

The Ages of Voluntarism – How we got to the Big Society

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The Ages of Voluntarism is one of the outcomes of the 'Non-Governmental Organisations in Britain 1945–1997' project, and emerged out of a British Academy workshop held in March 2009. The main aim of the book is to challenge narratives which have argued, in various ways, that voluntary action has been in decline since the perceived Victorian 'golden age' (pp. 1–2) of philanthropy, putting this declinist narrative in the context of similar narratives charting Britain's supposed decline over the last century. This is not counterbalanced by a simple chronological narrative tracing an alternative path, one of revival, but by a series of snapshots in which the authors argue for the adaptability, renewal, complexity and variety of the sector over the last century.

The chapters are a mix of period- and theme-specific case studies, and one which charts a particular theme over a longer period. Those with a specific period are covered in chronological order, beginning with Peter Grant's look at how the First World War affected voluntarism in Britain. Grant's chapter recognises elements of modern voluntarism here; in efforts to be more professional and effective, in the use of modern fundraising methods, and in the adaptability of the sector and the increase in the state's role in voluntarism. He draws attention to the 2.5 million men who volunteered for the front and the equal number who volunteered in another way at home. He traces the beginnings of state attempts to better co-ordinate voluntary action, and greater state involvement in it, both of which are recurring themes in later periods.

During the First World War volunteers were mobilised from all parts of society, something that continued in the inter-war years, as Helen McCarthy shows in her chapter on associational voluntarism. She explores how

both political and social life were democratised by involvement in associations, following the extension of the franchise in 1918 and again in 1928. Her starting point is that the inter-war period was still highly divided by class and gender. She argues that boundaries such as class, religion and gender all became more permeable through the activities of associations at this time.

Class is a recurring theme, taken up again by Peter Shapely in his discussion of tenant groups in post-war Britain. He examines how such groups reflected the wider discourse of civil society at the time and were often formed and run predominantly by working-class residents. Tenant groups, he explains, used the language of rights to campaign for fair rents and better conditions with some, albeit limited, success. Shapely's chapter shows the diversity and adaptability of such groups, but, significantly, he examines their local nature which is a useful reminder of their importance against a wider literature which often examines voluntarism on the national level.

National-level organisations often showed the same diversity and adaptability as the local groups included in Shapely's chapter. The fluid and thus often difficult to define nature of voluntary organisations is something which the chapter on drug and anti-smoking charities by Alex Mold and Virginia Berridge uncovers. They analyse the relationship between new social movements and voluntary action in the 1960s and 1970s. They discuss how categories which have traditionally been applied to voluntary organisations are useful, but have perhaps been applied too rigidly to properly understand such organisations. 'Old' and 'new', or 'insider' and 'outsider', have been seen as dichotomies, rather than as interrelated ideas which need not be simplistically polarised. In fact, Berridge and Mold argue that the complexities hidden by these dichotomous terms need to be reinstated. This wish to overcome simplified narratives, such as that of the post-war decline of voluntarism, is a recurring aim in voluntary sector historiography.

Another familiar decline narrative, taken up by one of the authors, is that of the secularisation of British society during the 20th century. Eliza Filby, in her contribution, looks at the role of the Church in helping the unemployed during the 1980s. Filby explores this theme and a set of important intersections between the Church, the voluntary sector and the state. The relationship between the latter two forms one of the central themes running through all chapters in the book. Filby, looking particularly at the relationship of the Anglican Church to the state in the 1980s, identifies three distinct phases of adaptation, collaboration and criticism, whereby the Church found a voice in speaking against the state on welfare issues. Ultimately Filby argues for the continued relevance of the Church in a more secular society, notably, though not exclusively, in terms of their role in shaping discourse on welfare.

The last period-based chapter is Pete Alcock's contribution examining New Labour and the Third Way, charting the emergence of the term 'third sector'. This term emerged as terminology shifted to define the third sector as all non-profit organisations including social enterprises, co-operatives and charities of all shapes and sizes. This, he argues, coincided with a very large rise in the profile of the sector and an upward shift in the scope and scale of voluntary action. Alongside this change in policy and discourse came structural changes from within the Labour Government to support state and third sector partnerships. Partnership being a key feature of state and voluntary sector relations under New Labour, (though not exclusively so as Alcock goes on to argue, not least in relation to the more recent Big Society policy of the Coalition government).

The extent to which New Labour's third sector policies represented a new approach from the party to the sector is explored by Nicholas Deakin and Justin Davis Smith, in a chapter which cuts across many of the periods examined in isolation elsewhere in the book. In the same way that the book as a whole seeks to counter declinist narratives, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that traditional interpretations of Labour Party hostility to voluntary action are incorrect. This 'myth', they argue, was created because at varying times it was politically convenient to both the left and right for the Labour Party to have been seen this way. In their interpretation, Labour has always embraced voluntarism 'properly defined' (p. 69). That is to say, voluntarism so defined is characterised as a form of self-help and a duty of citizenship rather than as paternalistic, Victorian and class-laden – a view which has been popular, and is indeed central to the overarching narrative of decline which the book seeks to offer an alternative to.

The Ages of Voluntarism does offer an alternative to this traditional narrative of declining voluntary action hastened by new state welfare. This alternative is one which has gained prominence among academics and students recently, with a number of recent publications, including the project team's other main edited collection, *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-state Actors in Society and Politics since 1945*.⁽¹⁾ The collected chapters cover varied periods, themes and types of organisation to show that voluntary action has continued to be an important element of social and political life as well as a provider of welfare services, characterised, as the editors put it, by 'constant renewal and adaptation' (p. 8). The contributors have picked moments of importance for voluntary action, often showing it at its best, showcasing its adaptability and diversity. This makes the absence of a chapter on the 1940s and 1950s, in the wake of new state-provided welfare all the more disappointing. The snapshots presented in *The Ages of Voluntarism* are necessarily brief and do not offer a comprehensive history of voluntarism over the last hundred years, nor do they claim to. Yet taken together, they do provide a good introduction to many of the key themes and debates which historians of voluntarism encounter.

By not organising the book around a central theme, the editors have risked producing a book of chapters which, although linked by a broad topic, do not quite feel like they belong together, each chapter best being read in isolation. However, by drawing out some other themes in the introduction, the editors give the reader not only some idea of recurring themes in the historiography, but also some signposts which can be used to draw the chapters closer together. Two broad areas, the relationship of voluntary action with the state and with society, are more or less explicit throughout, and described as 'inseparable' (p. 12) by the editors in the introduction. The frequent references to the state throughout the book seem to bear out this argument to some extent. Berridge and Mold's chapter, by debating the nature of insider and outsider organisations is perhaps best at examining some of the complexities of the relationship with the state on the national level, while Shapely does this in some ways with local government. However, much more research is needed, especially on relationships between the state and voluntary action at this local level.

The relationship with wider society is often less clear, as there is little focus on people with whom organisations were not directly interacting. The relationship with society is most often considered by an examination of voluntary action and class. Class has been central in understandings of voluntarism which give prominence to the middle-class volunteer of the Victorian 'Golden Age' and which have therefore lent weight to a narrative of decline which excludes all parts of society regardless of class, religion or gender from the history of voluntary action. Helen McCarthy's look at how these boundaries were becoming less rigid in inter-war voluntary associations shows the beginnings of a shift rather than a decline in voluntary action. This focus on the middle class volunteer is something that Peter Shapely also seeks to redress, and is what is referred to by voluntarism 'properly defined' (p. 69) when looking at the myth of Labour hostility.

Properly defining voluntary action is something the editors also take a little time over. They draw a distinction between a theoretical and practical definition of voluntary action. Theoretically they take a very wide definition including virtually all private action. On the practical level they narrow this down to exclude well-covered areas such as trade unions and political parties. This distinction and grey in-between area are typical of studies of the sector which often describe its blurred edges. This reflects the constantly-changing nature of voluntary action, something the editors want to make readers aware of, as well as pointing to the

continuities of voluntarism since the First World War.

The Ages of Voluntarism is part of an important and growing literature, reminding historians of the continuing existence and relevance of voluntary action in a space somewhere in between histories of the state, society and culture. As social history, it analyses one of the enduring interactions between citizens and society. For any reader unfamiliar with the history of voluntary action, it provides, in vivid case studies, some ways which the sector should be factored into considerations of both state and society, useful for anyone studying British society over the last hundred years.

In terms of the history of voluntary action, the chapters chart some significant moments and developments over the last century. By switching between types of organisation and types of voluntary action, they demonstrate the breadth of activity which voluntary action history includes. It should again be pointed out that this is not a comprehensive history of the sector, nor does it claim to be, but with what that could potentially include that should be no surprise. What it does do is argue very strongly and positively for the importance of voluntary action history in all its varieties. It also argues for the sector in its own right too. At the very end, the reader is reminded that the voluntary sector is threatened by spending cuts which may make the third sector under New Labour a 'high watermark' in the relationship between the state and the voluntary sector (p. 179), and which may ultimately make the 'Big Society' of the Coalition Government unrealisable.

For policy makers, examining the various ways that the sector and state have interacted and formed partnerships might inform how government seeks to influence the voluntary sector in the future. *The Ages of Voluntarism* does not offer ready-made policy, but a set of examples and precedents from which a number of different directions could be indicated. It also demonstrates how the sector mobilises and adapts to anything which central and even local government might care to throw at it, including spending cuts. The lesson for policy makers is clear, that despite numerous attempts by the state to influence and perhaps control the sector, voluntary action will always reconfigure itself to work independently as well as in partnership with the state, with the flexibility and diversity to do both and much more. It will endure and change, just as these articles show it has done for the last hundred years.

Notes

1. *NGOs in Contemporary Britain: Non-state Actors in Society and Politics since 1945*, ed. Nick Crowson, Matthew Hilton and James McKay (Basingstoke, 2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)

The editors of the collection are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further. They are actively engaged in researching some of the further areas pointed to by Charlotte Clements and will publish the results in *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain* (Oxford: forthcoming, 2012/13).

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