Connected Communities

Historicising Contemporary Civic Connection

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Executive Summary

This project, Historicising Contemporary Civic Connection (HCCC), sought to capitalise on historical frameworks for understanding contemporary issues around community and civic engagement. Undertaken by three Victorianist/neo-Victorianist researchers, the main study involved desk-based research scoping out the various disciplinary perspectives on notions of the “civic” in relation to the nineteenth century, and their relevance to contemporary discourses. In order to make the scoping study both focused and manageable the framework employed use two case studies, Liverpool and Glasgow.

The project highlighted the continued reinvention of a terminology of civic connection across historical frameworks and periods. Difficulties encountered in the early stages of the research involved the complexities of meaning associated with ‘civic’ and ‘community’ across Victorian studies and its constituent disciplines. Thus, increasingly use of such terms in urban geography and studies of physical spaces of encounter and exchange are often matched by a downplaying of ‘civic’ in concepts of literary study or historical narrative. In these instances, flexible approaches to the language utilised in the course of the study was required, including a permeating sense of how civic values are not only absent as explicit referents in works written from an arts and humanities perspective but where present run counter to social science or other disciplinary definitions.

Researchers and Project Partners

Professor Mark Llewellyn (PI); Dr Marcella Sutcliffe and Dr Alex Tankard (Postdoctoral Research Assistants). The project, through the Contemporary Civic survey, engaged with a number of groups and institutions including Culture Campus Liverpool, University
of Liverpool, University of Strathclyde, Scottish Civic Trust, Glasgow Life, National Museums Liverpool. We are grateful to the individuals who contributed via the project survey.

**Key words**

Civic; engagement; (neo-)Victorian; cultural institutions; public policy; participation; Liverpool; Glasgow.
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Research context for the project

The civic and cultural organisations of the Enlightenment and Victorian periods have reached a point in their history where their relationship with the local, regional, national and international communities they serve is under reassessment (see Black, 2000). As civic and often corporate bodies within a global cultural sphere/marketplace, and with (international and national) stakeholders from the individual public users through to the state, many cultural organisations are attempting to relocate their strategic aims within a set of changing circumstances. The development of a heightened professionalism not only in the administration of institutions but also in research, consumer-based models of engagement, and access to funding resources means that the contemporary cultural campus (which we take to include civic museums, galleries and other public environments such as literary and philosophical societies as much as educational institutions like universities: see Anderson, 2006 and Bennett 1995) is frequently a centre of competing demands as institutions seek to meet the dual needs of 21st century stakeholders and the responsibilities and duties of the civic charters on which they were founded (see Bennett, 1995). The original establishment of these organisations in the 19th century was frequently located in a sense of civic responsibility/pride and community needs and requirements. Supported by national events, public subscription, civic funding and philanthropy by private individuals and groups at their foundation, these organisations now find themselves dealing with the impact of an economic recession which goes beyond fiscal tightening and threatens the significant work they have undertaken to engage with, serve and be an intrinsic part of their various communities. Throughout their history they have often been the focus of cultural and civic connection for a cross-sector of groups within regional and local society (see Finnegan, 2009), and this remains a central commitment (see Daunton, 2005). In the context of England and Wales these infrastructural and institutional bodies are part of a Victorian legacy to be renegotiated in the present; in the case of Scotland, these same values and principles have a longer tradition in Enlightenment ideas from the 18th century (see Finnegan). This project sought to use the potential of the Scoping and Review exercise to look at the diversity of historical narratives that can be discerned in contemporary discourses and the ways in which historicisation of terms and themes such as community, connection, civic, cultural, knowledge economy, and technological development might provide not only a sense of continuity but also inspirations and the roots for change and revitalisation in current social, economic and cultural policy-making.

Project questions

The project provided an historical dimension to contemporary understandings of civic engagement and community connection. The Review's core themes and questions derived from the following key strands in the original proposal:

- How might we historicise contemporary issues around community connection and engagement within the Enlightenment/post-Enlightenment and Victorian traditions of civic institutions and the public sphere?
- In what ways might this historicisation inform and impact upon contemporary public policy about sustainable communities?
How have and how might civic cultures need to be adapted or changed in the light of contemporary challenges to their role? And how might such changes be interpreted and modified across different social and cultural networks and users? Can such adaptations be made (more) consistent with a return to the founding principles and original idea(s) behind the civic institutions? How might the philanthropic and community-based roots of civic culture feed into, connect with, differ from and exist alongside and/or within new conceptions of sustainable cultural and economic communities of wellbeing? What discourses and disciplinary narratives provide the foundations for a reassessment of the place of the civic in a post-centralised political, cultural and economic system? How can these models be located within and drive forward a ‘globalised civic’ culture?

The last of these questions has proved a particularly fruitful perspective for the PI’s ongoing research around global neo-Victorian civic cultures (see section on dissemination below). The internationalisation of such discourses is likely to demonstrate an increased need for arts and humanities debates and discussions over and beyond social science led responses to questions of diversity, mobility and people flow within an ever widening sense of cultural engagement and cross-cultural community fertilisation (see Adam 2009). Other issues which arose via the project scoping stage and in follow up evidence underlined the question of gender in relation to civic engagement and notions of the public sphere (see Calhoun, 1994). All of the questions in some way relate to ongoing debates around the themes of modernity (Prior, 2002), liberalism (Goodlad, 2003), the nature of public culture (Gunn, 2007) and issues of ideal or ‘perfectionalist’ societies (see Malachuk, 2005; Seligman, 1992).

Towards project answers

The main methods of the project were desk-based research undertaken by the two postdoctoral researchers and an online survey for community groups and other participants based in the two case study locations, Liverpool and Glasgow. This allowed access to the thoughts and views of a diverse range of individuals with experience negotiating contemporary and historical contexts for understanding how the civic functions within two discrete contextualisations. In some respects, the precision of the similarities and differences between Liverpool and Glasgow as both historised and living locales for civic encounter proved both an asset and a problem. The divergence not only in terms of historical context but also in contemporary cultures proved a rich source of contrast in relation to how a language and literature of the civic as well as the use of civic organisations as social frameworks for twenty-first century city-spaces could be utilised.

One of the primary methods employed in reading the research generated through the scoping exercise was via a civic engagement survey tool. The results of the survey are still undergoing review but indicative outcomes suggest that the civic and means of civic identification through cultural frameworks and organisations remains one of the most visible means by which people associated ‘civic values’ with community experience. Using the two case study locations we wanted to engage with and in some senses ‘test’ the theoretical and conceptual models of historicised civic connection within the context of contemporary public user and community involvement. This added richness and context to the scoping exercise and its historical trajectory from the 18th century through to the present. Inevitably, the end result annotated bibliography (which runs to some
31,000 words) is selective but the diversity of the keywords that needed to be employed around charity, philanthropy, civic and legal on the one hand through to recreation, clubs, gardens and museums on the other, underlined the dual perspective needed to accommodate the abstract ideals of civic belief alongside the physical, intellectual and emotional living of a civic life (see Dennis and Daniels, 1981; Goodlad, 2003; Gunn, 2007). What the scoping study and follow up engagements demonstrated is the multiplicity of narratives that are created and can be generated around terms like ‘civic’. Just as community/communities are in a continual state of evolution and responsiveness to external factors and environments as reshapers of existing conceptualisations, so the civic has always been a flexible term. Civic accommodates the modes of living, engagement, political and social action required at specific moments but in this respect frequently finds itself the state of nostalgia, longing and mourning. The civic is often formulated in the past tense as the civic that once was rather than the civic that is now. This is as true of the Victorian conceptual frameworks around the civic as the contemporary models, and the institutionalisation of the civic in the eighteenth and nineteenth century could in some ways be seen as an attempt to ‘fix’ its meaning. The contemporary civic exists in a spatial/physical (public buildings, structured cityscapes) and imagined (nostalgia, longing) dynamic with the spectral civic of the past. This prevents some forms of self-identification with civic values when they are seen as traditional or lost, but it also reinforces an historic connection with the desire for civic cultures, forms of interaction and communitarian beliefs.

The involvement of cultural organisations in both Liverpool and Glasgow and the use of international mailing lists such as the British Association for Victorian Studies (BAVS) membership list provided different accounts of civic participation that both supported the theories and concepts propounded in the academic research and caused the project team to question the adequacy of those research-based assessments. Frequently the civic is viewed as something ‘there’ but hard to define within survey responses: individuals can respond to what they think the civic is and is not but very often these contemporary conceptualisations are based in deep-rooted historical literary, cultural and artistic representations. For example, the survey assessed keyword responses to images of two prominent cultural buildings in Glasgow and Liverpool. The same buildings were represented but in two visualisations: the first a painting from the mid-/late-19th century, the second a photograph of the same building broadly two decades later. The keywords indicated much more reverence and respect for the earlier images and the ‘values’ associated with it than for the more living photograph. The latter was perceived as more contemporary and therefore less embedded within historical notions of civic virtue. This suggests in intriguing ways the fact that the civic is in and of itself viewed as traditional and past even at a time when contemporary political contexts imply the invocation of a return to those values as part of a vibrant cultural present.

Outputs and dissemination

The project utilised online resource as a means of accessing non-academic communities and including such participation within the research. This included the use of a blog page about the project and an online survey tool to harness community groups’ perspectives on both contemporary and historical uses and interpretations of the term “civic” in an arts and humanities context. A great deal of interest was generated by the survey and its dissemination across a wide range of groups including academics and members of local/regional civic organisations in Liverpool and Glasgow.
The PI presented elements of the research in progress at an AHRC/National Endowment for the Humanities event in Washington (March 2011); led two Connected Communities summit seminars on international (co-led with Graham Crow, Southampton) and civic themes (June 2011); and delivered a paper partly based on the project themes at an EU funded conference in Malaga (October 2011). On the basis of the web presence of the project, the PI has been invited to deliver a keynote lecture on the international neo-Victorian civic at the University of Amsterdam in summer 2012. Both the Malaga and Amsterdam papers are currently being worked up to a short monograph which will be published in 2013 entitled *Austerity Aesthetics: On the Cultures of Credit and Crunch*. The annotated project bibliography will be published online at the end of 2011 (see reference below).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The project team deliberately restricted aspects of the scoping of existing research contexts to fields within the arts and humanities. This indicated the need for research addressing the broad themed questions outlined above from perspectives including literature, philosophy and visual arts. Historical approaches are frequently drawing on multiple disciplinary perspectives but the dangers of segmentation and single-vision approaches means that the project team recommends larger team working across disciplinary boundaries to enrich notions of “civic”, “engagement” and “participation” beyond the quantifiable models of cultural policy research and into narrative – in its broadest sense – framings of the language around civic connection and its exploration. We are aware of the recently launched call by the AHRC/ESRC under the Connected Communities umbrella for research on community mobilisation and frameworks around civic community settings. However, it is important to underline the contribution that arts and humanities-led approaches can bring to such questions and themes both in partnership with researchers in the social sciences and in separate discourse-enriching contexts.

Core areas we would support as essential for future research in this area include:
- a deeper understanding of the use and shaping capability of cultural organisations (including museums, galleries, charities, universities and associated clubs and societies) to determine the nature of civic culture;
- increased attention to the role of gender in notions of civic engagement from both historical and contemporary perspectives;
- a mining of the language and context of philanthropy as a cultural civic ‘from above’ versus a more self-sustaining and grass roots civic narrative;
- a wider national and international context for the uses and abuses of the term civic when applied well beyond its standard definitional framework.
References and external links

Full references and the complete annotated bibliography from the project are available here: www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/courses/english/staff/llewellynmarkprof


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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

“to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.”

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC’s Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx