

History & Policy-Strategy Unit seminar on the Big Society
'Big Society' and 'Great Society': smaller, bigger, different, or much
the same?

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I posed the question of how far recent discussion of the 'Big Society' echoed earlier discussions in British, European and American history of the 'Great Society'; and whether the 'Big Society' was a replication of that earlier idea, or a scaled-down version of it, or something quite different. In order to explore this question I reviewed earlier usages of the term, or its synonyms, and ways in which those earlier uses seemed to resonate with current ideas, particularly in relation to provision for social welfare.

1. Traditionally, both economic activity, and public social-welfare arrangements designed to cater for human need in the event of economic shortfall, were largely local and communitarian in context. Against this view Adam Smith in the 1760s developed the notion of 'the great society of all mankind' or 'the *great chess board of human society*', wherein - by contrast with earlier models - economic activity was increasingly seen as something that was potentially national, international and even global in scope, and therefore potentially outside the range of traditional political boundaries. Smith himself had strongly criticised the confinement of publicly-financed poor law provision to a person's place of birth (as grossly distorting labour markets and hampering growth); but, despite many relaxations in practice, the primarily *local* basis of welfare provision continued throughout Europe and north America for much of the nineteenth century. Adam Smith's writings on moral philosophy also potentially subverted this local emphasis, in that they strongly endorsed the duty of non-economic 'altruism' in whatever context (whether 'neighbourly' or 'universal') where unmet needs were to be found. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that Smith believed most human material needs, including what modern parlance refers to as 'welfare' could most effectively be dealt with by the operation of markets.
2. Comparable with Adam Smith's 'Great Society', but subtly different in certain important respects is the model set out in the 1950s and 60s by F.A. Hayek. Like Smith Hayek saw the Great Society as potentially universal, but he laid much greater emphasis on its roots as lying, not just in rationally-calculating individuals¹, but in universal acceptance of an impersonal framework of *laws* - laws that wholly bypassed the need for altruism or personal morality in the lives of rational human actors (this is not to say that Hayek despised personal morality, but that it was simply irrelevant to the working of a Great Society regulated by law). On the other hand, Hayek appeared to allow a rather larger role for a 'welfare state' than anything envisaged by Adam Smith. Like Smith, Hayek certainly endorsed the notion of a basic 'subsistence minimum', but he also endorsed the further possibility of social services that would support a rising

¹ In fact Hayek's individuals were not particularly 'rational', it was the framework of laws that gave their actions rationality

'common standard' of civilised living. What he could *not* contemplate was the notion of a welfare state should openly or covertly aim at greater economic *equality*, as a goal quite independent of socio-economic need.

3. A third much more explicit (and more pessimistic) conception of a 'Great Society' emerged in the early-twentieth century, with the growth of an increasingly global international economy and the breakdown of community ties in many parts of the developing world. The most eloquent exponent of this new vision was the Fabian Socialist, Graham Wallas, who drew partly on the history of Britain but also on his own recent experience of large-scale social and industrial developments in the USA. In Wallas's view, mass international migration, mass production and consumption, and the rapid growth of large-scale organisations were everywhere outstripping the adaptive and creative capacities of individual human beings. This was leading to a 'Great Society' of passive and alienated citizens, managed by bureaucrats and specialists who were increasingly imposing 'standardisation' and 'routine' on both industrial production and social and private life – processes that were inexorably flattening out all forms of human 'difference', custom, and unorthodox creativity. Interestingly, one of the prime examples cited of this deadening 'routinisation' was the 1911 National Insurance Act (often heralded as the ground-plan for the future welfare state and for an end to mass poverty), but in Wallas's eyes creating such a 'mass of helpless irritation and suffering' among the working-class public that it would distort 'the whole course of English political development' for many years to come.
4. A further, and perhaps the most famous, model of a 'Great Society' emerged in the 1960s with President Lyndon Johnson's programme of that name, designed to put an end to social, legal and constitutional injustice in the United States. This was initially hailed by British and European commentators as a sign that the US was about to adopt a European-style welfare-state programme; but though it expanded Medicare and Medicaid for the very poor, the main thrust of Johnson's Great Society programme turned out to be legal and constitutional rather than social - in that it greatly extended the sphere of civil rights. The US programme also coincided with a yet further 'Great Society' movement in 1960s Britain. This was promoted by a group of Europhile academics and government advisors after General de Gaulle's veto on Britain's first application to join the Treaty of Rome; and was specifically aimed at the reform of British financial and economic institutions with a view to a more successful bid in the future. Headed by Thomas Balogh, Gerald Kaufman and Hugh Thomas, the group laid great stress on 'technological union' as the basis of a 'European Great Society' of the future. It launched a series of 'Great Society' publications, designed to promote a 'shake-up' of Britain's economic and governing institutions, which it believed would be greatly enhanced 'through the strong competition offered from the Continent, if Britain were to be in the Community'. The flavour of the group's publications suggests some degree of despair about Britain's industrial relations deadlock of the 1960s, and a belief that only through absorption into some much larger political and economic unit could such deeply-entrenched domestic difficulties ever be resolved.

5. In addition to the above, the 1960s produced several other models of 'Great Society' discourse – Social Catholic, New-Leftish, Ecological, etc – that can't be discussed in detail here. But the ones I have pinpointed above all demonstrate the difficulties of knowing precisely what was and is being talked about when economists, political theorists, policy advisors, and national leaders have invoked the term. In more recent discussion, the ideas of Philip Blond ('the 'Red Tory') have advanced a yet further prototype – in the form of a private enterprise society that rejects impersonal market forces and becomes radically redistributive, on the model of the John Lewis partnership. Blond has famously hailed David Cameron's 2009 'Big Society' speech – calling for a massive redistribution of power away from the state and back to its citizens – as echoing a much older tradition of such grass-roots, small-ownership-based, conservative democratisation. But just how far such a vision of 'Big Society' is compatible with Britain's role in global capitalism (particularly when some at least of the most powerful 'Great Society' theorists of the past have also been among the great stars of global capitalism for more than two centuries) is something that seems to need urgent clarification.