing was most clearly demonstrable in welfare-to-work provision, with non-state actors increasingly used to provide back-to-work services for the unemployed (Henman and Fenger, 2006). Secondly, New Labour extended the use of quasi-markets in the public sector which, while not involving the use of private companies, championed the use of market principles in public services (Le Grand, 2007). Under New Labour, quasi-markets were strengthened in hospitals and schools. The latter, for example, were encouraged to 'compete' for students and parents to 'shop around' for schools (West and Pennell, 2000). While not involving the private sector directly, quasi-markets elevated its central principles of choice and competition.

The Big Society, Blue Labour and the revival of communitarian ideas

As the above section argued, the overwhelming ethos of New Labour consisted of two reinforcing components: personal responsibility and the virtue of markets. Writing at the start of the New Labour era, Driver and Martell (1997: 43) described this approach as one of 'liberal conservatism'; with liberal, pro-market sentiments often accompanied by a moral conservatism throughout many aspects of social policy. Although traditional social democratic concerns were manifest in New Labour's commitment to invest more in health, education and children's services, its favour for markets and acute concern with personal responsibility projected a highly individualized view of the welfare state. This was evident in New Labour's repeated focus on the 'enabling' or 'active' state, which would 'help people help themselves' through a 'hand-up, not a hand-out'. With such notions the *raison d'être* of social policy entered new terrain, beyond notions of social citizenship and solidarity and towards supporting individuals to compete more effectively in a competitive market environment (Lister, 2011).

By 2009, the New Labour settlement looked to be over as the party's rating in the opinion polls collapsed to new lows. Simultaneously, British public life was scarred by crises such as the financial crash of 2008 and the

MPs' expenses scandal of 2009. Both crises fundamentally undermined public trust in the democratic and economic structures of British society. Perhaps as a result, by 2010 the Conservative leader David Cameron had done much to try to reinvigorate his party's stance on social issues. This involved looking beyond the market individualism of the Thatcher years towards a greater focus on social cohesion, relationships and community.

The Big Society

From the very beginning of David Cameron's leadership, there was a concerted attempt from the top of the party to demonstrate that it had changed. This was particularly true on issues which the Conservatives were not particularly associated with, such as the environment and climate change. It was also the case that the Conservatives began to seriously re-engage with social policy issues; a project which was manifested across two broad themes. Firstly, Cameron's Conservatives began to display a much more open approach to matters of social justice (Social Justice Policy Group, 2007). To this end, the Conservatives accepted the existence of relative poverty, proclaimed a commitment to high quality public services (especially the National Health Service) and declared their intent to deal with the problems of 'worklessness' and 'welfare dependency'. Secondly, David Cameron also displayed a strong belief that the institutions of civil society, and in particular the 'third sector', were in need of strengthening (Cameron, 2009). In the first years of Cameron's leadership, these concerns were often synthesized into concepts like the 'Broken Society' or 'Broken Britain'. The intent was to portray a country rife with social problems and burdened by a weak civic infrastructure (Social Justice Policy Group, 2006).

The effort made by the Conservatives under Cameron's leadership to engage with issues of welfare, poverty and social cohesion heralded a fundamentally important moment for post-Thatcherite conservatism. Since the 1980s, Conservative ideas on these issues had been dominated by the New Right critique, in which welfare was seen as 'leading to excessive public expenditure and an unfair tax burden on citizens and entrepreneurs, weakening the family and creating dependency' (Bochel, 2011: 8). While John Major and Iain Duncan Smith, two of Margaret Thatcher's successors, attempted to inject a greater emphasis on compassion and social responsibility into policy debates, they were up against a parliamentary party strongly attached to the consensus of the 1980s. Further, Thatcher's other two successors – William Hague and Michael Howard – maintained traditional New Right stances on taxation, public services and welfare. The New Right approach was theoretically distinct to older, 'One Nation' Conservative ideology, which emphasized the importance of social solidarity and responsibility to the poor. Similar ideas, together with socially liberal attitudes on issues like

homosexuality, formed the foundation for Cameron's attempt to 'detoxify' – or 'resocialize' – the Conservative brand.

In the final few months before the 2010 general election, the menagerie of ideas which had helped shift the tone of Conservative social policy were brought together under the concept of the 'Big Society' (Conservative Party, 2010). Through the Big Society, the Conservatives' renewed interest in social justice was interlinked with their desire to reinvigorate civil society. A stronger civil society, it was argued, could help alleviate Britain's long-term social and economic problems.

The concept of the Big Society brought back a belief in the importance of collective action, solidarity and civic association to Conservative social policy. Nevertheless, the intellectual foundations of the debate are framed within distinctly conservative ideological boundaries. Wiggan (2011) argues that the Big Society approach is informed by a 'civic conservative' perspective, which emphasizes that social problems and the decline of civil society are exacerbated by a big state. Ellison (2011: 48–49) also argues that these ideas have a long heritage in conservative thought and hark back to a Burkean belief in the 'little platoons of intermediate groups and institutions' between the state and individual that constitute civil society. The Big Society has also been influenced by the more radical 'Red Tory' thesis of the political philosopher Phillip Blond (2008). According to Blond, it is not just the state which undermines the civic-communitarian values of mutuality and reciprocity but the individualism of the market, which has 'resulted in the atomisation of communities and a decline in trust and commitment to the public good' (Wiggan, 2011: 29). Nevertheless, it is highly attestable that the Big Society is a profoundly important political development. It was not too long ago, argues Ellison (2011: 46) that the Conservatives were 'unable to shake off an embedded image of callous disregard for the victims of free market liberalism and marked intolerance over social and moral issues'.

After its pre-election launch, the Big Society was subjected to ridicule throughout the media and generally perceived to have confused the public (Toynbee, 2011). As such, many commentators predicted that it might be slowly erased from history when the Coalition government was formed. However, under David Cameron's premiership the Big Society has been given a prominent role throughout numerous strands of social policy. So for example, planning reforms aim to empower neighbourhoods on local decision-making (DCLG, 2011); public sector reforms aim to open up service provision to more charities, social enterprises and private companies (Cabinet Office, 2011a); young people have been encouraged to be more active in their communities through the National Citizen Service (Cabinet Office, 2011b); and up to 5,000 community organizers will be trained through the Community Organisers programme (Cabinet Office, 2011c). Further, Big Society Capital (formerly the Big Society Bank) will provide

up to £600 million worth of funding directly to the third sector and those looking to invest in not-for-profit organizations.

Noting these developments, Ellison (2011: 54) quite rightly describes them as 'beguiling'. Across many policy areas, the predominant themes of mutualism, reciprocity and cooperation have historically been associated with the British left. Thus, during its first eighteen months in power, the Coalition has introduced a wide range of policies from a rather distinct ideological position. Based upon the objectives of active citizenship, community empowerment and the strengthening of social and civic relations, there is an apparently powerful lineage between the values of the Big Society and those often associated with communitarianism. At the same time, the Labour Party has also been debating similar topics. Sometimes dubbed the centre-left's response to the Big Society, the ideas of 'Blue Labour' have often caused a deep political stir (see Davis, 2011).

Blue Labour

Between October 2010 and April 2011, a range of Labour politicians and sympathetic academics participated in four seminars which sought to renew social democratic thinking after Labour's general election defeat (Glasman et al., 2011). The seminars' attendees formed a diverse group, including the political philosophers Maurice Glasman, Jonathan Rutherford, Stuart White and Marc Stears, the left-leaning MP Jon Cruddas and the former 'Blairite' minister James Purnell. The group was quickly branded as 'Blue Labour' due to their intent to further a form of 'conservative socialism'.

The idea of a conservative socialism infers the two main components of the Blue Labour agenda. Firstly, Blue Labour looks to defend an older form of English socialism. For Glasman et al. this involves a socialism which is less concerned with the purportedly progressive, scientific and managerial state management approach characteristic of Fabianism. Rather, they prefer to extol the values of reciprocity, mutuality and solidarity found in the early labour institutions of mutual societies, cooperatives and trade unions (Glasman, 2011: 15). For too long, Blue Labour believes, the centre-left became too focused on using the state bureaucracy and scientific methods to alter and alleviate the condition of society's poorest. In doing so, Glasman (2011: 23) argues that Labour forgot 'to cherish aspects of its tradition that place reciprocity, association and organisation as fundamental aspects of building a common life'. Labour instead focused on abstract ends like equality and justice and thus failed to articulate a vision of 'the good society'. Echoing the rallying call of communitarian philosophers, Glasman (2011: 34) argues that 'people need each other to lead a common life', while Rutherford (2011: 90) states that 'without the shared meanings of a common life there is no basis for living a life of one's own'. Blue Labour subsequently

proposes that it is the job of government to build 'strong social institutions which promote public goods' and enable 'the power of organised people to act together in the Common Good' (Glasman, 2011: 34). Consider the welfare state, for example. Not only do people support the welfare state for reasons of equal access or maximized welfare outcomes. They do so because the welfare state – and in particular the NHS – is underpinned by an ethic of collective solidarity: of people providing support and standing together in times of need. For Glasman (2011: 29, 27), solidarity is the fundamental value of the welfare state; it was built on the basis of 'sustained organisation and political action', not abstract notions of 'pluralism, rights, and equality of opportunity'.

The second component of Blue Labour is the belief that the public goods and institutions which promote 'the common good' need to be protected from the forces which seek to supplant them (Katwala, 2011). Although Blue Labour and the Big Society share some of the same interests and objectives, it is on this question – which forces threaten civic life and social relationships? – that the two part way. While the Big Society narrative tends to blame a bureaucratic, big state, Blue Labour's theorists critique the damaging forces of the free market. Glasman (2011) argues that the British labour movement has been rooted in the defence of social practices and goods from market expansion and commodification, yet New Labour – with its enthusiasm for the economic language of globalization, change and progress – ignored or did not accept that the free movement of capital and labour might interfere with or corrupt the values and well-being of community life. As a result, Rutherford (2011: 91) argues, New Labour became 'disconnected from the ordinary everyday lives of the people' and 'presided over the leaching away of common meanings and social ties that bind people together in society'. Similar critiques of the market are widely found in the communitarian literature. Sandel (2009: 265) for example argues that 'one of the most striking tendencies of our time is the expansion of markets into spheres of life traditionally governed by non-market norms'. This is dangerous, Sandel attests, since 'marketizing social practices may corrupt or degrade the norms that define them'; as such, Sandel believes there needs to be 'a public debate about the moral limits of markets'.

While Blue Labour is also critical of what it sees as an overly bureaucratic, rationalist state, it is not anti-state in the traditional neoliberal sense. Rather, Blue Labour seeks a different form of state and public sector which is more relational and empowering to its users and workforce (*Analysis*, 2011). Thus, the fundamental objective of Blue Labour is to defend social relations and community togetherness from the penetrative and disruptive forces of the free market, while building a state which helps support and foster social goods.

Collectively, the development of both the Big Society and Blue Labour represents a shift towards a more communitarian strand of thought throughout

the centre-right and centre-left of British politics. What, though, might this mean for the welfare state? And does it represent a genuine break with the more liberal persuasions of the past three decades?

A real communitarian turn?

The question of whether the Big Society represents a genuine shift in British conservatism with the potential to change British society has been deeply debated since 2010. While some commentators see the Big Society as little more than a front for the Coalition's deficit reduction programme (E. Miliband, 2011), others see it as a radical, reforming idea (Birrell, 2010). The same can be said of Blue Labour; to some it is an electoral posture to appeal to the more conservative constituencies of Labour voters (Bragg, 2011), but others value it for revitalizing Labour's politics of identity and community (Katwala, 2011). While the previous section showed how, theoretically at least, the Big Society and Blue Labour express some of the same themes and goals as communitarians, this section will explore in more depth whether either concept possesses the genuine capacity and reach to redirect policy towards more communitarian ends.

How big is the Big Society?

The previous section showed how a variety of philosophical influences, such as Burkean conservatism and Red Toryism, had contributed towards the more communitarian and civic agenda of the Big Society, significant for its difference to the more individualist, neoliberal strands of conservative thought. However, although the Conservatives have begun to engage with communitarian ideas, there are a number of fundamental challenges which, together, are working to limit the impact of the Big Society agenda.

The first of these challenges is the economic crisis and, primarily, the Conservative Party's response of a significant programme of deficit reduction through austerity and deep cuts to the public sector. While the Coalition defends its cuts programme in the name of economic stability, it is clear that the scale of cuts will result in what Bochel (2011: 21) calls 'the residualisation of the welfare state' as nearly £20 billion worth of welfare cuts are introduced. Subsequently, many critics have proceeded to argue that the deficit reduction strategy – which in essence involves a dramatic withdrawal of collective provision and support – is fundamentally at odds with the Big Society objectives of a stronger and more active civil society (*Guardian*, 2011). The economic challenge to the Big Society is further exacerbated by the £4.5 billion worth of spending cuts imposed on already stretched charitable organizations (Coote, 2010; Ellison, 2011).

The second challenge for the Big Society is the persistent influence of neoliberalism, with little evidence that free market ideas have been seriously scrutinized by either the Conservative Party or the Liberal Democrats. While the latter have been historically less associated with free market ideology, it is worth recalling that the Liberal Democrat leadership is largely made up of the pro-market 'Orange Bookers' (Laws and Marshall, 2004), such as Nick Clegg, David Laws and Chris Huhne. Accordingly, many of the Coalition's reforms – even those advanced under the Big Society banner – see no conflict between the extension of markets and a stronger civil society. Indeed, for those public services which have been 'opened up' to a diversity of providers, the government has overwhelmingly awarded contracts to private companies as opposed to charities or community groups (Butler, 2011). This is particularly evident in the welfare system, with Wiggan (2011: 26) arguing that 'the Coalition's approach to welfare reform shows a continuing of neoliberal orthodoxy' based upon a bias towards private sector outsourcing and performance management. Thus, although one of the Big Society's principal theorists, Phillip Blond, offers a thoughtful critique of the market, it appears to have had a minimal effect on a government eager to expand market relations even deeper into the public realm.

The final challenge to the communitarianism of the Big Society is the model of 'responsibility' implicit across many of the Coalition's reforms. As the first section of this article showed, responsibility – and in particular the collective responsibilities of the wider community and society – is an important theme for communitarianism. The Coalition however, akin to both the New Right and New Labour, has tended to promote a highly individualized model of responsibility, in which individuals are imagined and encouraged to be the bearers of their own predicaments. Lister (2011) argues that there are four dominant themes of responsibility for the Coalition: contractualization, opportunity and aspiration, consumerization and active citizenship. Collectively, Lister argues, these models of responsible citizenship advance an 'individual rational actor logic' where personal responsibilities are imposed on the individual citizen. In policy terms, these discourses are acutely expressed in the Coalition's welfare-to-work reforms, which have intensified moves made by New Labour towards a more conditional benefits system with tighter eligibility criteria (DWP, 2010). As many before have noted, conditional welfare is largely in keeping with a narrative of unemployment as a problem of individual behaviour and irresponsibility (Driver and Martell, 1997). As Bochel (2011: 21) states, conditionality emphasizes that 'individuals and individual choices [lie at] the heart of many social problems': an approach which is often criticized as excluding and stigmatizing those 'failing' to exercise sufficient individual responsibility. In this spirit, benefit receipt is generally seen as an abdication of personal responsibility, with judgement about others in society subsequently withheld if

they fall outside the system. This leads to what Lister (2011: 77) calls an 'asymmetrical responsibility' and Ellison (2011: 57) the 'bifurcated Big Society', where there is 'no place for those who, largely for reasons ... resulting from their socioeconomic position, find it hard to "fit in"'.

The Big Society is indeed a notable development for a party predominantly associated with neoliberalism. However, the above discussion argues that it is up against three competing policy agendas – the shrinking state, marketization and a paternalistic view of personal responsibility – which work against many of its core communitarian ideas. Further, over the first eighteen months of the Coalition, these phenomena have proceeded to assume such priority for the government that the ethics of the Big Society have been largely sidelined and crowded out. It is therefore difficult to argue with Wiggan's (2011: 38) assessment that 'the reforms of the Coalition, far from breaking with neoliberalism, are consistent with its intensification'. The Big Society is indeed a big idea, yet amidst a smaller state, market expansion and a narrative of personal responsibility, there exist strong doubts about where it fits in.

Feeling blue?

Unlike the Big Society, whose ideas have pervaded centre-right thought for almost five years, Blue Labour is much more recent and it is more difficult to assess its communitarian potential. Nevertheless, in its short lifetime Blue Labour has provoked a wealth of political debate (at least within the Labour Party). Within this debate, it is evident that there are three prime objections to the Blue Labour thesis, all of which potentially challenge the capacity of the tendency to advance a genuinely communitarian social democracy.

The first problem for Blue Labour is its predilection for an overly elusive, or perhaps even odd, style of political argument, evident throughout the prime Blue Labour text *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*. Glasman (2011) for example claims that the Blue Labour thesis is founded in the writings of Aristotle and the fallout from the Norman conquest of England, while he has also expressed a desire to reinstate an 'early modern form of Tudor statecraft' (*Analysis*, 2011). Blue Labour has also been accused of romanticizing an era of patriarchy and male work. Rutherford (2011: 100) for example celebrates '[t]he narrative of a patriarchal social order ... [which] transmitted a common life down through the generations – mankind, fraternity, masterful, sons of free men, faith of our fathers'. The effect of these peculiarities is to make Blue Labour appear as dangerously nostalgic and often baffling, despite the valuable arguments it makes about community and capitalism. Thus, if it is to gain more clout within the Labour Party, it is likely that Blue Labour will have to adopt a more tangible, policy-centred approach.

The second problem facing Blue Labour is its attitude to the apparatus of government and, in particular, the welfare state. As this article has

shown, Blue Labour thinkers are somewhat hostile to what they see as an overly bureaucratic and rationalist state, divorced from community life and people's everyday experiences. However, this stance has been criticized by several commentators vis-à-vis whether a stronger society is compatible with a weaker state. White (2011: 131) for example agrees that the welfare state should encompass 'more than just transfers and tax-financed public services', yet also believes that the practicalities of the market economy mean that without these services living standards would be severely damaged. The need for a strong government is also at the centre of Helen Goodman's critique of Blue Labour. In her reply to Blue Labour's key thinkers, Goodman (2011: 25) argues that only government can act on the scale needed to provide the 'economic and educational opportunities and successes on which personal and family wellbeing depend'.

Finally, Blue Labour also faces a challenge to its claim that politics and social policy have become too concerned with abstract moral principles, such as justice, fairness and equality. However, as David Miliband (2011: 51) retorts, in order to achieve the Blue Labour objectives of solidarity, community and reciprocity, there needs to be a far greater level of social equality between individuals and communities. The questions on which Blue Labour seeks to debate regarding power, security and belonging are, argues Miliband, simultaneously questions about disempowerment, insecurity and disengagement; none of these issues, believes Miliband, can be separated from debates about equality and justice. White (2011: 130) is also sceptical of Blue Labour's attack on moral principles, stating that values like equality are 'part of the argumentative cut and thrust of democratic politics'.

Whether the communitarian spirit of Blue Labour will come to play an important role in British politics will thus, in part, depend upon these three challenges. Nevertheless, unlike the Big Society – which faces quite profound ideological challenges from within its own political community – Blue Labour confronts challenges that are more of style than of any greater political contradiction. If it can overcome these challenges, it may be able to offer a powerful centre-left, communitarian riposte to the existing neoliberal consensus.

Indeed, in seeking to refine its theory, Blue Labour's thinkers may find an ally from an unusual source. In the field of epidemiology, decades' worth of research has related poor social relations and community life to higher levels of inequality and market ideology. The most important contributor to this debate has been the social epidemiologist Richard Wilkinson, who has shown throughout a wide range of publications that many health and social problems are correlated with income inequality (see Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010). In short, Wilkinson argues that more equal and less market-oriented societies are healthier and achieve better social outcomes because they have stronger social relationships:

Looking at a number of different examples of healthy egalitarian societies, an important characteristic they all seem to share is their social cohesion. They have a strong community life. Instead of social life stopping outside the front door, public space remains a social space. The individualism and the values of the market are restrained by a social morality. People are more likely to be involved in social and voluntary activities outside the home. These societies have more of what has been called 'social capital' which lubricates the workings of the whole society and economy. There are fewer signs of anti-social aggressiveness, and society appears more caring. In short, the social fabric is in better condition. The research tells us something very important about the way the social fabric is affected by the amount of inequality in a society. (Wilkinson, 1997: 4)

Blue Labour is still an embryonic form and recent controversies involving Maurice Glasman have threatened to bring a premature end to the tendency itself (Hodges, 2011). However, if it can overcome the problems which this article has outlined, Blue Labour could offer the foundation for a new, strong narrative vis-à-vis the defence of social goods, community life and the public sphere from the often disrupting and expansionary forces of the market. As was shown above, similar theories have a strong foundation in social epidemiology. If Blue Labour can marry this empirical grounding with its communitarian philosophy, its influence could be quite profound.

Conclusion

This article has argued that in recent years both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party have begun to engage with communitarian theories, which argue that there is a value to defending community and civic life from the individualism of liberal political theory. For the Conservatives, these ideas have been synthesized under the concept of the Big Society, which argues that Britain's social problems can be tackled by a stronger role for civil society and community action. Similarly, after Labour's heavy election defeat in 2010, a new tendency has emerged – Blue Labour – which states that the party must aim to rebuild a solidaristic and cooperative society after thirty years of neoliberalism.

While both of these concepts are unquestionably influenced by communitarian ideas, it was argued that they face fundamental challenges. In particular, the Big Society agenda has been profoundly undermined by a competing ideology within the Coalition government, which prioritizes a smaller state, marketization and personal responsibility. Faced by forces which contradict many of its central themes, it seems increasingly unlikely that the Big Society will have a deep effect on British public life and social policy. Similarly, Blue Labour also faces doubts about its credibility, particularly in relation to its

unusual and overly mythologizing tendencies, its resistance to the state and its concern with traditional social democratic values like equality and social justice. However, it was argued that these are more stylistic doubts than those which face the Big Society; its core argument regarding the conflict between the free market and society offers a more radical, and potentially transformative, communitarian challenge to the neoliberal consensus.

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Author Biography

Daniel Sage is a PhD candidate at the University of Stirling, where his thesis explores the effect of welfare-to-work policies on the experience of unemployment. He also has interests in inequality, social cohesion and the politics of social policy. Recent publication: Sage, D. (2012) 'Fair conditions and fair consequences? Exploring New Labour, welfare contractualism and social attitudes', *Social Policy and Society* (in press).