CHAPTER 5

The Dynamics of Social Value

Abstract  If social value is created in relationships, how does this occur? Do exchanges of intimacy, friendship and association give rise to the same kinds of value, or different ones? Are all of them equally important for the well-being of societies? How do radical changes in organisation and structure come about? These are some of the questions which will be addressed in this chapter.

Keywords  Institutions • Culture • Risk • Sustainability

The term ‘Subjective Well-being’ was adopted by social scientists from the early 1970s onwards to indicate a quantifiable measure of human experience which could counterbalance the ‘welfare’ in terms of which economists analysed collective goods and public services. In the same decade, the latter category had been re-theorised in terms of individual choices rather than government policies by economists like Buchanan (1968), Olson (1965, 1982) and Oates (1972), who insisted that the principles of liberal democracy and free markets demanded that citizens should be able to choose the quantity and quality of their collective services, and that this could be achieved if they were enabled to pay different amounts in contributions for each of these goods according to their needs and resources.
Although no state adopted the radical form in which these ideas were presented, all (including the former Soviet Bloc countries) were influenced by them in the final two decades of the century. Programmes for ‘privatising’ the public sectors of these polities were widely adopted, and better-off citizens soon received education and health care which was of a much better standard than their impoverished fellow-citizens, even when these services had not been privatised. This was because, as earnings became more unequal, the residential districts of the better-off attracted the best teachers, doctors and other professionals to their facilities, while the most deprived ones had services more focused on social control (see Chap. 4).

In the UK, better-off households described themselves as focused on giving their children the best chance in life, some using this to justify sending them to private schools, and enlisting them in many out-of-school activities (Jordan et al. 1994), while those living in the poorest districts justified practices like doing paid work while claiming unemployment-related benefits by saying that it was the only way to compensate for unfair disadvantages (Jordan et al. 1992).

In this chapter, I shall consider how the analysis of social value addresses transformations such as this one, which involved the replacement of one set of institutions, and the attitudes and decisions made within them, by another. It may well be that we are currently experiencing a transformation as profound as that which happened in the 1980s, not because of a revolution in economic theory and a radical shift in the ideology of governments, but as a result of the impact of the coronavirus.

After all, it would not be the first time that pestilence had caused such a radical shift. In the fourteenth century, a rural English economy which had been largely unchanged since the Norman conquest was transformed by a series of waves of bubonic plague, both allowing the feudal peasants to gain access to their own plots of land, and accelerating the drift into towns and cities (BBC 4TV, ‘The English Middle Ages’, 6 May, 2020). This was arguably the key to the individualistic political culture that characterised England for the rest of its subsequent history (Macfarlane 1976).

Although the coronavirus caused a tiny proportion of deaths compared with the Black Death, the suspension of so much economic activity over a period of months did cause a fall in national income of around 15 per cent in a single month (April, 2020), and involved the state in a range of interventions which were without parallel in peace time. This meant that relationships with officials and fellow-citizens became far more prominent
sources of well-being (or survival), and the plight of the most vulnerable (such as care home residents) far more a matter for general concern.

In other words, well-being that arose from material gains was of less account, and that which arose from relationships (whether with kin, neighbours or strangers) became – as in war-time – more significant. Conventional measurement of well-being does only partial justice to this kind of shift, in which an overall sense of what makes life meaningful is refocused on a different set of common purposes, shared in different ways, involving new kinds of bonds with others.

**Conflicting Priorities**

Although survival through lock-down to the resumption of ‘normal’ life was the focus of media attention, this was not the way many people experienced the pandemic’s impact. Rather it was an intensification of the sense of the collective, at every level. Although intimacy and association, often difficult to express, remained very important, belonging gained increased significance.

These new features of the cultural landscape took shape against a background of official responses to the pandemic which were often inept and bungling. Although the UK government had huge stocks of personal protective equipment (PPE) in warehouses, it emerged that a very high percentage of these had passed the date at which they could be safely deployed; this was not admitted until long after the death rate had reached its peak, but as the rate in care homes (still inadequately supplied with PPE) was still rising (Channel 4, *News*, 7th May, 2020).

This confusion was not entirely due to political incompetence; the experts themselves were often uncertain of the best way to proceed. One Oxford University epidemiologist offered the opinion that about half the population had already had the virus, so it was not so deadly after all (BBC Radio 4, ‘A Cure, But at What Cost?’ presented by Tom Chivers, 5 May, 2020). Philip Thomas, Professor of Risk Management, said that it was a question of evaluating how much risk cost in terms of lives saved. If the economy contracted by more than 6.4 per cent, then more lives would be lost through poverty and its effects than if the virus had been allowed to spread; this view was echoed by Emily Jackson, Professor of Medical Law at the London School of Economics, who pointed out the consequences of unemployment and isolation on mental health. The epidemiologist George Davey-Smith said that the data was still too unreliable to predict
outcomes. Philosophers argued about whether lives should always be taken to be of equal value, or whether some measure of quality of life should be factored into any calculation – for instance, should prolonging a life in severe pain be considered desirable.

Jonathan Portas, who had advised Gordon Brown, the Prime Minister during the financial crisis of 2008–9, said that the government should not worry about the fiscal deficit in the long term, and that priority should be given to preparing the NHS for a future crisis. It was pointed out that interest rates were historically low, so borrowing was relatively inexpensive.

But at this time there were additional issues of social justice. Another cause for concern was the fact that, even after adjustments to allow for various factors which inflated the discrepancy, Black and Minority Ethnic staff in the NHS and care homes, and citizens, were twice as likely to die of the virus as white residents. Similar discrepancies were announced in the USA, suggesting that there might be a genetic explanation for these figures.

**LOCAL PROJECTS FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

The social value of projects for sustainability is among the potential gains from the coronavirus that has come with the experience of lock-down. Opportunities to do more rural walks, spend more time gardening and simply appreciate the benefits of clean air constitute potential sources of change for the period immediately after restrictions on mobility, economic activity and other interactions end.

Although China is responsible for one third of the world’s emissions of carbon dioxide, and is unlikely to cut these in the near future, both the European Union countries and the Democratic Party candidate for the US presidency, Joe Biden, plan to spend billions on ‘green deals’ for renewable energy, new infrastructure (such as charging points) for electric vehicles and cleaner public transport systems (BBC Radio 4, ‘Today’, 25 May, 2020).

But the change in this direction has also been evident at the local level, and it is here that projects for sustainability also contribute most to social value, through the relationships between participants. For example, the town of Frome in Somerset, UK, has been transformed through a movement started by a local citizen, previously inexperienced in politics or environmentalism, Peter MacFaddyen. The local authority is the parish council, and had been concerned previously only with parks, bus stops and
traffic control. From his previous experience (as a gardener, disability rights worker and employee of voluntary organisations in Africa and India) he was struck by the lack of participation in local democracy in the town (BBC Radio 4, ‘The Spark’, presented by Helen Lewis, 25 May, 2020).

In spite of his lack of previous political experience (he had never been a member of a party), MacFaddyen contacted others (only one of whom, a former Chief Executive of the council, had previously been involved in local issues), to form a new Independent Party; it took all the seats on the parish council contested in 2017 and 2019. His party had no manifesto, and no system of discipline, insisting on informality, to the point of members sitting among the public at meetings. By making issues more accessible, posters more informal and cartoon-like, and floating ‘whacky ideas’, there was an increase of some 75 per cent in polling in the town.

More ambitiously, the council borrowed £250,000 to buy the disused town hall as a local community hub, and another £750,000 to renovate it; yet the local part of the council tax was increased by no more than £7 a year, because of low interest rates. The party sustained constant participation and engagement with citizens. MacFaddyen stepped down as leader in 2019, to campaign for these policies elsewhere: 100 towns in the UK came to have significant independent representation, and there was interest in the story from Finland, Queensland, Australia and New Zealand. Several towns near Buckfastleigh in Devon collaborated to set up similar schemes, with active participation by a voluntary sector, substantially subsidised by the council.

There is no direct evidence of increases in well-being, and hence social value, from projects such as these, but it is difficult to believe that these did not occur. At worst, they represented a direct challenge to the authoritarian alternatives which present themselves in the aftermath of the pandemic and the consequent economic recession.

Conclusions

As populations emerge from lock-down, the redundancies caused by closures of businesses in hospitality, the performance arts and tourism will create a potential workforce for environmental projects. If these can be creatively and imaginatively managed, they might compensate for the loss of social value in the service sector, and contribute to long-term improvements in quality of life.
Awareness of these factors, and of their relevance for social value, has certainly risen during lock-down. As part of an overall re-evaluation which has occurred during this period, as people have time to reflect, and become more conscious of their mortality, they may have come to give higher priority to these aspects of sustainability.

But this can only be achieved by reversing the strong trend towards authoritarianism in government. Most notably President Bolsonaro in Brazil but also President Trump have shown a lack of concern for environmental destruction alongside their disregard for liberal rights and values. The politics of social value will have to win over those who supported them (often because they themselves felt devalued by the economic consequences of globalisation) in order to change this direction in policies.

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