Community development and the contested politics of the late modern *agora*: of, alongside or against neoliberalism?

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**Abstract**

In this article we argue that community development is an expression of the political and politicised assembly of an active citizenry in civil society, and may therefore be characterised as a late modern *agora* – the ancient Greek concept describing the interface between the public and private spheres of social life. Drawing on Bauman (in *Globalization: the Human Consequences*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998), we argue that the enemy of political association – of the *agora* – in late modernity is neoliberalism. The meaning of community development as the late modern *agora* is then explored, and we note the subsequent contestation over its status, as revealed in variant ideological perspectives on the role of civil society. In particular, we identify three dominant understandings and practices of community development: a neoliberal version where civil society is subservient to the needs of economic development; a corporatist version that advocates a partnership between the state, market and civil society; and an activist version, where community development is envisaged as local, nodal and global resistance to neoliberalism. In essence, we are posing the question: ‘community development: of, alongside or against neoliberalism?’

**Introduction**

Bauman (1998, pp. 86–87) likens the contemporary idea of civil society to the ancient Greek concept of *agora* as a site of political assembly or local marketplace, an interface between the public and private spheres of social life. He argues that in modern society, the *agora* has come under sustained
attack. Its enemy during the twentieth century was totalitarianism, whereas as we enter the twenty-first century it is neoliberalism. In this article, we identify the notion of community development as a modern discursive form of *agora* and examine its politically contested relationship with neoliberalism in late modernity. We begin by noting the neoliberal assumption of economic growth as ‘good change’, and contrast this understanding with the reality of the pathologies brought about through untrammelled economic ‘development’. Community development, we then argue, exists in relation to processes of commodity production and exchange in late modernity, being a form of politics where citizens attempt to participate in their socio-political milieus in order to influence developmental processes. We link the emergence of community development as the late modern *agora* to the democratic forces unleashed in modernism and the subsequent quest for social justice. The meaning of community development as the late modern *agora* is then explored, and we note the subsequent contestation over its status, as revealed in variant ideological perspectives on the role of civil society. In particular, we contrast three understandings and practice of community development: the neoliberal version that sees the notion of active citizenship as the outcome of the development of Putnamian social capital, where civil society is subservient to the needs of economic development; the corporatist version that advocates a partnership between the state, market and civil society which realizes new forms of governance that supersede the welfare state; and the activist version, where community development is envisaged as local, nodal and global resistance to neoliberalism. In essence, we are posing the question: ‘community development: of, alongside or against neoliberalism?’.

**Community development and the ‘post-ideological consensus’**

In our view, community development is a form of politics whereby citizens participate in civil society through communicative action in order to directly socialize policy issues. Ife (2002, p. xi) notes that sceptics have suggested that ‘community development is dead’. Endisms are currently in vogue among proponents of the much vaunted historical victory of capitalism over socialism in late modernity. For them, global neoliberalism as a development model is underpinned by the normative assumption that capitalist development upon modernization is ‘good change’ for the betterment of the planet (Thomas, 2000, p. 24). They view the world as having achieved a post-ideological democratic consensus, based on the fusion of minimalist expressions of democracy embodied in contemporary liberalism, with social action organized predominantly through the market.
The age of contestation between market-led development embodied in organized capitalism and state-led development embodied in twentieth-century socialism is simply over in the global neoliberal analysis – what has become known via its paradigmatic form as ‘the end of history’ thesis (e.g. Fukuyama, 1992). Zizek calls this a fundamental denkverbot – a prohibition on thinking – and argues ‘today, actual freedom of thought means freedom to question the prevailing liberal democratic, post-ideological consensus – or it means nothing’ (Žižek, 2002, pp. 167–168).

In this view, there must be a right to truth, one which permits criticism of the prevailing post-ideological consensus if democracy itself is to survive. Bauman (1998, p. 8) similarly asserts that we need to bring back ‘from exile ideas such as the public good, the good society, equity, justice and so on’. This is a view of the world in which community development has a vital catalytic role to play in democratising democracy, where community development as a late modern form of agora provides a vital public space for democratic dialogue and political criticism in an era characterized by the eclipse of the ability and interest of the ordinary citizen to influence the practices and practitioners of ‘thin’ (i.e. liberal) democracy, a democratic form based on Madisonian representation in the political process by elites, rather than on mass participation by the citizenry (see, Barber, 1984).

Critics of market-led development have demonstrated its limitations. Davis (2007) in his remarkable book Planet of Slums has traced a global trajectory of unregulated capitalist development since the 1960s that has led to today’s unprecedented mega-slums of the Cono Sur, Sadr City and the Cape Flats. He argues that in these vast shanty towns a new urban proletariat has emerged unimagined by either classical Marxism or neoliberal orthodoxy. Such developments raise the issue of ‘bad change’ and the rights to, and need of, planetary citizenship – cosmopolitanism – in a globalized world. The adage ‘think global, act local’ reminds us of the continuing political relevance of the agora in late modern society as an arena in which new emancipatory discourses can be forged that lead to late modern solutions to late modern problems through participatory democracy.

**Modernity and community: the search for paradise lost**

The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) made the idea of community famous through his classic distinction between gemeinschaft (community) and gesellschaft (society). Tönnies grew up in a small town on the west coast of Schleswig with strong communal traditions. He migrated to Berlin and made ‘the resulting culture shock into the material of his creative life…’ viewing the city as what he called ‘a society of strangers’ (Burrow, 2000, p. 120). For Tönnies, the idea of community was
founded on an essential sympathy and elemental trust, which creates a natural union among people. On the other hand, society was perceived by Tönnies as heartless, impersonal and hostile. He presented modern society as an urban environment in which people were held together by the legal ties of contractual obligation, in sharp contrast to the wholesome bonds of the local community that defined the traditional social order. The social pessimism that pervades Tönnies’ ideas is echoed in present day analysis by commentators like Putnam (2000), which is supposed to be a metaphor for our times. Putnam laments what he perceives as a growing problem of civic disengagement in American social life. The world of his intellectual mentor, Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited the United States during the 1830s, and celebrated the quality of civic life in his study *Democracy in America* (first published in 1835), has been lost according to Putnam’s pessimistic analysis. A sense of place and rootedness in locality is fundamental to this vision – the world as an imagined village. But Bauman (2001), in his study *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, presents the search for the ideal community as a paradise lost, one we hope to rediscover. He presents community as an ‘elusive’ ideal, an imaginary place characterized by a feel-good factor: ‘community feels good because of the meanings the word community conveys – all of them pleasures, and more often that not the kinds of pleasures we would like to experience but seem to miss’ (Bauman, 2001, pp. 1–2). According to Bauman, our search for community is a mission to rediscover greater ontological security in modernity, but this involves reconciling the tension between our need for both security and freedom – the calculus of which will determine the quality of our lives. The community has become a key site of civil society in late modern society, encapsulated in the slogan ‘Think Global: Act Local’.

**Modernism and the quest for social justice**

Modernity gave birth to a movement called ‘modernism’, which was revolutionary in its impact. It was a disparate movement, in which emancipatory politics intersected with *avant garde* literature and art. Modernism was a gamble with history and consciousness that was borne of outrage at the state of human affairs. The activities of artists and writers geared to transform human consciousness by an appeal to sensation found its echo among political agitators and social reformers. The publication on the eve of European revolution in 1848 of Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* epitomized the impact of modernist ideas on politics. But while modernism sought to transform the world in the direction of greater equality and liberty, it found its mirror image in anti-modernism. The latter sought to
pursue a counter-transformation back to earlier social and cultural forms, which are represented in an iconography of idyllic family and communal life. In other words, modernism epitomized by the big city, with its dangers of revolution, violence and permissiveness, is contrasted with the rural bucolic life of certainty and stability, where the seigniorial presence of God provides an anchor for enduring authority.

Modern protest movements have been very much an urban phenomenon. The relationship they engendered between ideas and action is a complex one. Socialists, trade unionists and feminists provided the intellectual impetus behind urban protest, but at popular levels the issues were not ideological. Rather, they were about wages, unemployment, tenants’ rights and slum housing conditions; free school meals, poor relief and other practical issues that reflected the daily concerns of people living in poor communities. While the leadership hoped that their Left-wing ideological perspectives would filter down, compromise was the political and social reality. The intellectual leadership sought to impose discipline, as well as ideology, upon a natural sense of injustice felt by poor people. Despite this dissonance between the leadership and the communities of protest, they shared a common belief in human progress. They both firmly believed that society could improve whether they could influence the state in the direction of social justice. Their modernist position stood in marked contrast to pre-modern protest movements. The latter were often about agrarian use rights or religious in character and rooted in a belief that there had been a decline in the standards of the past, standards that needed to be restored. Also, while sharing the context of capitalism, there is also a noticeable difference between modernist protest movements and post-materialist movements of late modernity – the student rebellions of the 1960s, the environmental movement, the anti-nuclear movement and the contemporary anti-capitalist movement – all of which question the moral basis of progress in terms of its consequences for humankind.

**Late modernity: ‘Modernity without modernism’**

Bauman (2001, p. 75) characterizes late modernity as modernity without modernism: ‘we have been landed now in an as yet unexplained world of modernity without modernism: while continuing to be moved by an eminent modern passion for emancipatory transgression, we no longer entertain a clear vision of its ultimate purpose or destination’. Neoliberals have substituted modernization for modernity, a concept imbued with the idea that all economic progress is characterized as ‘good change’. In this view, ‘development’ is the constant expansion of economic growth underpinned by rapacious production, consumerism and possessive
individualism. In this late modern reality, neo-Tocquevillean social theorists, notably the aforementioned Fukuyama (1995) and Putnam (1993), have claimed that there is a positive correlation between modernization and civil society, because the former promotes co-operation, prosperity and trust simultaneously leading to higher levels of social solidarity and economic prosperity. On the face of it, this is two-world theory where the economic sphere is dominated by market values, and a social world defined by depoliticized ideas, such as building social capital, in a post-socialist world order. According to this vision, there is no longer a society in the modernist sense of the welfare state or a public sphere, only individual enterprise, self-reliance and charity.

Hayek has contended that ‘the social’ is merely something which was developed as a practice of individual action in the course of social evolution (Hayek, 1976, p. 78). For Hayek, ‘the social’ was an abhorrent concept that conjured up images of totalitarianism that characterized the modern socialist age. In his Mirage of Social Justice, he equates the pursuit of equality with tyranny (Hayek, 1976). Other neoliberal social theorists have challenged the normative basis of social solidarity based on the collectivist ideal of the welfare state, which they view as creating a dependent underclass (Murray, 1984; Marsland, 1995, 1996). In Margaret Thatcher’s famous aphorism, ‘there is no such thing as society’ (Sunday Times, 9 November 1988). This was intended to be the obituary of the welfare state and the idea of a public sphere. Bourdieu (1998) in a witty polemic against neoliberal globalization, Acts of Resistance, contextualises these political changes. According to Bourdieu’s analysis, the crisis of politics and the rise of street protests in France and other countries are due to the ‘hollowing-out’ of the State, which in turn has undermined the public sphere. He argues that citizens who are rejected by the state in turn reject the state ‘in the same way. One has the sense now that citizens, feeling themselves ejected from the state (which, in the end, asks no more than obligatory material contributions, and certainly no commitment, no enthusiasm), reject the state, treating it as an alien power to be used so far as they can to serve their own interests’ (Bourdieu, 1998, pp. 4–5).

What is clear is that civil society as the postmodern agora is a politically contested concept. There is a divergence between Anglo-Saxon and European perspectives, epitomized by neo-Tocquevillean and Bourdieusienne interpretations of civil society. Neo-Tocquevillians exalt a traditionalist view of a world of consensus that is adapted to the realities of global neoliberalism, in which economic prosperity and human progress are presented as interdependent, within a capitalist society. Bourdieu (1998, p. 25) views this interpretation as one of the new myths of our time that has ‘kidnapped the state: it has made the public good a private good, has
made the public thing, *res publica*, the Republic, its own thing’. He argues that ‘at stake is winning back democracy from technology’ (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 26). The Bourdieusienne concept of civil society stresses a conflict between democracy and oligarchy, devolving on the right to association that is rooted in symbols, values and ideology that reflects the *zeitgeist* of our age. This vision is of an activist civil society, constituted by a Social Left, standing in the way of the neo-Tocquevillean colonization of the concept that detaches it from a theory of the state and the historic commitment to social citizenship.

**Active citizenship and participatory democracy**

Late modern political consciousness has changed our understanding of what it means to be a citizen. Various strands within late modern political life, such as feminism and queer theory, have challenged the precepts of liberalism and social democracy by arguing that the ‘personal is political’. The private spaces of social life, first opened to public scrutiny by pioneer social activists in the Victorian era, have become the battleground of cultural politics. Radical democrats espousing participation through the fragmented causes of identity politics have been joined by neo-conservatives in challenging the hegemonic influences of liberalism, social democracy and the nation-state. The great meta-narratives of the pursuit of human emancipation through social politics and pluralism through diversity and individual choice have lost their persuasive force in late modern discourse. The politics of late modernity has reshaped political discourse into interplay between human subjectivities (political consciousness) and the state. This reflexive process is continuously reinventing political issues into new forms, new debates and new subjectivities. Late modern consciousness has transformed established meanings and relationships between the family, civil society and the state into an anti-bureaucratic and anti-clientist form, based on the democratic value of the citizens’ rights to participate. These opposed views of late modernity mean transforming civil society into an ideological battlefield between neoliberalism and an emergent social left (Powell, 2007).

Active citizenship has emerged in this transformed social landscape. It was initially promoted by neoliberals ‘as an exhortation to discharge the responsibilities of neighbourliness, voluntary action and charity’ in the context of ‘the rundown of public sector services, benefit cutbacks and privatised programme in which it was advanced’ (Lister, 1997, p. 22). However, more radical democratic variants of active citizenship emerged in the form of community groups challenging paternalistic top-down relationships that disempower. These more democratic forms of active
citizenship arguably indicate the emergence of new social movements among marginalized groups. Active citizenship here is associated with demands for greater participation in the welfare state through the involvement of the burgeoning third sector as a partner. In this reality, the third sector is perceived as an alternative to state bureaucracy and professional elitism, and a public space between government and market. Civil society in its re-invigorated form is presented as a democratic community-based alternative to the dependent status imposed by the social citizenship of the welfare state.

In postmodern conditions, active citizenship in the form of volunteering is promoted as a more humane alternative to the Fordist philosophy of the welfare state ‘one size fits all’. It is part of a wider attack on the modernist conception of citizenship that has in part been induced by the consumerist philosophy of neoliberalism but is also the product of a deeper social fragmentation connected to the rise of identity politics. Social politics, embodied in the institution of the welfare state, has consequently suffered in terms of public esteem. The growing disenchantment with this form of democracy and demands for greater public participation refocus attention away from the social to the active citizen. The core emphasis in active citizenship is on participation in the decision-making and service delivery processes of state, leading to the empowerment of the citizen. Active citizenship can be innovative (e.g. campaign for migrant workers’ rights); preservationist (protecting the environment) or remedial (helping the dispossessed) (Uprimmy and Garcia-Villegas, 2006, p. 84). Boaventura de Sousa Santos views the reconciliation of the confrontation between representative democracy and participatory democracy based on active citizenship as the core challenge for late modern society. In his book Democratizing Democracy, de Sousa Santos (2006, p. x) declares:

Such a confrontation, which derives from the fact that representative democracy has systematically denied the legitimacy of participatory democracy, will be resolved only to the extent to which such denial is replaced by the development of forms of complementarity between the two forms of democracy that may contribute to deepen one another. Such complimentarity paves one of the ways to the reinvention of social emancipation.

In the reconstructed reality of late modern society, the challenge facing the agora is to respond reflexively to changing needs and demands. The challenge to the zeitgeist of the welfare state social obligation, common citizenship and human rights is manifest. If cultural agendas in the shape of identity politics and burgeoning social movements are to be the shape of things to come, where does that leave active citizenship? Is it possible to
sustain communities in a polarized and fragmented social order? This is the great social, political and intellectual challenge of our times. We turn now to examining three main paradigms that are shaping models of community development: ‘of’, ‘alongside’ or ‘against’ neoliberalism.

Neoliberal civil society and social capital: of neoliberalism

Neoliberals have posited social capital as the elixir that will fix the problems of late modernity. Skidmore and Craig (2005, p. 17) assert, ‘social capital is an appealingly simple proposition: the kinds of social relationships people have with one another and the trust and shared values that emerge from them, influence the capacity of communities to work together to tackle common problems’. Robert Putnam is regarded as the ‘high priest’ of social capital as a theory of managed change. He argues that ‘in measurable and well-documented ways social capital makes an enormous difference in our lives … social capital makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer and better able to govern a just and stable democracy’ (The Irish Times, 1 November 2002). He attributes the lack of social capital in a contemporary society to our lifestyle, which he argues is dominated by television. Television, he contends, has undermined community involvement and civic engagement. In this visually orientated world, lifestyle has become increasingly individualistic and atomized, deeply disconnected from ‘the social’. He contends that the public realm has suffered not only in declining membership of churches, unions, clubs and societies but also in disconnection from politics and democracy defined by voter apathy. Despite his apparently apolitical orientation, Putnam does connect civic disengagement with democratic deficit.

Putnam is correct to argue that the quality of democracy defines civic virtue. But, social capital is conceptually disconnected from democracy. Its inspiration is in market capitalism in a world where the consumer has become a substitute for the citizen (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 25). This is the fundamental flaw in the neo-Tocquevillean position. There are grounds for believing that Putnam may even be misreading American society. It is true that more traditional forms of civil society are in decline. Bowling leagues are a metaphor for community decline. On the other hand, as Harriss (2002, pp. 53–54) points out, ‘the generation in America that Putnam holds responsible for the decline of community has been responsible too for having created the first consumer movement since the 1930s, the first environmental movement since the turn of the century, public health movements, grassroots activism and community organising, the first feminist movement since the pre-World War I period, the civil rights movement, and innumerable transnational non-governmental organisations and civic
movements, all of which led to unprecedented advances in rights and social justice’. The reality is that as culture changes, so does civil society.

The Welfare State replaced many traditional social service organizations operated by voluntary organizations whose egotism and paternalism were at odds with a democratic society. Putnam’s passionate attempt to restore communitarian values in the spirit of Alexis de Tocqueville misguidedly seeks to evoke a past where civic virtue rested upon self-help. Skidmore and Craig (2005, p. 19) conclude ‘the call for the restoration of civic virtue to its proper place in people’s lives may be impassioned, but this new traditionalism also feels rather implausible as the basis of genuine, far-reaching renewal’. A return to the past based on a fusion between the market and civil society offers a vision of social policy where it would be residualized in the mould of the Poor Law State and traditional philanthropy. It is a socially regressive option.

Civil society and social partnership: alongside neoliberalism

The concept of social partnership envisages a corporatist model of social policy based upon co-operation between government, market and civil society. Jones and Novak (1999, p. 83) note that partnership in the UK casts the state in the role of facilitator for the market and that it is essentially ‘a partnership with big business and few people else’. Mandell (2002, p. 83) shares this view of partnership in the UK, which she links to the ‘New Public Management’ strategy and similar policy approaches in other English-speaking countries. Ling (2000, p. 89) argues that partnership is a new form of governance in response to a growing democratic deficit, which is eroding the legitimacy of the state. He adopts the Foucauldian concept of ‘governmentality’ and asserts that civil society is being drawn into ‘a new strategic arena’. Ling concludes that governmentality (which ultimately means co-option to a new and more subtle form of governance) ‘is a double-edged phenomenon with both an inclusive dimension and a more worrying authoritarian dimension’ (Ling, 2000, p. 90).

Marxists are highly critical of social partnership. Allen (2000) argues that social partnership in Ireland has been used to distribute wealth by stealth to the rich and co-opts dissenting voices. But, a national survey by Powell and Geoghegan (2004) of Irish community development organizations indicated a predominantly benign view of social partnership among community activists, despite reservations about the poor quality of dialogue between the partners and lack of shared vision. However, the authors conclude that social partnership represented a new narrative of governance in which community development was at risk of becoming a paid arm of the state. Not all commentators would accept such views of social partnership as
governance by social control. For example, Batliwala (2002, p. 406) observes that grassroots movements are seeking to democratise partnerships: ‘These are partnerships between relative equals – each brings to the engagement a different source of power but that power is recognised and acknowledged by the other’. In this form, it is possible to view partnership in a very different light, as an exercise in ‘democratic experimentalism’ (Sabel, 1996).

In reality, partnership is likely to be influenced by its structures and the relative power of stakeholders, as well as the quality of dialogue and respect that exists between them. These stakeholders may include many progressive voices, with a strong commitment to the idea of social justice. It is important to remember that organizations geared towards social change, including trade unions, voluntary and community organizations and, indeed, political organizations, have a tradition of self-governance with strong local roots. They are not the creations of a central state apparatus. Co-operation at local level through social partnership consequently has a more tangible sense of democratic inclusion. However, there is a real threat. The autonomy and vitality of social partnership risks is suffocated by the centralized bureaucracy of the state, with its tendency to reproduce hierarchies of power at local level. Effective social partnership envisages the state as ‘enabler’ rather than ‘enforcer’, assisting and empowering local initiative to combat social exclusion and promote inclusive democratic forms that harness the participative potential of community development.

Participatory democracy and activist civil society: against neoliberalism

In the approach to community development that we are labelling activist civil society (following Kaldor, 2003), civil society is conceived of as an activist realm that exists in tension with, but extraneous to, both formal politics and the market. It draws on an intellectual heritage that aligns it with civic republicanism and radical pluralism, particularly in its orientation to civil society as a public sphere where active citizenship is conceived of in political terms, rather than the nebulous ‘voluntary’ Putnamian construction, and where inclusivity is a key characteristic. This view places the assumed viability and vitality of liberal democracy under great scrutiny, and particularly the neoliberal agenda that liberal democracies have aligned themselves with in the west over the last 20 or so years.

This approach critiques the aspects of liberal democracy such as its inability to redeem its own promises of equality; its tendency to develop overweening state bureaucracy; its inability and/or unwillingness to redistribute wealth and eradicate poverty; its reluctance to extend full
citizenship to an array of marginalized groups as diverse as, for example, women, the disabled, asylum-seekers and ethnic minorities; its recent tendency to erode on a slow but inexorable basis established civil, social and political rights such as the right to association, the right to collective bargaining and the right to peaceful protest; while also being heavily critical of the primacy afforded to the market as the expression *par excellence* of social organization, and the attendant paring back of the welfare state. In addition to this critique of political society, this approach also condemns the encroachment of oligarchical capitalism into the lives of ordinary people to an extent hitherto unexperienced, where unelected bodies such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Group of Eight (G8) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) exert global influence beyond the capability of most states. It is common within this view that governments are routinely held to be at the behest of multi-national corporations (see Klein, 2007), and that representative politics therefore has limited legitimacy.

In contrast, civil society is seen as the potential redeemer of the failed promises of liberal democracy, as a rallying point against the perceived injustices of global capitalism, and is held to represent the self-activation of the citizenry in the face of the perceived encroachment of the unelected bodies named above into the lives of ordinary people. Civil society is held to be both site and actor in resisting these manifestations of oligarchical capitalism, being a force for democratization. For post-Marxists like Cohen and Arato (1992), Habermas (1996), Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and Melucci (1989, 1995, 1996), both politics and social relations have become decoupled from their traditional class moorings and are now more fragmented, predominantly along identitarian lines. As such, they see civil society in predominantly cultural terms – as the ‘lifeworld’, in a celebrated phrase – which in post-industrial societies comes under attack from the bureaucratizing logic of the ‘system’, i.e. the economy and state. For post-Marxists, the most important civil society actors are social movements. In these views, social movements are the dynamic component of civil society that has both a defensive quality (particularistic, identity based) and an offensive quality (universal, publicly oriented). Post-Marxists stress the continuance of the liberal democratic project, albeit they envisage an extensive reformation of it by civil society. It is the rejection of this position, and the retention of aspects of class theory, that distinguishes post-Marxists in the activist meaning of civil society from neo-Gramscians.

Neo-Gramscianism is, in its essential form, a reformulated Marxist perspective that while accepting the neo-Marxist diagnosis of the death of the Marxian political subject (the working class) refutes the attendant claim of the eclipse of capitalism as the organizing principle of late
modernity. In doing this, neo-Gramscians rely on a predominantly cultural conception of social class that stresses the continuous contingency of social relations, and people’s responses to them. In this view, most recently and most popularly articulated by Hardt and Negri (2000, 2005), class is conceived of as a relationship rather than an abstract entity, as a process rather than an objectively existing phenomenon, and as something built rather than something given. In this sense, neo-Gramscian perspectives draw on the legacy of cultural Marxism to be found, for example, in Thompson (1963), in which both the nature of the classed relationship and the conception of the classes are constantly negotiated and renegotiated in an unfolding dialectic.

Civil society remains a vital category for neo-Gramscians, although they do not ascribe to that category the level of certainty generally given over to it by post-Marxists. Rather, the contingency outlined above gives a contemporary view of class as one decoupled from our traditional understanding of the labouring classes to a decentred, networked and nodal conception based on the idea of multiple oppressions stemming from the same source, which gives rise to a locally distinct but globally linked struggle for emancipation. In this view, civil society’s goal is to increase democracy, eradicate poverty and attain peace. There are, of course, divisions within this approach, but they centre more on tactics in this globalized view of social struggle than they do on social analysis. For example, Hardt and Negri (2005) stress the importance of the development of a global civil society and attendant global democratic institutions as a means for achieving these goals, as do Falk (1993) and Kaldor (2003). In contrast, Ayres (2003), Laxar and Halperin (2003) and Hamilton (2003) all contend that the implicit assumption underpinning such a strategy – that state sovereignty and state structures are in terminal decline – is mistaken and Eurocentric. Writing from the perspective of the majority south, they contend the response to ‘Empire’ should be reasserted localized state sovereignty, and not transnational civil society. Indeed, they go further, suggesting that the very existence of a global civil society is overstated, arguing that purported expressions of global civil society (Zapatista solidarity, G8 and WTO protests, etc.) are in point of fact local campaigns against globalization.

Notwithstanding these distinctions, activist civil society is a site of politico-cultural conflict, and as such is inextricably bound up with a local, participatory, emancipatory, activist politics. Inherent in this notion is the emancipatory potential of ordinary people to take back control of their contexts. Far from being cowed in the face of the neoliberal project, ordinary people, through association in civil society, are attempting to take back control over their lives from social elites and the dominating logic of the purportedly ‘free’ marketplace and the neoliberal state. Over
the last two decades, as the global neoliberal project has reached what appears to be its apogee, citizens in civil society around the globe have organized locally, nationally and internationally, to resist. While the neoliberal project utilizes a logic of domination that acts through both the state and the market, the forms and circumstances that this logic creates and exists within differ from context to context. As neoliberalism becomes projected onto different societies with variant histories and social structures, resistance also takes different forms: institutionalized community resistance to neoliberal workfare programmes in New York, USA; expressive solidarity through community arts in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; resistance to state-sanctioned violence defending the World Bank-supported destruction of the Narmada Valley, India; trade unionism in Paris, France; the rise of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Chiapas, Mexico; and local community resistance to the presence of multinational corporation gas refineries in Rossport, Ireland, to name but a few.

Although obviously very different, these various forms of resistance across the globe are connected through their response to neoliberalism. However, it is not simply a defensive reaction against the incursion of the instrumental logic of the market and neoliberal state; it is also a positive expression of the will to self-determination and self-development in which the politically active citizenry has re-emerged as a self-organizing entity that is developing an autonomous political subjectivity in civil society, where the formal corporatist politics of the twentieth century is being by-passed on a local, national and increasingly international scale.

The multiple connections between these various groups in an activist civil society have posed ontological questions as to how civil society is to be conceived. Social movements, paradigmatically understood as collective contentious politics, are taking on new forms. This reality is beginning to generate new social theory that is breaking down the distinctions usually rendered between social movements, NGOs and voluntary organizations.

Writers like Hasenfeld and Gidron (2005), for example, have begun to introduce the idea that complex organizational forms are now developing, organizations that have characteristics of social movements, NGOs and voluntary organizations which meld together to realize ‘hybrid’ organizations. These hybrid organizations are the result of a complex array of influences: of the continuing attraction of political association in the public sphere to realize emancipatory goals, and hence ‘movements’; of the hollowing out of the welfare state, and hence devolved social service delivery; and of voluntarism as a favoured mode of expression for both altruistic and pragmatic reasons. At the heart of this intersection of protest, attempted social changes and care for fellow human beings through service provision are the desire to participate directly and broadly in the democratic process:
to democratize ‘thin’ representative liberal democracy and to promote participation through the agora as both instrumentally effective and intrinsically worthwhile in a project that may be construed as democratic renewal. For some, such as Touraine (2001), this denotes the emergence of a qualitatively new political actor: a ‘social left’ that, in the words of Beck (1997), is ‘reinventing politics’ (Beck, 1997). This social left is characterized by its proactive defence of the social, its focus on both equality and difference encapsulated in the slogan ‘all different, all equal’ and in its defence of cultural rights.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have explored the notion of community development as expression of the late modern agora. We have argued that its provenance can be found in the democratic forces unleashed in modernity, and in the modernist movement in particular. We have further argued that contemporary community development may be conceptualized as the late modern agora – as the site of political, or at least politicised, assembly of citizens and the citizenry. We identified three ways in which community development is, or normatively could be, oriented towards neoliberalism as the dominant expression of ‘development’ in the early twenty-first century: ‘of’, ‘with’ or ‘against’ neoliberalism. The logic of negative liberty in neoliberal conceptions of community development and social capital sees the reduction of mutualistic bonds to an absolute bare minimum, which, in turn, gives rise to minimalist conceptions of the state, civil society and the citizen, although the market is afforded the central role of co-ordinator of social action.

In this perspective, civil society is no more than the aggregate of atomized, privatized individuals – in effect equating civil society with the market, and the citizen with the consumer. While the citizen in civil society is the self-interested bearer of rights, active in the market, she remains politically passive but for electoral plebiscites, and is civilly bound to her neighbour through only a shared submission to the minimalist Lockean social contract. Tocquevillean notions of the ‘unfit multitude’ and Madisonian restrictions on political engagement through the binding force of representation rather than democracy take on full expression in this view, where popular participation through civil society in the political process is discouraged, and where citizens are deferential to elite formulations of political management. Contrary to its proclamations of supporting notions of an active citizenry, neoliberalism actually contributes to the passive status of the citizen vis-a-vis the public sphere and thus lends itself to normative use within a worldview that stresses the neoliberal project of globalization.
and the supposed supremacy of liberal democratic regimes. As a purported expression of an active citizenry, it is therefore weak, and detrimental to the task of democratizing democracy.

Active citizenship through social partnership has emerged as an influence in shaping many liberal democratic societies in recent years. Community development has become the central instrument of this strategy aimed at local regeneration and social inclusion. While proponents and opponents argue over the social control potential of such an approach to development, it is certain that a profound contradiction lies at the heart of social partnership – the pursuit of social inclusion in a market-led economy that is widening social inequality as an integral function of wealth creation. However, social partnership does offer scope for citizens to engage in a participatory, if heavily circumscribed manner, with both the polity and the state. While, therefore, offering some leverage for citizens to resocialize the state and to democratize democracy, it embodies the constant danger of the co-option of protest and the silencing of the critical voice of civil society. Community development organized through social partnership is often incorporated into projects of reinvented governance, which is often accompanied by the discursive reinvention of active citizenship as social service delivery, and where actors in civil society are apportioned these service roles as the welfare state is pared back. In such a scenario, political active citizenship is often reformulated as ‘developmental welfare’, where civil society is no longer a political actor, but a site and agent of service delivery. Until such time as the state realigns its project with civil society rather than with the market, social partnership approaches will inevitably encounter these limitations.

It is in resisting the fusion of civil society with either the market (as in neoliberalism) or the state (as in social partnership) that participatory forms of community development find their strength. While the values embodied in this form of community development are a marginalized pursuit in twentieth century consumerist culture, its emancipatory aims are timeless ones within modernity. Its significance lies not only in its emancipatory vision in these politically regressive times, but in its source – marginalized citizens and those that identify with them – and in its orientation to, and vision for, both the polity and the state: where active citizens are politically active in the public sphere, and where the state is re-socialized towards the welfare of its citizenship. The major challenge facing this approach is how it is to carry out the task of resocializing the state: civil society cannot, and should not, attempt to take over the role of the state in terms of its responsibilities to its citizenry – civil society has neither the administrative capacity nor the suffused infrastructure required for such tasks. What it does have is the capacity of the late modern agora that
can reintroduce the notion of the public good, the details of which may be debated via the practice of participatory ‘thick’ democracy: an essential task in an era where politics is an increasingly elite affair, remote from the needs and aspirations of the citizens of liberal democracies.

References


