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Poverty, Philanthropy and the State: Charities and the Working Classes in London

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Author:

Kate Bradley

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Oliver Blaiklock

The last 12 years have seen an unprecedented growth in the scale and scope of the voluntary sector. In the ten years from 1996/97 to 2006/07, its income almost doubled, from £17bn to just over £33bn.⁽¹⁾ Meanwhile, more than half (58 per cent) of the 2,705 people interviewed in England for *Helping Out: a National Survey of Volunteering and Charitable Giving* commissioned by the Cabinet Office's third sector division and conducted by the National Centre for Social Research and the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) had both volunteered and donated to charity in the last 12 months, and 81% had given to a charity within the last four weeks.⁽²⁾ As a general election approaches, all three political parties are at pains to stress the importance of the so-called 'voluntary sector' to civil society, and to the effective delivery of welfare services.

Unsurprisingly, the history of voluntary organisations and of charities is a growth area, and has been since the 1980s when the welfare state itself was under ideological attack. Pat Thane, Frank Prochaska, Jane Lewis and Geoffrey Finlayson have all contributed to a growing literature of the history of the welfare state that has challenged the traditional escalator, or Whiggish theory of its development. Instead, their work suggests the need for commercial companies and employers to pay greater consideration to the 'mixed' economy, consisting of the state, voluntary action, and support by the family. The Voluntary Action History Society

(founded in 1991) continues to grow in strength, with its work is focused on attempting to utilise the findings of historical research for the benefit of current practitioners in the voluntary sector.⁽³⁾ Policy makers are beginning to realise the importance of the historical background and other factors in making particular voluntary bodies what they are, and in affecting the development of their methods of working. Yet, as historians, we still need to know more about the variety of ways in which charities have worked alongside the state. Sometimes charities have worked as enablers of state services with voluntary input and expertise. In other cases they have offered help for individuals needing advice and advocacy.

An important consideration for historians of welfare has been the changing nature of the 'mixed economy?', and in particular, the adaptation of charities, especially after 1945, to the enlarged role of the state. Kate Bradley's book is an interesting and thought provoking addition to this literature. The book charts the changing relationship between the voluntary sector and the state in the period 1918 to 1979, and importantly, the evolution and adaptation of one type of charity - the university settlements - to the growing welfare state. Settlements were charities formed in deprived areas of Britain's cities in the late 19th century and were a combination of mission, training school and community centre. The settlements brought young graduates such as William Beveridge and Clement Attlee to deprived areas of cities to undertake social work. Using the London settlements to explore the evolution of the mixed economy of welfare in the 20th century, Bradley demonstrates effectively the ways in which people entered upon careers in the charitable sector, and details their experiences while working there. The major themes are illustrated through the description of the many services provided by the settlements, including boys and girls clubs, health care services, juvenile courts and legal advice. These activities shared the general motivation of attempting to provide services to the neediest groups in society; acting as advocates for those who needed them; and ensuring the self-realisation of those men and women involved with the work of the settlement movement.

Dr Bradley was heavily involved in the running and organisation of the archive of Toynbee Hall ⁽⁴⁾, and it is the expertise gained from this work which has helped her produce this detailed account (adapted from her 2006 thesis) of the history of Settlements and their interaction with the working classes in London. Her position has allowed Bradley to utilise the records of settlements, oral history testimonies, settlement worker memoirs, newspaper articles, photographs and films, government reports and social surveys. The achievement is all the more impressive given the lack of records in some cases. Toynbee Hall was bombed and many of its records destroyed, including those of the warden J. J. Mallon. Similarly, in wartime, record keeping was abandoned in many voluntary organisations in the interests of better serving the community.

A key problem outlined by the author, and which is important for historians of welfare and of British society, is how and why the settlement movement survived past 1918, when provision for welfare services was increasingly made through the state, through local authorities and national governments. In answering this question, Bradley examines how the many and various settlements in London interacted with the state and communities around them, and considers how the evolution of the state and its responsibility for welfare continually impacted upon them. She considers the extent to which the settlement movement was able and willing to re-frame its work and to innovate. Finally, she asks how they responded to changes in the local communities, especially after the Second World War. A firm understanding of these historical problems is necessary to a greater understanding of the history of welfare in Britain, and of civil society.

Bradley's thesis is simple. Settlements did not, as some have supposed, lose their purpose as the state expanded its services, but rather continued to act as buffers between private individuals and the worst effects of poverty/social inequality in a dynamic and mixed economy of welfare. In doing so, by avoiding duplication of the state's activities, and by acting where the state could or would not act, Bradley demonstrates that the development of British welfare was a complex process of negotiation and mediation. This is not often the case in the political science literature which tends to point towards state failure as the main motivating factor for charities to carry out work alongside the state. This literature, and the economic theory surrounding the provision of public goods, as Bradley points out, often fails to consider the realities of human factors in shaping welfare provision.

This is a particularly well-organised work. After providing a brief history of the Victorian settlements, she

moves on to consider what life was like for those working in them, both as leaders and as workers. At this point, the author skilfully weaves in a discussion of gender. Bradley's research tells us much about the changing role of women in the settlements. The settlements provided an ideal alternative for families unable or unwilling to support young women financially. It was simultaneously a way for women to earn some money, it relieved pressure on the home and helped them to gain independence. While there was still a glass ceiling in place when it came to management positions, working in the settlements was one way in which women entered the social work profession. The profile of women increased during the Second World War within the settlements, and continued to grow after 1945, accompanied by the expansion of social work training and funding for university courses.

The main research problems are subsequently explored through chapters that consider the different aspects of the work of the settlements in health, developing good citizens, rehabilitation of offenders, legal aid, holidays for deprived children and finally, combating the effects of immigration. Bradley's research uses a wide range of London settlements: Toynbee Hall, Mansfield House, Canning Town Women's Settlement, Margaret Hall Settlement, Blackfriars Settlement, Bernhard Baron Settlement, the Fern Street Settlement, Oxford House, Mary Ward Settlement and Cambridge House. This in turn reflects the vast range of influences at play within the settlement movement. There were single-sex and mixed settlements, Jewish settlements, educational and even a scouting settlement. By examining more than one charity, Bradley is able to offer an in-depth study of networks, parallels and contrasts existing between charities. This is a major strength. These sometimes had a transnational element. In the 1920s, Egerton St John Catchpool, then sub-warden of Toynbee Hall, was inspired by visits to Hull House Settlement in Chicago, to work on a programme of classes at Pentonville prison.

In a chapter considering health, Bradley shows that the settlement's work was not undertaken in a vacuum, but rather within the growing relationships between charity workers and local government administration. By 1939, there was a withdrawal of certain settlement activities, health care for women in light of expansions of local authorities. However, both the Canning Town Women's Settlement Hospital and the South West Ham Health Society provided a consistent approach to providing for the medical needs of women and children. Women were key to providing medical services to the neediest groups in the local community, and their work provided them with opportunities for building up networks with other charities and establishing their presence in local government.

At the same time, the book stresses the importance for its success of the relationship of a settlement to the community which it served. It was more important to reflect the needs of the community rather than to superimpose the wishes of its leaders on the local people. The history of the Council of Citizens of Tower Hamlets and of the young Bangladeshi community in the 1970s, aptly illustrates the fact that the settlements could not just impose themselves upon communities – they had to learn what it was people wanted, and then to provide a means of doing or enabling this. The notion of leadership, which drove many of the London settlements, was not often related to the success of any particular initiative or service.

Bradley's book makes a valuable contribution to a growing literature on the history of British civil society and citizenship. The gradual extension of the franchise in local and national elections to working-class men and women from the 1860s onwards was accompanied by the apparent need to prepare and educate the new voters for their responsibilities. Education for citizenship involved making the individual aware of their rights, duties and responsibilities as citizens. The importance of the discourse of citizenship to the work of the settlements is stressed throughout the chapters on youth clubs, and on the law. Many of the projects of the settlements, for example those which sought the rehabilitation of ex-offenders and of young people through clubs, shared the same broader goal of reengaging those at risk of exclusion within the wider community. This was equally applicable in the case of legal aid and advocacy services which were supplied to help citizens check the abuses or mistakes of the welfare state. The notion of citizenship had an important role in the opinions of those working for or connected with the settlements. Perhaps unsurprisingly T. H. Marshall's views on citizenship and social class were highly influential. The view of citizenship, as Bradley points out, was based on the paradox that the ordinary working class person had the right to participate in public life, but that he or she did not have the skill or ability to do so.

To conclude, Bradley's excellent book raises many questions worthy of future research, particularly the process of professionalization and the significance that this has had for voluntary organisations. There is also scope for considering the shifting attitudes of the central government and local authorities towards voluntary organisations, and how this has influenced the welfare mix. Her book provides a significant addition to the historiography of welfare in 20th-century Britain.

The author is happy to accept this review without further comment.

Notes

1. *The Guardian*, 17 February 2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/joepublic/2010/feb/17/future-voluntary-sector-role> [2]>[accessed 17 February 2010].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *The Guardian*, 5 September 2007 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2007/sep/05/voluntarysector.socialtrends> [3]>[accessed 17 February 2010].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. <<http://www.vahs.org.uk/> [4]> [accessed 19 February 2010].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Kate Bradley, *Poverty and Philanthropy in East London, 1918-1959: The University Settlements and the Urban Working Class* (Phd Dissertation, University of London, 2006).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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[3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2007/sep/05/voluntarysector.socialtrends>

[4] <http://www.vahs.org.uk/>

[5] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>