



# The power of language in the age of austerity: Volunteers and practitioners reflect on UK civil society

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## Abstract

This article is offered as an example of practice-based research, focusing on the concept of *praxis*: the bringing together of research, theory and action. It does this by exploring the challenges of group work and collaborative thinking, sharing the learning and reflection of a group of civil society practitioners, from a range of different backgrounds and knowledge practices. The group came together under the auspices of the Raymond Williams Foundation, to reflect on 'keywords' that underpin their work in civil society. Using Raymond Williams's approach to hermeneutics, they considered how language is used and embedded within society. The approach allowed for the possibility of critiquing and contesting ideas that have become ideologically or political dominant. The group considered the keywords 'charity', 'philanthropy' and 'voluntarism', and how their meanings have changed and evolved within society. The debate also brought into focus current concerns about shrinking state provision and consideration of whether the UK is witnessing a renewed focus on charity and corporate philanthropy. Ultimately, the article describes both the tensions and areas of commonality within the group in response to the debate, as well as opening up the group's learning experience to critical examination.

**Keywords:** charity; philanthropy; altruism; voluntarism; praxis

## Key messages

- This article explores the challenge of bringing together volunteers and practitioners from different backgrounds to reflect on the keywords 'charity', 'philanthropy' and 'voluntarism' that underpin their work in civil society.
- The words enable reflection on the recent sustained period of austerity in the UK, alongside growing concerns about the impact of reducing state provision for the most vulnerable in society. Are we seeing a re-emergence of charity?
- Analysis of the evolving meaning of such words provides a powerful technique to mobilize learning and critical reflection among the participants and a compelling example of the concept of *praxis*: the bringing together of research, theory and action.

## Why redefine the language of civil society?

In January 2016, I was part of a group of UK civil society practitioners who came together for a weekend at Wortley Hall, near Sheffield in South Yorkshire, under the auspices of the Raymond Williams Foundation (RWF), as a small 'think tank', to collectively re-examine and challenge current debates about **charity, philanthropy** and **voluntarism**. This event offered me the rare privilege of experiencing a residential weekend, which allowed for a total immersion in the topics for discussion and an intensity and engagement with members of the group that I believe could not have happened in any other situation.

This article is a result of that weekend but is also testimony to my own thinking over a number of years on what constitutes a healthy civil society. I have a long-standing history of working in both the voluntary sector as a community activist and in higher education. I was head of communities for a Russell Group university between 2007 and 2013. My position as CEO of an infrastructure charity between 2000 and 2007, and my role in public engagement at the university, which included lecturing on the 'big society' policy of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government of 2010–15, led me to recognize the great changes taking place in civil society over the last 20 years. Both roles also encouraged me to contemplate the need for a space in which debate could take place about matters that are too often taken for granted, such as our use of language and how it both obscures and illuminates our social world. I am also concerned with how members of the public can be engaged in this discussion to create a shared knowledge-building process. This approach is central to the ethos of the RWF, and constitutes a method that is informed by academic research but led by a community of interest outside the walls of the university.

The Raymond Williams Foundation is a charity that was established in 1989, shortly after the death of Raymond Williams, the cultural theorist and adult educator. Initially it existed in the form of the Raymond Williams Memorial Fund (RWMF). The role of the RWMF was 'to commemorate and continue the work of Raymond Williams' and specifically 'to assist educationally disadvantaged adults' ([www.raymondwilliamsfoundation.org.uk/RWF1.html](http://www.raymondwilliamsfoundation.org.uk/RWF1.html)). By 2009, and following a substantial bequest, the Raymond Williams Foundation was established as an independent, non-party and non-sectarian charity. Its links were with the best aspects of the long-standing tradition of liberal adult education, which was aimed at teaching the whole person, often as a second-chance opportunity in life. It was, as Whitehead described it in 1929, a form of education that allowed people to 'see the world as a web of interrelated processes of which we are integral parts, so that all of our choices and actions have consequences for the world around us' (Whitehead, quoted in Mesle, 2008: 9). Raymond Williams himself spent many years teaching adult students who came to him through the Workers' Education Association (WEA) and the University Extension Movement, and he wrote comprehensively on education and what a genuine learning society should look like. His avowed social purpose was to help in 'the creation of an educated and participating democracy' (Williams, 2011: 178).

Since 2014, my interest in research influenced by 'real-life' experience has taken a very personal trajectory. I have been undertaking a PhD on the subject of short-term residential adult education colleges, a little-researched corner of the educational world. These colleges emerged after the Second World War, and lasted until the majority were closed in the 1970s. I joined the Raymond Williams Foundation in 2014 to seek the help, knowledge, support and advice of its many learned members, drawn from a range of organizations, including the WEA, the Philosophy in Pubs network, the

Raymond Williams Society (which supports intellectual and political projects in areas broadly connected with Williams's work and publishes the peer-reviewed journal *Key Words: A Journal of Cultural Materialism*), openDemocracy (an independent global media platform that seeks to challenge power and encourage democratic debate on social and political issues across the world) and the Independent Working Class Education Network.

## The research process and methodology

Our weekend group was diverse. Apart from myself, facilitating the weekend, it comprised a retired social worker/probation officer; a former adult educationalist; a community activist and counsellor; a gay rights activist; the former head of regeneration for the coalfields; a librarian/archivist; an organizer for Philosophy in Pubs – an RWF development that brings community members together in a pub setting to discuss important political, social and economic issues; a senior lecturer in youth and community work; a retired university lecturer in estate management and published author; current and former charity workers, including people who had worked for the WEA; and community volunteers. A number of members of the group did not know one another in advance; the only prerequisite was an interest in the subject and a small fee for residence. The call for the weekend went out to a wide circulation list and was based on the principles of positive public engagement.

My task was to develop preparatory materials and to circulate them to the group as reading material before the weekend. I used lecture notes of my own on the 'big society', developed over a number of years, and researched and developed a document that covered recent statistics in the voluntary sector, as well as offering some statements about the changing nature of the sector to stimulate debate. I also undertook a piece of desk-based research on the three keywords to create a paper for the group, based, in part, on Williams's own writings but also looking at contemporary applications. This was in line with an established methodology for the wider RWF keywords project, which had started with an earlier weekend examining the word 'aspiration'.

Our primary objective was to come to an agreement, if we could, on a set of refined and revised meanings for these words, sharing the expertise, knowledge and understanding we had each gained through our work in civil society, and challenging our individual assumptions and positions.

Flip-chart notes were taken over the whole weekend and small group work allowed for some of these differences to be aired. We also used the particular discussion group methodology developed by the Philosophy in Pubs movement, which does not allow any one voice to dominate and encourages respect and 'turn taking'.

Everyone who attended the event received all the notes from the weekend and was asked to comment and to suggest amendments. It was agreed that a paper would be produced following the weekend, to go on the RWF website, and that we would also seek publication. As the facilitator, I drafted the paper and an agreed editorial group commented on the draft. In this sense, the weekend was an example of broader public engagement, with the emphasis on co-production and collaborative writing.

By taking our research and debate into the public arena we hoped to help foster wider engagement with the deeply political ways that language is used and how, if we take it at face value, it can also disempower. Therefore, we were not simply concerned with examining language in a purely theoretical way that was disengaged from our work lives but seeking, instead, to engage with the concept of *praxis*, bringing together

research, theory and action, the process by which a theory is enacted, embodied, or realized. In this way, we saw our contribution as being about making 'research for all'.

## Defining the keywords

### Raymond Williams's concept

Much of the initial part of the weekend focused on how the words 'charity', 'philanthropy' and 'voluntarism' are used and how they were understood differently by individual participants. This created an interesting set of tensions and a constant need to determine, or redefine, a shared understanding. For example, some participants had a particular perspective on voluntarism as being solely about volunteering, rather than the broader concept of voluntarism as non-statutory sector provision. Some were concerned that the concept of volunteering is being debased by its use as a substitute, in some quarters, for paid work. Some members of the group saw philanthropy as very positive, with admiration being shown for big donors such as Bill Gates, while for others this was perceived as being part of a wider problem of private sector and corporate dominance. The aim of the weekend was to create a nuanced response to some of these complexities.

To help unpick these issues, our starting point was in understanding how Raymond Williams approached language. His thinking acknowledged that sometimes the very language we use constrains us and maintains current societal and economic orders as if they are 'common sense'. As early as the 1970s, Williams was arguing that language is the handmaiden of ideology. *Keywords* (1976) challenges the reader to rethink our relationship with language as a reflection of power. Offering a summary of his approach to keywords in response to an interview question in *Politics and Letters*, he stated: 'Like any other social production ... [it is] the arena of all sorts of shifts and interests and relations of dominance' (Williams, 1979: 176–7).

In *Keywords*, Williams unpicked the word 'charity' among a selection of over a hundred words that he argued were critical to understanding society at the time (Williams, 2015: 20–2). 'Philanthropy' and 'voluntarism' do not make it into *Keywords* in 1976, or the revised edition in 1983, perhaps showing that their importance has increased over the subsequent decades. Therefore, our intention was to revise the concept of 'charity' for contemporary society and to create the basis for two new keywords in 'philanthropy' and 'voluntarism'.

Williams's approach suggests that words can become philosophically charged, and that a 'scraping off' or cleansing process is required to reach the kernel of words and facilitate their reclaiming through the patina of old meanings and the accretion of more recently acquired meanings. Meanings are contested, both historically and in a contemporary context. Williams investigated language and its application using a progressive socialist hermeneutics approach. Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of interpretation, particularly in relation to texts, and Williams approached this from a socialist perspective. His rationale was to re-examine language as part of a process of *consciousness-raising* and *critical thinking* about the structural realities that surround us and impinge on civil society. For him, this constitutes the first stage in taking action.

### Wider social context

Much of our debate took us into areas that are not new to those concerned about societal change, including the impact of a receding state, escalating levels of poverty

and inequality in the UK and a new (or rediscovered) rhetoric that members of the group felt places the blame firmly with the impoverished and marginalized. We all acknowledged that we were seeing more people falling through the net due to austerity measures. Our sense was that many of the gains of the post-war welfare state are under sustained assault and the hard-won language of rights and responsibilities has been replaced by a discourse focused on distinguishing between those who are deserving of support and those who are not. This shift has been aided by a reconfiguration of charity and philanthropy, not as a means of questioning this ideology, but of underpinning it.

In our collective view, language is profoundly political. The British media have continued their steady and persistent drip feed of anti-immigration commentary, their rhetoric of 'the deserving and undeserving poor', 'chavs' and 'scroungers and spongers', amplifying the demonization of those in precarious employment and living on the margins, and this has led to a deep rift in UK society, as exemplified by the recent Brexit vote to leave the European Union. Recent statistics from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (MacInnes *et al.*, 2015) show that the proportion of people who live in households with an income below the minimum income standard (MIS) increased by nearly a third between 2008/9 and 2012/13. More recently, families have experienced a great increase in poverty, with at least 8.1 million parents and children now living at an income level below that necessary to cover a minimum household budget, up by more than a third from 5.9 million in 2008/9.

A number of us have seen first-hand the impact of the loss of industry and manufacturing on the communities in which we both live and work, with the resulting growth in poverty and worklessness, and diminishing community pride. In 2015, in support of a team from Heriot-Watt University, I was involved in a piece of research funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which examined poverty and the impact of austerity in Nottingham and five other cities in the UK. In particular, the research examined the proliferation of foodbanks across the UK and the breakdown in social safety nets.

The Trussell Trust – the UK's biggest charitable foodbank provider – maintains a network of 400 foodbanks, offering a minimum of three days' emergency food and support to people experiencing crisis in the UK. In 2014/15, the trust gave 1,084,604 three-day emergency food supplies to people in crisis. They cite a figure of 13 million people living below the poverty line in the UK, with individuals going hungry every day for a range of reasons, from benefit delays to receiving an unexpected bill on a low income. This contemporary snapshot is unlikely to change significantly in the current political climate, where inequality is deepening.

### **Civil society: Gaining a collective understanding**

As part of our discussion of the three putative keywords, we considered what civil society means to us, as charity, philanthropy and voluntarism are inextricably linked with concepts of society and associational life. 'Civil society' is a phrase much-used – often unproblematically – to describe voluntary action, and the networks and spaces we inhabit and within which we meet outside the state and the marketplace. As our stimulus, we used the work of Michael Edwards, an activist and a leading writer on the subject, who defines the term in three ways in his book *Civil Society* (2014).

First, civil society as *associational life*, the space of voluntary association, which includes community organizations, sports clubs, non-governmental organizations, charities, faith groups, mutual aid and informal networks and unions.

Second, civil society as the *good society*, the space that 'encompasses the realm of ideas and competing narratives about the nature of a good society and how

it might be achieved' (Bunyan and Diamond, 2014: 8). In this space, issues connected with poverty and inequality sit at the heart of debate about what a good society might look like and civil society organizations make a contribution to, and inform the debate, in a number of ways.

Third, civil society as the *public sphere*, the space that takes us into the realm of politics, where important questions are asked about the nature of social and political change and the ways in which civil society organizations can develop the power and legitimacy to engage in the public sphere. While current political rhetoric implies that this kind of change is largely consensus-based, marked by increased cooperation and collaboration between the market, the state and civil society, recent experience within the charitable sector shows a very different situation. As Bunyan and Diamond comment:

....'partnership' under New Labour and the 'big society' under the Conservative-led coalition both envisaged an ever greater role for civil society and implied a shift in power away from the market and state towards civil society. In reality, the opposite has largely been the case, as neoliberal hegemony, actively promulgated through what one author has referred to as the state–market nexus, has remained firmly entrenched. Through the employment of 'managerial technologies' and private sector practices, such as contracting and commissioning, the practices of civil society and third-sector organisations have been significantly impacted upon, involving, among other things, a shift towards service delivery at the expense of other forms of engagement such as advocacy and campaigning.

(Bunyan and Diamond, 2014: 9–10)

This was a key feature of our discussion, the extent to which charities, and the voluntary sector in general, have taken on the characteristics of business and the state, effectively becoming part of the system – as service providers and as tools for governmental policy – rather than sitting in an alternative space from which they can critique and comment as self-determining, client-led and genuinely independent bodies. As the National Coalition for Independent Action (NCIA) express it in their final report, 'The role of the dissenting activist, of whatever form or style, has now become critical for our collective health and well-being' (Waterhouse and Scott, 2013: 3).

### **Altruism: Challenging the taboo**

The group began its keywords analysis with the word '**altruism**', which we felt underpins conceptions of charity and philanthropy. We concluded that 'altruism' is a deeply complex word, denoting, at its best, disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being and welfare of others, and conceived as the opposite of selfishness. We discussed the fact that it is a traditional virtue in many cultures and a core aspect of various religious traditions and secular world views, although the concept of 'others' towards whom concern should be directed can vary among cultures and religions.

We argued that altruism tends to be understood as an individual act, outside the context of social relationships, as the performance of an action that is at a cost to the individual in terms of time, resources or sharing of skills. One member of the group in particular emphasized the debate that exists as to whether 'true' altruism is possible in human psychology. The theory of psychological egoism suggests that no act of sharing, helping or sacrificing can be described as truly altruistic, as the actor may receive an intrinsic reward in the form of personal gratification. The validity of this argument depends on whether intrinsic rewards qualify as 'benefits'. The actor also

may not be expecting a reward. Barbara Oakley takes this a step further in an article for the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. She argues that 'altruism and empathy themselves can inadvertently bias our efforts to create truly cooperative modern, complex societies' (Oakley, 2013: 2). Rather than altruism being reified as a sacred concept, there are dangers implicit in applying altruism uncritically at a societal level. As Oakley argues, some programmes for societal change do not take sufficient account of the bias of the programme designers towards what *they* regard as beneficial to others. She suggests that we need much better research to question the outcomes and to ensure accountability if such programmes go wrong. She argues that asking such questions has become unacceptable: 'We often do not know, because well-meaning advocates have made raising those questions a taboo' (Oakley, 2013: 7).

### Charity: A history

According to the historical research I undertook in preparation for the weekend, the concept of charity has a long and interesting history. The following section gives an insight into our findings as we came to them, looking from the medieval period to the present day.

In Raymond Williams's *Keywords* definition, he points out that the word has had a long-standing relationship with power, money, status and 'well-meaning advocates'. The word first entered the English language through the Old French word '*charité*', meaning preciousness, dearness, high price, and implied Christian love of humankind or the *unconditional love of others*. According to Williams, at this stage it was understood as offering 'benevolence to neighbours, and specifically gifts to the needy' (Williams, 2015: 21).

By the medieval period, however, rich patrons demonstrated their economic and social status by founding leprosaria and hospitals for the sick and poor. New religious orders emerged with the primary mission of engaging in intensive charitable work. Whether this movement was spurred by economic and material forces, by a burgeoning urban culture or by developments in spirituality and devotional culture is a point of debate, but it appears to have affirmed existing hierarchies of power.

The Poor Laws were a system of poor relief established in England and Wales, codified between 1587 and 1598, which were passed to deal with the impotent poor. The two statutes of the Poor Law in England and Wales encompass the Old Poor Law, passed during the reign of Elizabeth I, and the New Poor Law, passed in 1834, which significantly modified the existing system of poor relief.

The sense of charity as an institution was established by the seventeenth century. 'Charity begins at home' was already a popular saying at this point. The notion of 'taking charity' – and the fear of wounded self-respect and damaged dignity that it implies – also started to appear around this time. Williams describes this sense of charity as conferring power over others, as 'the interaction of charity and of class feelings, on both sides of the act' (Williams, 2015: 21).

In 1832, the Royal Commission into the Operation of the Poor Laws was set up following the Swing Riots of 1830, an uprising against hunger and oppression in which rural workers demanded higher wages and an end to the new machines that destroyed their winter employment. They reinforced their demands with rick-burning and the destruction of threshing machines. While the rural workers were savagely suppressed, it became clear that the social and financial gulf between rural labourers and farmers was widening.

The 1832 report concluded that the existing Poor Laws undermined the prosperity of the country by interfering with the natural laws of supply and demand,

that the existing means of poor relief allowed employers to force down wages and that poverty itself was inevitable. The Poor Law Amendment Act 1834 completely overhauled the existing system and established a Poor Law Commission to oversee the national operation of the system. This included the coming together of small parishes into Poor Law Unions and the building of workhouses in each union area for the giving of poor relief. Although the aim of the legislation was to reduce costs to rate payers and cut demand for poor relief by making the Poor Law a deterrent, one area not reformed was the method of financing the Poor Law system, which continued to be paid for by levying a 'poor rate' on the property-owning middle classes. Despite the aspirations of the reformers, the New Poor Law was unable to make the workhouse as bad as life outside for many people. The poor diet offered, familial segregation and ignominy were anathema to all but the most desperate, even in a period of turbulent and violent social change.

In 1869, the Charity Organization Society (COS) was founded in England to distribute outdoor relief to the elderly, ill or 'non-able bodied', and to force them to accept the workhouse test. It was mainly concerned with the distinction between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor, believing that giving out charity without investigating the problems behind poverty created a class of citizens that would always be dependent on alms giving. Instead of offering direct relief, the society aimed to address the cycle of poverty, and to inculcate self-sufficiency. Neighbourhood charity visitors taught the values of hard work and thrift to individuals and families. The COS set up centralized records and administrative services and emphasized objective investigations and professional training. Such charities used 'scientific philanthropy' to help poor, distressed or 'deviant' persons. These 'scientific principles' aimed to 'root out scroungers and target relief where it was most needed' (Rees, 2001: 6).

The COS claimed that private charity would be superior to public welfare because it improved the moral character of the recipients. However, records show that only a minority of relief recipients managed to become self-reliant, despite the fact that the COS granted relief only to recipients deemed 'worthy' and improvable. The COS was bitterly resented by the poor for its harshness, and its acronym was reframed by critics as 'Cringe or Starve'.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Beatrice and Sidney Webb argued that civil society and charity should not substitute for the state, but be additional to it. As Barry Knight argues, they differentiated between the 'parallel bars' and 'extension ladder' models of voluntary action, recognizing the fundamental role of the state in providing the 'minimum of civilised life':

The parallel bars model involves state action and voluntary action working side by side to reduce poverty. This was the prevalent model during the first decade of the 20th century when there was a great awakening about the importance of social conditions. The extension-ladder model distinguishes different roles for the state and for voluntary action. Under this, the role of the state is to secure a national minimum of civilised life open to all alike, of both sexes and all classes – by which was meant 'sufficient nourishment and training when young, a living wage when able-bodied, treatment when sick, and modest but secure livelihood when disabled or aged'.

(Knight, 2014: 4)



### Self-improvement or missionary zeal?

The first point of contestation for the group was related to whether or not charitable giving creates dependency and therefore acts as a means of social control. We discussed this issue in detail. Critics of charitable giving contend that simply transferring gifts or money to disadvantaged people has negative long-term effects and promotes dependency and a lack of drive towards self-improvement. Beatrice Webb, and the activists within the COS movement, implied this, though from different starting points.

The complex convergence of 'charity and of class feelings' (Williams, 2015: 21) are acutely described by Oscar Wilde, who called charity 'a ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution ... usually accompanied by some impertinent attempt on the part of the sentimentalist to tyrannise over their [the poor's] private lives' (Wilde, 1997: 1,043). This, in effect, captures the 'missionary flavour', as we viewed it, of many of the middle-class and upper-class interventions in the lives of the poor and destitute. The use of the word 'restitution' here is important, in its sense of the restoration of something lost or stolen from its proper owner, or recompense for injury or loss.

In his 1845 treatise on the condition of the working class in England, Friedrich Engels took this further, unpicking the concept of charity, not as restitution or even sentimentality, but as a salve to the conscience and a way of tidying away social problems so that they do not trouble those who are better off. He pointed out that charitable giving, whether by governments or individuals, is often seen by the givers as a means to conceal suffering that is uncomfortable or unpleasant to see. Engels quoted from a letter to the editor of an English newspaper where the writer complained that the:

streets are haunted by swarms of beggars, who try to awaken the pity of the passers-by in a most shameless and annoying manner, by exposing their tattered clothing, sickly aspect, and disgusting wounds and deformities. I should think that when one not only pays the poor-rate, but also contributes largely to the charitable institutions, one had done enough to earn a right to be spared such disagreeable and impertinent molestations.

(Engels, 1969: 221)

The English bourgeoisie, Engels asserted:

is charitable out of self-interest; it gives nothing outright, but regards its gifts as a business matter, makes a bargain with the poor, saying: 'If I spend this much upon benevolent institutions, I thereby purchase the right not to be troubled any further, and you are bound thereby to stay in your dusky holes and not to irritate my tender nerves by exposing your misery'.

(Engels, 1969: 222)

We concluded that there are many parallels with contemporary society. However, perhaps a more favourable interpretation, as the writer and academic Julia Stapleton has argued, is that Victorian patrons were motivated by idealism in their engagement with the poor, and that many of them had a genuine desire to improve the lot of the most vulnerable in society, albeit on their own terms. Arguably, this extended beyond relief of poverty and more towards the concept of philanthropy as the promotion of welfare and spiritual and material well-being in others:

Idealism provided a powerful philosophical foundation for the spirit of altruism, self-sacrifice and obligation which seized the governing and intellectual classes in the last quarter of the 19th century.

(Stapleton, 2005: 155)

## Philanthropy

As Williams did not tackle 'philanthropy', our starting point for this keyword was the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in which it is defined as 'the desire to promote the welfare of others, expressed especially by the generous donation of money to good causes'.

We felt that this definition was far from neutral. The use of the terms 'generous' and 'good causes' prompted debate about how far a mindset associated with charity and philanthropy dominates contemporary thinking. Who defines the nature of a good cause, how is this value-based decision reached and who actually benefits?

We argued that aspects of philanthropy relate closely to the idealistic mindset cited above of 'altruism, self-sacrifice and obligation', and instances of philanthropy commonly overlap with instances of charity, although not all charity is philanthropy, and vice versa. We discussed the fact that philanthropy, for instance, can represent patronage for a cause or an institution, such as Stephen Fry's role as patron and ambassador of the mental health charity, Mind. It can also relate to displays of wealth ostensibly for public benefit, such as the construction of grand public buildings and projects – hospitals, schools, parks, libraries. The net result can be an enhanced social standing for the philanthropist. Acting as a philanthropist allows for a 'cherry-picking' process whereby the wealthy patron chooses what issues, activities or personal interests to support and, thus, where their money will be deployed.

One concern about this 'cherry picking' that the whole group shared is that the more intractable, less publicly 'attractive' social and economic issues, such as homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, prostitution and domestic violence, may be less likely to attract support from a wealthy patron – unless, like Fry, they have been personally affected.

A difference commonly cited between philanthropy and charity is that charity relieves the pains of social problems, whereas philanthropy attempts to solve those problems at their root causes, which is reminiscent of the COS model of creating self-sufficiency or contemporary concepts of providing skills development or capacity building. A common view within the group was that philanthropy has the implication of giving unto people, or patronage (in all its connotations), rather than of people doing it for themselves.

### **'Charity is a cold grey loveless thing': The evolution of the welfare state**

The decline of both charity and philanthropy at the beginning of the twentieth century ties in closely with people's fight for direct democracy and equality, and the enfranchisement of a wider proportion of the working population. This period saw the Poor Law system falling into decline due to factors such as the introduction of liberal welfare reforms and the availability of other sources of assistance from friendly societies and trade unions. Many of these reforms emanated from collective action, workers' cooperation and communitarian action, closely associated with Michael Edwards's description of civil society as associational life. Such activism led to increased duties for the state to protect its citizens throughout life, and marked a move away from the whims of philanthropy and charity – favourite causes, missionary zeal, targeted interventions by the wealthy – towards an establishment of rights and taxation. Clement Attlee stated that 'Charity is a cold grey loveless thing. If a rich man wants to help the poor, he should pay his taxes gladly, not dole out money at whim' (Attlee, 1920: 75).

William Beveridge's report in 1942 was the foundation of the post-war Labour Government's welfare state:

a concept of government in which the state plays a key role in the protection and promotion of the economic and social well-being of its citizens. It is based on the principles of equality of opportunity, equitable distribution of wealth, and public responsibility for those unable to avail themselves of the minimal provisions for a good life. The general term may cover a variety of forms of economic and social organization.

(‘Welfare state’, 2015: n.p.)

According to Beveridge, the state places upon all of us the responsibility to participate, to work and to care for others, but if we are incapacitated it will care for and maintain us to provide ‘the minimal provisions for a good life’. Private philanthropy is understood, tacitly, as being inadequate for dealing with the intractable problems of society – and of life – as we age, become ill or find ourselves out of work. The group was struck by Beveridge’s insistence on equality of opportunity and the equitable distribution of wealth, which suggests that certain groups in society should not hold the purse strings or be conferred with special privileges, and that there should be some delimitation on a purely marketized economy.

## Bringing the discussion up to date

### The rise of the market

Our discussion then took us up to the present day. The welfare state arguably permitted the decline of charity and philanthropy for a time. Barry Knight, author of *Reviving Democracy: Citizens at the heart of governance*, suggests that charitable and voluntary action was less prominent in the UK from the 1940s until the 1960s, at which point some of the sheen of the early years of the welfare state had started to wear off – particularly regarding its potentially pacifying influence on collective action and the fight for societal change.

The charitable sector emerged from this period in a different form and with a different *raison d’être*:

Then came the 1960s, which saw a rebirth of new and radical organisations based on the freedom of the age in which the cracks in the welfare state had become all too evident and citizens were no longer willing to be cast in passive roles. Principles of association and participation were much to the fore here. Gradually, the voluntary sector rebuilt its influence.

(Knight, 2014: 4)

The voluntary sector, as it was now depicted, placed the emphasis on voluntarism, or freedom of choice, and became a space for innovation, contest and radical action. Many members of the group had been involved in this evolution, personally engaged in some of the great social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Women’s Liberation Movement and the Gay Rights Movement, which often emerged through activism at a community level, for both communities of interest and place, and sought a voice in society for those most marginalized and disempowered. Members of the group, and colleagues and communities they had lived and worked among, had volunteered their time, expertise, passion and energy on an unpaid basis to support causes and issues that were important to them.

At this stage, the state and the voluntary sector were understood to have different but complementary goals and the state provided money, often in the form of grant aid, for voluntary organizations to work in self-determined areas, as long as

they did not take on work properly undertaken by the state. This led to a flourishing of voluntary action in many areas, including conservation and preservation, disability activism, homelessness, substance misuse and poverty.

However, as Knight goes on to say: 'This all changed in the 1980s. In 1986, the Home Office wrote to the NCVO [National Coalition for Voluntary Organisations] to say that government would only fund voluntary bodies that met government objectives' (Knight, 2014: 4).

Thus began the new love affair with state-controlled charitable and voluntary activity, and a resurgence of philanthropy after its post-Victorian era slumber. The final section of the weekend began an exploration of contemporary manifestations of the three keywords.

### Current policy and practice

We agreed that the UK Coalition Government of 2010–15 was keen to see a return to concepts of charity, volunteering, personal enterprise, self-reliance and philanthropy, moving away from an organized voluntary sector or collective activism. Talking on BBC Radio 4's *World at One*, Ed Miliband, leader of the opposition in 2010, described the Coalition Government's flagship civil society approach, 'big society', as heralding 'a return to Victorian philanthropy, with little role for the state. "This is essentially a 19th-century or US-style view of our welfare state – which is cut back the welfare state and somehow civic society will thrive," he said' (Watt, 2010: n.p.).

The Conservative ideology represents a paradigm shift for swathes of the voluntary sector and civil society who emerged in the 1960s and who have tried to stay true to their more recent campaigning and self-initiating roots. The shift has left many of them starved of funds and resources:

What is clear is that the voluntary sector, a pivot of the Big Society, is experiencing huge difficulties in meeting the challenge, because voluntarism rarely functions in isolation from the state. ... It is pious optimism to suggest that private philanthropy will suddenly appear in the same proportion, or in the same places, as the disappearing public purse.  
(Hopkin, 2011: n.p.)

Penny Waterhouse's paper, *Thinking Out Loud – The Job of Voluntary Services: What voluntary services should do, not do and might do*, was an important stimulus for the weekend. In it she argues that the critical role of voluntarism as a broker of innovation and a champion for reflection and dissent is being compromised in contemporary society. The hard-won victories of the twentieth century, in which the voluntary sector emerged as distinct from, and in addition to, the state, are being lost or placed under severe strain, with the state sector being starved of resources:

The post war settlement saw the creation of a wide variety of rights and entitlements alongside the extended provision of free health, education, legal aid, income support and social welfare protections. The bulk of welfare services were provided directly by state agencies, decreasing the importance of provision by voluntary services. Many voluntary agencies re-positioned themselves as places from which to stretch the frontiers of state provision through innovation, and to provide informed policy and political critique of the shortcomings of that provision.

(Waterhouse, 2016: 1)

In a recent article, the sociologist Linsey McGoey suggests that we have moved so far down this route that views such as those expressed by Attlee, in which charity was understood as cold comfort without economic equality, which were 'commonplace by the mid-twentieth century' (Karlin and McGoey, 2016: n.p.), are utterly lost in contemporary society, and that we are moving towards a renewed faith that 'private enterprise can yield public benefits' (Karlin and McGoey, 2016: n.p.). She cites the rise of 'philanthrocapitalism', the conjoining of big business, philanthropy and the market, alongside a renewed, uncritical adoption of charity, as the main reasons for this change:

Charitable giving is seen as sacrosanct, even while the failures of private charity to make dents in growing economic inequality or to curb escalating poverty ... grow more obvious. Any force in society that's seen as inviolable or irreproachable is worrying, whether it's unaccountable big government or unaccountable big philanthropy.

(Karlin and McGoey, 2016: n.p.)

She argues that philanthrocapitalism is nothing new, harking back to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thinkers such as Adam Smith, for whom it is incontestable that 'private enterprise can yield public benefits'. She adds, 'what's new today is that we accept on faith that their trickle-down philanthropic efforts represent an improvement over the past' and that 'the media and public are largely accepting the bullish triumphalism of the new breed of philanthrocapitalists who suggest, wrongly, that their effort to marry private interest with social welfare is somehow unprecedented' (Karlin and McGoey, 2016: n.p.).

In the group's view, the contemporary marriage of economics, philanthropy and business takes us to the heart of the issues that the voluntary sector faces at the moment. McGoey's critique of philanthropy suggests that the big philanthropists, people such as Bill Gates and Bill Clinton, are now making the choice about the allocation of resources, leading to an almost unimpeachable power and authority resting in the hands of a tiny super-rich minority, and to an increasing disempowerment of the state. While this may be an acceptable price to pay for the benefit of vast philanthropic donations, McGoey argues that such private donors are not filling the void fostered by the receding role of the state.

## Voluntarism

The final keyword we tackled, and perhaps the area that excited most debate in our keywords analysis, was 'voluntarism'. As stated in the introduction, some members of our group understood the term to refer exclusively to volunteering, in the sense of the giving of time, energy and skills freely, often out of an impulse to be 'other-regarding'. This includes acts of human compassion, such as being neighbourly, or engaging in volunteering for causes or concerns close to our hearts – essentially because we want to.

Deep concerns were expressed in the group that the essence of volunteering is being debased in current government thinking, placing emphasis on a greater sphere (or burden) of activity being undertaken by the voluntary sector, wider civil society and unpaid volunteers. An example is local people running libraries that would otherwise be closed down, displacing trained (and paid) librarians with volunteers, but this is only one example within a wider cultural expectation that a whole range of provisions will become (and are becoming) voluntary. There was also deep concern about public accountability in that, arguably, any scheme or service run by volunteers and removed from the professional sphere no longer has the same capacity to be called to account

if things go wrong or to provide evidence that a service is meeting people's needs if this is called into question.

At the time of the 'big society' launch in 2010, the Conservative Party manifesto stated: 'Our public service programme will enable social enterprises, charities and voluntary groups to play a leading role in delivering public services and tackling deep-rooted social problems' (Conservative Party, 2010: 37). The Communities Minister, Eric Pickles, perhaps showed the true colours of the 'big society' programme as a means of saving money when he told Radio 4's *World at One*: 'Even at a time when money is tight, it is still possible to find different ways of delivering. It is unashamedly about getting more for less' (Watt, 2010: n.p.).

Many areas of the public sector have since experienced the cold wind of austerity rhetoric. The mantra is cut expenditure, achieve more with fewer resources and defer to market discipline.

As our group discussion demonstrated, the concept of volunteering has become fraught with difficulty. Our final discussion stimulus came from Zygmunt Bauman and his work, *Liquid Modernity* (2000), in which he selected five of the basic concepts that have served to make sense of shared human life – emancipation, individuality, time/space, work and community. He argued that they are all tied in, on different levels, with volunteering, and showed how they have become fluid and contested areas without the structural certainties of the past, complicating and confusing our own immediate understanding of community. As a group, we felt strongly this loss (or obscuring) of life-politics and human community, its displacement by the economic system, and our disappearing sense of civil society as an alternative space for mutual support and collective action.

Penny Waterhouse describes voluntarism and, by extension, the voluntary sector thus:

Voluntary action occupies a space within civil society that is distinct from both the state and the market – a space in which citizens come together freely to exercise self-determining collective action. Such formal and informal associations are an expression of citizen action, usually driven by compassion, conviviality and fun, mutual interests and generally, a determination to make the world a better place. Voluntary groups do not have to exist. Their activities are not required by law, nor is there a statutory duty to keep them going if they fail. This is the core of voluntary action: to exist and act by choice.

(Waterhouse, 2016: 1)

Key to her commentary is that civil society and voluntarism are neither the state nor the market. Activities associated with civil society are not mandatory or statutory – their central feature is that of being predicated on choice. They allow for problem solving, local community knowledge and community cohesion, contributing, at their best, to pride of place and community spirit.

Our overall view – at the end of our keywords analysis – was that the capitalist crisis we have faced in the UK (and globally) since 2008 has given subsequent UK governments an opportunity to try to re-order society, to create a culture of 'divide and rule' in which community, associationism and voluntarism are suspect unless they go hand-in-hand with government thinking, and that we now live in a culture in which individualism prevails. This ideological onslaught and the austerity agenda build on the earlier efforts of Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to question the very concept of 'society', as well as New Labour's third way, which began the process of

redefining, and 'professionalizing', the role of the voluntary sector. We concluded that the neo-liberal model promotes a return to mercantilism, big business and fictional finance, and that the earliest conception of charity, as the unconditional love of others, compassion and other-regardness, becomes distorted.

## Policy to practice: The way forwards

At the end of an intense weekend of debate, we spent our final session considering the best way of staying true to our crucial central objective of praxis, of satisfying our desire to create public debate and impact about these issues, and of taking our learning and critical thinking back to bear on our work and lives beyond the point of discourse. This now seems particularly important, a year after the initial weekend, at a time when the nation as a whole is especially uncertain about what our communities and our free associations should look like after the UK's withdrawal from the European Union.

### Informal learning and public pedagogy

The Raymond Williams Foundation promotes the importance of informal learning, of taking discussion into free public spaces, such as through the Philosophy in Pubs movement. The intention is to support or engender crucial discussion at community level about our future society, in a normalized environment and in a friendly and non-threatening way, allowing participants to ask questions and to promote socially responsible debate informally. It is an ethos predicated on building knowledge within communities and within civil society, a means of acknowledging the important contribution of academic expertise and learning – through intensive reading, sharing papers and concepts – while taking learning and research outside the realms of academia. Led by communities rather than by researchers, it does not allow researchers and research methodologies to dominate.

Raymond Williams emphasized the importance of this kind of public pedagogy, which provides space for debate and dialogue. In this approach, he recognized the democratizing potential of boundary-shifting, multidisciplinary forms of education that escape the schoolhouse and find their expression in our associational networks – our family and home environment, libraries, museums, radio networks, pubs and leisure centres and, we must now add, social media and the Internet. Central to public or critical pedagogy is *criticality*, the breakdown between student and teacher, expert and non-expert, allowing for the development of *critical consciousness* and political action – a form of knowledge democracy. This could be described as education for social purpose, seeking a quantitative and then a qualitative change as its end point in real-world applications.

### Collaborative research

In our final session, I reflected back on my own previous role as head of communities within a UK university setting, in which I had argued for the central role of the university in promoting social justice and in connecting with communities through community-based, participative and collaborative research. My contention was that universities are privileged and resource-rich institutions that could play a vital role in supporting the development of a knowledge democracy, as part of our shared associational life in which we collectively re-shape, rethink and reframe what civil society should look like. My experience of engaging communities with research in a university setting suggested that we have much still to learn on this point. In my view, many people still associate the

university with a place of knowledge dispossession rather than knowledge democracy, seeking to keep local communities out, rather than to bring them in.

The emphasis of the UK's research excellence framework (REF) on evidencing public impact has helped to create a new focus on the university's engagement with its publics, and the recent work of the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) on analysing responses to the REF is beginning to show a fascinating and encouraging range of activities being utilized to engage with groups and individuals outside the university. There is still much to be drawn from this material but one key early finding suggests a need for more emphasis on exploring the impact of public engagement that moves beyond improving public understanding – or knowledge dissemination – into knowledge exchange – the capacity for collaborative research to influence policymakers and to animate social action, with a focus on learning from the expertise of those outside academia. This was the aspiration of our RWF 'think tank', and demonstrates the importance of communities working with academics to shape and influence policy.

### **The university and the community: Learning from each other**

In a recent Carnegie UK Trust report, *InterAction: How can academics and the third sector work together to influence policy and practice?*, Mark Shucksmith (2016) argues that we need to re-examine our understanding of knowledge if we are to move towards a true knowledge democracy. While the academic world values formal, explicit knowledge, the voluntary sector is more likely to work on the basis of tacit knowledge, which is intuitive, sometimes hard to articulate and often acquired through practical experience ('learning by doing'). Such knowledge 'requires close interaction, shared understanding, cooperation and trust' (Shucksmith, 2016: 2). Shucksmith goes on to show that 'the simplistic notion that only universities produce knowledge and that this must be transferred to users in a knowledge transfer process is outdated' (Shucksmith, 2016: 9). One way forward emphasizes the importance of knowledge brokers – those people who can act as intermediaries between universities and civil society organizations, bringing together research creators/producers with research users from both sectors. These brokers can transcend boundaries – between universities and society and between academic disciplines – helping to formulate a public pedagogy that requires the 'genuine involvement of different publics in the formulation of the research problem and subsequent conversations with relevant publics at all stages of the research process' (Shucksmith, 2016: 23).

In an important sense, my role in facilitating the RWF Keywords event was that of a broker, as someone who has spanned the worlds of informal, community-based practice, policy and academia. I was not alone in this. A number of members of the group were, or had been, practitioners in a range of settings – including social work, youth and community work, public sector planning, regeneration, human rights and community activism. Our final view was that informal learning groups are one way of engaging in the research process. Another is writing papers and journal articles under our own steam. Finally, taking Shucksmith's lead, we considered that a group such as ours might have an important role to play in offering training and development for researchers on what constitutes an effective policy process, how to engage with practitioner expertise and how to involve voluntary sector partners in such programmes.



## Conclusion

Finally, engaged research, 'research for all', must challenge and inform our concepts of civil society, however it is achieved. This article is the culmination of the work of the RWF think tank in January 2016. A version of it has already been posted on the Raymond Williams Foundation website to promote our commentary on keywords further afield, via the Internet, in the hope of stimulating, or contributing to, a wider debate. I also delivered presentations on the group's work at two academic conferences in 2016.

The article is, in itself, a call to action. My final question is to ask whether we can come together as key civil society voices with academics and policymakers, to create a critical collective response to the issues identified in the article at a time when such a response is so urgently needed. In attempting to reframe our notions of charity, philanthropy and voluntarism, the role of civil society and its history, perhaps this article can offer a starting point for debate about how we challenge our assumptions about what constitutes a caring, humane society, what we mean by engaged research, what research for social action should look like and how we bring points of real debate to life beyond empty rhetoric and sound bites, as these clearly do not serve us well.

## Notes on the contributor

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