

Connected Communities

Active Citizenship, Public Engagement and the Humanities: The Victorian Model

Professor Eugenio Biagini and Dr Marcella Sutcliffe



Background

Executive Summary

This project, *Active Citizenship, Public Engagement and the Humanities: The Victorian Model*, sought to give historical perspective to contemporary debates surrounding the role of the humanities in civil society. The Study was undertaken by an experienced postdoctoral researcher, with the supervision of a professor in British and European history. The study involved scoping out the state of current research on historicizing the 'two cultures debate' and mining London repositories. The Study focused on a case-study, the Working Men's College.

The project highlighted how in the long 19th century the uneasy relationship between liberal and vocational education came to be inextricably interwoven with the emerging debate around the differing value of the humanities and the sciences.

Difficulties encountered in the early stages involved understanding the layered meanings of 'citizenship' in the Victorian era and negotiating the 'fuzziness' of the distinction between the humanities and the sciences in the context of a 'liberal education'. The relationship between mid-Victorian claims of cross-class 'fellowship' and late-Victorian uses of the term 'active citizenship' constituted one of the strands of investigation. The study highlighted how charges of 'uselessness' of the humanities were best placed in the larger context which questioned the use of a liberal education.

Researchers and Project Partners

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The project engaged with a number of educational institutions including:

Working Men's College

Toynbee Hall

Bishopsgate Institute

Key words

Citizenship
Education
Humanities
Victorian
Edwardian
Two cultures

Research context for the project

In the course of recent years (2008–2012) cultural value has come under critical scrutiny: the economic crisis and the need to impose austerity measures have prompted governments to question the role that the arts and humanities play in society, demanding 'measurable' results. Questions have engendered a sense of confidence crisis and an image problem of the humanities, prompting cultural policy academics to take the long view in order to historicize current debates. While the research field is beginning to take shape in the UK (Belfiore and Bennet, 2008) and in the US (Nussbaum, 2010), the future of the humanities in society is still object of discussion: in the US a think-tank in Santa-Barbara (California) – '4Humanities' – is working towards appropriating the language of 'discovery' of scientists in order to 're-frame' the humanities (Alan Liu, 'Creating a Humanities Advocacy Plan', <http://prezi.com/gpd6ygbijwvi/creating-a-humanities-advocacy-media-plan/>); UK researchers are pointing towards the need to 're-claim' the value of the humanities from the 'econocrats' (Eleonora Belfiore, 'Cultural Value', (<http://culturalvalueinitiative.org/>)). It is not only Cultural Policy Studies scholars who have engaged with the topic but also sociologists (Furedi, 2004) and English department academics (Collini, 2006). Amongst historians the question of the role played by the humanities in society has been framed in the context of the 'two cultures' debate (Porter, 2005; White, 2005; Ortolano, 2009), opening the enquiry into the way a 'liberal education' was valued in the course of the nineteenth century. Scholars of the history of science have felt compelled to enter the debate surrounding

the origins of the 'two cultures' (Lightman, 2010). As a result of these studies, historians have warned against polarizing the division between the 'humanities' and the 'science' in the context of Victorian culture, highlighting two important points: firstly they outlined the 'fuzziness' of categorical divisions between the 'two cultures' (Porter, 2005) and, secondly, they warned against placing the origins of the 'two cultures' debate' in the Huxley-Arnold 1880s differences (Lightman, 2010).

This project sought to use the potential of the Scoping and Review exercise to frame the state of current research through an annotated bibliography and to investigate how nineteenth-century discourses on 'cross-class fellowship' by Christian Socialists and 'active citizenship' by Oxford idealists related to the debate on the reform of the university, the role of university men in society and the establishment of university settlements by social reformers. A research review of the literature surrounding the emergence of 'active citizenship' amongst liberal academics explored how a 'liberal education' for workers was negotiated and appraised in the long nineteenth century. Spanning between 1854 and 1914 – from the Christian Socialist experiment of the Working Men's College to the establishment of secular university settlements in East London – the review aimed to shed some light on what Victorians and Edwardians involved in the adult education movement understood by 'citizens' and by 'liberal education' – focusing on the different roles that the humanities and the sciences played within these debates.

Project questions

The Review's core themes and questions derived from the following key strands in the original project proposal:

- How did 'active citizenship' distinguish itself from philanthropy?
- What were the connections and networks which were established?
- What were the main challenges?
- How did the discourse on 'active citizenship' and the civic engagement of 'men of letters' evolve between the mid-nineteenth century and the outbreak of the First World War?

Most of the research devoted to addressing these questions was desk-based, including substantial mining of archival material.

Consultations were also held with representatives of educational institutions in North London and East London.

State of the Field

In the initial phase of the AHRC Connected Communities Scoping Study *Active Citizenship, Public Engagement and the Humanities: the Victorian Model* (hereafter the 'Study') we conducted a survey of the research field in order to investigate if other projects currently being researched could complement our research. Besides considering the work being carried out within the AHRC 'Connected Communities' programme, award-holders of other funding bodies were sought and approached. It transpired that Toynbee Hall had recently been awarded a Grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (until Feb 2014) to run an outreach and learning project, *Revealing Social Reform*, based on the Toynbee Hall archive. This award, parallel to our own Study, reinforced

our conviction that the theme of our Study was particularly timely and could be embedded as part of a wider network of activities.

There were nevertheless some clear differences in methodology and approach between the AHRC project and the above-mentioned Heritage Lottery Fund. The focus of the AHRC Study on Victorian 'active citizenship' differed from the investigation into charity, philanthropy and social reform under way at Toynbee Hall, and indeed it was on exploring these differences – both in theory and in practice – that our research focused. It was specifically on the educational aspects of social reformers that our Study centred. Moreover our project aimed to operate a survey of the practices of 'cross-class fellowship and 'active citizenship' across a number of educational institutions in London. Most of them, but not all, were based in East London. Meetings with stakeholders and archivists at Toynbee Hall (Sinead Wheeler) the Working Men's College (Satnam Gill, Gillian Welch) and the Bishopsgate Institute (Stefan Dickers, Michelle Johansen) confirmed that the most apt venue for the launch of an exhibition on Victorian 'Active Citizenship' would be an educational institute based in the East End. The Bishopsgate Institute was therefore chosen as the most suitable place for our Exhibition launch.

Towards project answers

The main method of the project was desk-based research, undertaken by the named postdoctoral researcher. The period of the investigation chosen allowed for differentiating two main types of educational institutions: the non-residential ones and the university settlements. The former were exemplified by the case-study of the Working

Men's College (1854), where the language of 'fellowship', Christian 'brotherhood' and 'humanity' was first employed with the aim of providing workers with a 'liberal', rather than 'useful', or vocational education, as had been previously the case in the mechanics' institutes. University settlements differed from the Working Men's College in that they were based on the new idea of 'active citizenship' which was developed in Oxford by idealist reformer, T.H. Green, in the 1880s.

Having operated a survey of the Victorian educational institutions, the Working Men's College emerged as a particularly relevant case-study for our research, due to the fact that its life spanned the entire length of the period (and more) which we were proposing to investigate (1854-1914). The Working Men's College also appeared to be in need of historical reappraisal. The case of the Working Men's College differed from many of the later university settlements for its location: unlike most of the educational experiments, it was not located in East London. Focusing on the continuity of practices operated by both mid-Victorian, late-Victorian, and Edwardian educators at the Working Men's College it was possible to identify how shifts in the College educational policy were a measure of how society valued the role that a liberal education for workers could play in 1) creating 'citizens' 2) crossing class divide. By analysing the adult education practices in parallel with the unfolding Oxford University reform the study was able to focus on the evolving value which was placed on providing workers with a liberal education – and whether this should involve both the sciences and the humanities. The debates on the type of science that workers should access (liberal or practical/vocational) emerged as a contentious ground around the turn of the century. The results of the study

suggests that, with the turn of the century, as science as a topic of study for workers came to be increasingly equated to its exclusive vocational aim, the humanities became at the Working Men's College and other adult education institutions (e.g. the Workers' Educational Association) the only vehicle for workers to access a liberal education. The study points towards focusing more on the role that pre-war Edwardian educators played towards sowing the seeds of the 'two-cultures' debate.

Outputs and dissemination

The AHRC Scoping Study played an important role in 'connecting communities' at a number of levels.

1. The Scholarly Community

The AHRC project facilitated the establishment of an interdisciplinary Forum which will outlive the life of the Connected Communities Scoping Study. This is the CRASSH Graduate Faculty Group which Dr Sutcliffe established and convenes with Dr Mike Higton, Divinity Cambridge (www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/page/1115/active-citizenship.htm). The Group was born out of the desire of pooling together the research interests of two different, but complementing projects, the AHRC Scoping Study and the project 'The Idea of a University', which is part of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme.

Mike Higton is Academic Co-Director of the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme www.ideaofauniversity.com/news/2012/oct/2/crassh-seminar-series/ The CRASSH Group, *Active Citizenship, Public Engagement and the Humanities* involves a series of the seminars which will constitute a platform for further discussion of the issues raised by the AHRC Study, involving academics and policy makers.

The discussion of some of the research findings of the AHRC Study at a **CRASSH Seminar (22 October)** constituted a valuable opportunity for debating and questioning issues, emerged during the progress of the work, within the scholarly community.

www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/2126/

Further dissemination of the findings amongst the academic community will be published. An article focused on the case-study of the Working Men's College has been submitted to the *History of Education Journal* for peer-reviewing.

2. The Wider Community

A combination of talks and a travelling exhibition ensured the visibility and accessibility of the research findings beyond academia. The high level of interest for the research project indicated that the findings of our research needed to be presented in more than one venue and in two different locations, London and Cambridge. The choice of the locations was linked to the historical connections that existed between 'university men' from 'the old universities' and London in the period under consideration. The following talks were delivered:

- **Talk, Bishopsgate Institute on 11th October at 7pm Exhibition, Bishopsgate Institute from 11th – 20th October**
www.bishopsgate.org.uk/events_detail.aspx?ID=239&Keyword=active+citizenship&TypeID=Talks
- **Talk, Working Men's College, Camden, Talk, on 23rd October at 7pm**
- **Exhibition, Working Men's College from 5th – 23rd November**
- **Talk, Michaelhouse Café, Cambridge, Festival of Ideas, at 7pm**

- **Exhibition, from 24th – 27th October, Michaelhouse Café, Cambridge, Festival of Ideas**

www.cam.ac.uk/festivalofideas/festival-programme-2012/

Following a Talk by Prof. Eugenio Biagini and Dr Marcella Sutcliffe in East London (Bishopsgate Institute, Exhibition Launch on 11 October 2012), further talks were delivered and the exhibition travelled within a month between four different venues. As part of the Cambridge Festival of Ideas, organised by the Public Engagement Department of the University of Cambridge, the Exhibition (15 panels) was shown at the Michaelhouse Café, where numerous visited (61 people booked in through Eventbrite).

The Study's commitment to outreach and public engagement was particularly manifest in the success of one of the events which took place at the Working Men's College the AHRC Study. The talk helped rekindle links between this Victorian educational institution and one of the 'old universities', Cambridge University. Delivered by Prof. Eugenio Biagini and Dr Marcella Sutcliffe the talk coincided with the Inaugural Lecture of the WMC New Lecture Series. This collaborative event was indicative of how partnerships between community and university partners, when rooted in historical (if forgotten) associations, may be particularly successful. The project also facilitated connections across FE institutes which do not usually work together: therefore the launch of the Inaugural lecture at the WMC was also supported by the Bishopsgate Institute.

Talks were well attended in all venues: the Bishopsgate Institute (45 people) and the WMC (85 people) were at full capacity – indeed the WMC had to relocate from the Library to the Maurice Hall, which could accommodate

double the number of people. The CRASSH seminar in Cambridge saw 15 postdocs, PHDs and academics attend. The Festival of Ideas counted 61 bookings for the event through EventBrite.

The project utilised social media as a means of accessing a wider audience and including in discussions both academic and non-academic communities. The website of the project, www.hist.cam.ac.uk/research/research-projects/modern-british/active-citizenship, was embedded within the History Department of the University of Cambridge. The project drew on the potential of the digital humanities and social media to re-establish a network of connections between HE, FE, co-operatives and local communities by creating a virtual community where ideas relating to 'active citizenship', public engagement and the role of the humanities in civil society were exchanged beyond the strictly academic circles. Blogs were uploaded on a number of different sites, as well as the project's own website. Twitter was embedded in the Faculty website. At the end of the project, the Twitter Account (@VictActCitship) counted 67 followers.

A selection of the exhibition panels was uploaded on the website via Flickr.

Recommendations for Future Research

After the initial scoping phase, the researchers decided to concentrate on a particular case-study which would serve as example of the discourses which bound concepts of citizenship and a liberal education as a way towards improving society. The research showed that the field of the origins of 'public engagement' in Victorian Britain is vast and has strands which go beyond the practice of philanthropy.

Understanding the way the Victorians' grasp of the meaning of 'citizenship' underwent ongoing shifts, as reforms gradually broadened the electorate, is fundamental in order to frame the role which Victorians, and then Edwardians, ascribed to a 'liberal education' of workers during different periods between 1854 and World War I.

Core areas we would support for future research in this area include

- A deeper understanding of the differences/similarities between philanthropy and 'active citizenship';
- Increased attention to how the relationship between vocational and liberal education impacted on the value of science in workers' education, particularly in pre-war Edwardian Britain;
- Mining of the language of the 'two cultures' in the Edwardian period
- An extension of the research into the cultural value of the humanities in the context of the emerging professional society at national and international level.

References and external links

Full references and the complete annotated bibliography from the project are available at:

www.hist.cam.ac.uk/research/research-projects/modern-british/active-citizenship/articles

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www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk