

Core Concerns

Understanding the dynamics of 'race' and racisms in as complex a society as that in Britain requires an ability to tackle the fundamental building blocks of social interaction as well as the ways in which the institutions of the state operate. **Rob Berkeley** gives the background to and the foreground of Runnymede's June conference on 'Social Capital, Civil Renewal and Ethnic Diversity'.

'Race' and ethnicity are about what people do, creating and re-creating them over time and in different spaces (see 'Race is all around us' Bulletin 338). In deciding to focus Runnymede's 2004 research efforts on civil renewal and social capital the challenge posed is to apply an understanding of 'race' and ethnicity to policy trends that together aim to address the bases of social interaction and the institutional frameworks in which they operate: a tall order, but an important step.

For too long issues of 'race' and ethnicity have been seen as an also-ran, an agenda that belongs to the margins and the 'other'. In this agenda there is hope that we can move to a situation in which 'race' and ethnicity are viewed as fundamental to understanding society and to 'doing' politics.

The Oxford House experience

How the nature of 'race' and ethnicity is core to an understanding of society was highlighted in our June 24 conference. Oxford House in Bethnal Green was the ideal location to further our understanding of the ways in which 'race' and ethnicity must be bound into our conceptions of contemporary society. An exhibition, 'Make What You Will', by young artists and a dance performance by local children working with Ascendance provided the backdrop to our deliberations and a reminder of the vibrancy and vitality of the multi-ethnic communities of East London.

Recently refurbished as an arts and community centre, Oxford

House was founded as a university settlement. The move from outpost of Victorian philanthropy to a centre run by and for its local community is evidence of the change in the way we conceive our relations with each other. Oxford House is both a symbol of civil renewal and a recognition of efforts to build the capacity of the people of Bethnal Green to engage with each other in a community of communities.

The state and the socially conscious citizen

Civil renewal, understood as the redefinition of the relationship between the individual and the state in order to reinstate the role of political community, has been described as 'the centrepiece of the government's reform agenda.'¹ This redefinition is reliant on appreciating the identities of citizens and their understandings of community, and engaging with these identities to



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¹ David Blunkett (2003) *Civil Renewal: A New Agenda*. London: Home Office, p.1.

Delegates at the conference reception area at Oxford House, Bethnal Green



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Speaking at the Oxford House conference are (from the top): Michelynn Lafleche, Director of Runnymede, Bobby Duffy, Research Director of MORI, David Halpern, Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, Professor Ben Fine of the School of Oriental and African Studies, and Dan Corry, Director of the New Local Government Network

2 Francisco Herrerros (2004) *Why Trust? The Problem of Forming Social Capital*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.



reformulate the state. In order for the political community to be effective, it has to be able to respond to the community of citizens and communities that make up multi-ethnic Britain. Success in civil renewal is then dependent on the success of a multi-ethnic society at ease with itself.

Social capital is much discussed between social scientists and it was therefore only a matter of time until it caught the imagination of policymakers. It can often appear to be the holy grail of social policy since it promises to resolve some of the most important issues in social science, in particular 'better working democracies, in which citizens are more active and demand greater accountability from their elected representatives'.² This is despite the fact that even after 20 years of scholarship there is little consensus on how to define social capital, and the routes to its formation remain elusive. Interestingly, the World Bank among others uses measures of social capital to decide policy, despite its ill-defined nature.

For those on the left of politics, social capital poses some difficulties since as a concept, its roots are to be found in liberal/conservative notions of smaller government – the state seen as at best irrelevant for its creation. Responses to the agenda have convincingly questioned whether the concept of social capital is useful in societies where there is stratification, disadvantage and racism.

Civil renewal and social capital are suggested as the end and means, respectively, of a new policy agenda. Ethnic diversity is key to understanding both concepts. Any policy development that fails to take this into account runs the risk of failing and indeed exacerbating the discriminations and disadvantages already keenly experienced by marginalised ethnic groups.

Conference Presentations – from data to deeds

Session 1

– Focusing on Social Capital

Bobby Duffy opened proceedings by reflecting on what survey data has to show on some of the key themes which social capital attempts to address: engagement with public services, trust in each other, political participation and shared values. He reported that levels of trust are related to certain other social indicators, suggesting that the more trusting are likely to be from middle-class backgrounds. He noted that a characteristic of the least trusting groups was that they lived in an area of greater ethnic diversity. This suggests that levels of social capital are related to economic capital and that 'race' and ethnicity play a part in its formation. This poses a challenge to those formulating policy on the basis of social capital to explain how it copes with current disadvantage. For those engaged in promoting civil renewal, it would suggest that the levels of trust and subsequent engagement are related to social class and 'race', and that these variables must be taken into account in renewing democratic structures.

David Halpern, of the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, presented a paper to conference that considered why 'social capital' could be a useful policy tool in multi-ethnic Britain. Noting the rise in academic interest in the topic, Halpern introduced the delegates to the key parts of the social capital debate and the complexities of the different types of social capital (bonding, bridging and linking) and the different levels (individual, community and macro) at which they operate. As highlighted by Bobby Duffy's paper, the key measurement tool for social capital is the level of social trust, captured in the question 'Generally, do you think most people can be trusted?' In Britain, surveys suggest that there is a downward trend in the

proportion that answer positively. Scandinavian countries tend to have maintained higher levels of social trust.

In relation to ethnicity, Halpern noted that social capital could help to explain the 'ethnic penalties' suffered by certain groups, arguing that group membership can have its negative outcomes:

... we can say that upward social mobility is normally thought of as being a great advantage, it will boost your life satisfaction, and so on; but actually, especially for minority ethnic groups, upward social mobility can often be associated with marked decrements in your mental health, because you've left behind some of the supportive networks that you had before. And these are illustrated by what's sometimes called 'group density effect'.

He also pointed to recent research from the Home Office Citizenship Survey, which showed that there are differential levels of social trust among different ethnic groups:

... if you look at 'Do you trust your neighbours? Do you trust those around you?', you see quite marked differences around whether you think people are trustworthy. In the white population, that figure is about 41%; in the Asian population it drops to 27%; and in the African-Caribbean population it's 16%.

These differentials become even more important when considering the range of social policy areas in which social capital is said to have some effect: educational outcomes, physical and mental health, fear of crime, and economic success. For Halpern the key is to understand better the means by which to build bridging and linking social

capital, and he suggested some ways in which government policy is already beginning to address these issues – through active citizenship programmes such as Millennium Volunteers, housing mix, devolution, community service credit schemes. Significantly, he noted that bonding and bridging social capital do not seem to be in direct conflict, suggesting that strong ethnic communities are not in opposition to the development of strong communities of communities.

Ben Fine, a long-standing critic of social capital, argued that the social capital paradigm ought to be rejected since it obscured more than it illuminated. He argued persuasively that the basis on which most of the research into social capital was founded is flawed. The ubiquity of the agenda made him suspicious of its existence, explaining everything and consequently nothing:

... it is a universal concept with a gargantuan appetite, almost as big as – if not bigger than – globalisation. It ranges over all history, countries, peoples, activities, as I've said, from 12th-century Italy through to US bowling clubs to Tanzanian burial societies, to New York diamond traders, to whether we trust our neighbours and so on. The presence or absence of social capital is the theoretical, empirical and policy panacea for the poor, the sick, the criminal, the criminalised, and so on. So social capital, because of this universal nature, obliterates difference, treating as equivalent what are entirely different phenomena, circumstances and consequences. And I think this is very, very serious for looking at ethnicity and multi-ethnicity.

He went on to argue that whilst applying to almost everything,



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Speaking at the late morning and afternoon sessions of the Oxford House conference are (from the top): Professor Ralph Fevre, Deputy Director of the Cardiff School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Cllr Sanjay Dighe, Chair of the London BME Councillors' Network, Avila Kilmurray, Director of the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, Alison Gilchrist, Director of Practice Development at the Community Development Foundation, and Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality



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social capital could not be used to explain satisfactorily 'those questions of power, conflict and systemic sources of disadvantage and inequality which seem to me to be so germane to the problems of ethnicity'. Instead of illuminating the significant problems and challenges posed in late modern society, social capital, he argued, degrades the debate since 'it is entirely parasitical upon existing ideas, but re-clothes them with weaknesses'. Professor Fine was keen to express to delegates his reservations about the dangers of the agenda, concluding that:

It's very important to bear in mind how social capital is used – and this is my experience of policy and practice – to organise support for policies and policy contexts that have already been decided and as a way of sidelining dissent at lower levels to the implementation of those policies and against dissent moving to higher levels.

Session 2 – Civil Renewal and Governance

With this real challenge to the social capital agenda still reverberating, the discussion moved on to look at civil renewal and governance. Sanjay Dighe, Chair of London BME Councillors, provided a view from

his experience of working in an ethnically diverse borough, reflecting on the challenges but reaffirming optimism about the role of local government and the success of multi-ethnic communities.

Ralph Fevre reported on research carried out while the National Assembly of Wales developed its mechanisms for involving and engaging with minority groups. Quantitative and qualitative surveys enabled a comparison between the responses of different minority groups consulted by the Assembly: women, people with disabilities, LGB organisations, and BME community organisations. Fevre pointed to a rather unexpected result of the research – namely that a top-down approach to civil renewal through the creation of networks expressly for the purpose of consultation produced a more positive response than building on existing networks. His research posed another challenge to the social capital model, he concluded:

Some commentators, and some of those charged with modernising Government in the UK, will be surprised that social capital does not seem to be a key ingredient in innovations designed to widen

participation in policymaking. Social capital is normally thought to be the glue that holds society together, and building social capital is seen to be synonymous with civil renewal. Yet our research shows the groups with more social capital were much less enthusiastic about the organisations of civil society getting involved in policymaking.

It would appear that social capital does not always operate in such a way as to improve engagement with government and may in some ways be counter-productive to civil renewal.

'New Localism' has been the recent theme of the New Local Government Network's policy analysis. Dan Corry spoke about the challenges new localism must respond to in order to operate effectively in a multi-ethnic society. New localism is defined as

The devolution of as much power as possible to the local level within an agreed framework of minimum standards to deliver high quality services and engaged communities.

This localism can be seen as a re-imagining of the role of local government, or the development of new structures for specific bodies such as primary care trusts, neighbourhoods or police services. Corry argued that participation needs to be viewed more flexibly given that citizens' interests will change depending on their life-cycles. Any participatory model will need to be sensitive to ensure representation, avoid the dangers of 'political capture', and enable organisations to work together where appropriate. In achieving this goal, he noted that local government might have an important role to play:

... in a more pluralistic governance system, where we

Karen Wright, Centre for Civil Society, LSE, asks a question from the audience



have different public bodies, community and voluntary bodies, the local authority clearly has a legitimacy across the spatial area that none of the other bodies has. It is elected and, hopefully, increasingly, will be elected to give community leadership rather than just be the service-deliverer, to be the voice of the community to all the other services and groups.

Session 3

– Community Use of Social Capital

Alison Gilchrist (Community Development Foundation see p. 27) and Avila Kilmurray (Community Foundation Northern Ireland) shared a panel to discuss practical ways in which the civil renewal and social capital agenda can be used in communities. Gilchrist noted that community is often seen and felt to have been imposed from outside, leading to resistance, short-lived alliances, and a failure to take diversity into account. Community development offers a response to this model:

It's a way of working to create, nurture and shape the social conditions, the social environment whereby vibrant communities can emerge and then in turn foster the evolution of a myriad of self-organised groups, networks and organisations.

Avila Kilmurray shared her experience of working in often divided communities in Northern Ireland. The very real conflict in Northern Ireland had encouraged policymakers to use social capital as a way of understanding the barriers that build up within a community and had framed a great deal of work in building relationships across communities.

... the Community Foundation has found social capital a useful concept. The reality is, in headline terms, Northern Ireland has a lot of

'bonded' communities, but lags behind in any sense of 'bridging' social capital.

Both speakers noted that whilst social capital might be a useful policy tool:

Community Development and Social Capital must be considered in the broader policy and political context of the distribution of power and resources.

Session 4

– On Achievement

A paper from Trevor Phillips concluded the conference. His emphasis was to relate discussion on social capital and civil renewal to the other current debates on migration, integration, multiculturalism and equality. He was keen to express the need for our discussions to be focused on achieving goals rather than indulgent navel-gazing. He was clear that the emphasis in considering social capital is to have some impact on changing the way in which the state operates rather than changing communities themselves:

...when we're thinking about social capital, we shouldn't just be thinking about what individuals do and how people live next door to each other. We also have to think about the way institutions work, schools and governments, and so on.

A group of delegates then moved on to the Museum of Immigration and Diversity in Princelet Street to see how communities have impacted on our shared histories and consider how immigration has required institutions to be developed and neighbourhoods to adapt to ensure that all can thrive. Others left to watch England's multi-ethnic footballers play their final game in Euro 2004.

State capital

The conference had presented

contested views on the importance and utility of social capital and sketched a range of different routes to civil renewal. The debate was clear in concluding that race and ethnicity form a core part of the understanding of these concepts. Unless we can begin to grapple with these issues, we will be unable to achieve the kind of state in which a multi-ethnic society can thrive.

For Runnymede, the next phase must include continued discussion, coupled with a greater emphasis on practical interventions for change. In the coming months we will gather practitioners from across government, voluntary and community sectors to home in on how the civil renewal agenda can be a tool for improving race equality, and what role social capital might have to play in its delivery. □



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A set of proceedings of the Oxford House Conference on Social Capital, Civil Renewal and Ethnic Diversity will be published in November 2004. Full details of availability will be carried in the December Bulletin and on our website.

Civil Renewal for All

Delivering civil renewal in a multi-ethnic Britain

Runnymede Working Paper

September 2004

Civil Renewal has developed into a major focus of the government's community policy. All major political parties have expressed their concern at the disengagement of citizens from politics, the decline in 'neighbourliness', and the importance of making public services responsive to the needs of citizens. In this working paper, Runnymede considers the major challenges and opportunities for this agenda making a difference to racial equality in Britain.

Available on the Runnymede website [www.runnymedetrust.org], this paper aims to frame a debate on civil renewal in relation to ethnic diversity. By setting out some of the major questions, it is hoped that more people will be encouraged to engage in what we believe to be a crucial debate about the relationships between the state and citizens, at the same time recognising the significance of responding to the challenges and opportunities provided by a successful multi-ethnic society.

Your comments and contributions are welcome and will be used to inform our ongoing work in this area.