

What Has to be Civilised?

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Introduction

Any attempt to go beyond saying what is wrong in current circumstances to speculating how things might be different is always to be welcomed. Crisis Britain, after all, has become a front for the turn towards an increasingly Nasty Britain. In this context, Colin Hay and Tony Payne's desire to seize the political agenda in advance of civic capitalism is particularly noteworthy. It is admirable in its own terms, because it sets out an alternative vision of how we might allow ourselves to live that stands directly at odds with the political and cultural trends of the last forty years. But it is doubly admirable in taking a direct shot at those who would preach collective sacrifice as crisis response whilst carefully singling out the unorganised and voiceless to carry a disproportionate burden of contemporary economic restructuring.

The broad political objectives that lie in the background of the Hay and Payne paper have my full support. However, it is the responsibility of fellow travellers to question one another's strategy of problem specification in the interests of introducing greater analytical clarity into the debate. It is in this spirit that my comments are presented.

My main concern is with what happens to Hay and Payne's carefully thought through reform agenda if the object of that reform is not as they specify it. The reader learns much about what it would take to promote a distinctly civic variant of capitalism, and the resulting vision is certainly one in which an increasingly civilised tone will be struck in the relationship between one person and another as well as between people and nature. An instinct to care is being promoted, one where voluntary acquiescence to the new norm would be the first-best option but where behavioural change through legal statute is a more than acceptable second best. However, the capitalism that is to be rendered increasingly civic does look to me as though it is one where simply halting the advance of market ideology can be relied upon to civilise everyday economic relations. But I do worry that the economic structures of contemporary British capitalism do not look like those of the classical market stereotype and

that this might make access to the civic mission very difficult indeed. Let me now try to explain the basis of my concerns, whilst at the same time – as all fellow travellers should be prepared to do – making suggestions for the way forward.

At-a-Distance Accumulation and the Civic Mission

It took me a little by surprise that there were only two clearly apparent time-specific qualifiers to an undifferentiated notion of capitalism in the Hay and Payne paper. One refers to the predominantly neoliberal strategy of political governance in evidence since the 1970s and the other to the pathologies of what they call the ‘Anglo-liberal growth model’. However, the former tends to capture only the political priorities of the regulatory form within which the economic essence evolves, and not the resulting outcomes. The latter, in turn, emphasises the limits of successfully incorporating a winning political coalition into an increasingly financialised economy. Both are clearly worthy of greater public attention, but neither really gets to the heart of how the structures of the British economy have changed in recent decades.

The type of qualifier that to me seems to be most in need of addition would speak directly to the balance of ownership within the economy. The demise of what might be called High Street Capitalism is reflected in the related rise of two new consumption spaces. One emerges from the replacement of independently owned stores with national or even international chains that look and feel exactly the same wherever they are experienced. The accent of the shop assistant might change, but what they sell on behalf of faraway shareholders and how they are allowed to sell it remain resolutely the same. The other new consumption space is – it hardly needs saying – the internet, and it has taken retail homogeneity to whole new levels. Even the local accent disappears, as all that matters is the voice in your own head telling you whether this is indeed the bargain being proclaimed.

What unites these seemingly disparate trends is that they place the mundane activities of everyday economic life increasingly at a distance from those who own the means of production. It is clear from the Hay and Payne paper that their civic mission takes the level of mundane economic activities extremely seriously. There is a tension here, though, in that so many of the practices of everyday economic life have been devolved to the individual, cocooning them seemingly in a world of their own, but that this has brought them no closer to where power is exercised at the level of economic structure. They might well be choosing between alternatives on an informed basis, much in the mould of the classical market-bound agent acting in a context of many buyers and many sellers, but the limits of their choices are apparent.

There are some product lines that do allow people to express themselves as ethical and environmentally-conscious consumers, and in these purchases it is possible to see the outline of civic capitalism come into view. But such products represent the exception of niche consumption, rather than being the rule. In the general case choice tends to be restricted to selecting between different price cues in the context of relatively homogeneous products

mass produced by companies that refuse to act as though they are part of the local community. It is only the exceptional type of consumption that provides the individual with a sense that they are interacting economically with other people and that their decisions therefore have distinctly human consequences. The general type of consumption, by contrast, seems to be governed by abstract conceptions of price and draws the individual into the clutches of a corporate world in which their lived economic experiences become increasingly detached from the feeling that those experiences involve other people. In other words, it is only the exceptional type of consumption that is typically performed in a behavioural space in which civic norms are unambiguously present. Following the demise of High Street Capitalism the general type of consumption is typically performed in an altogether different behavioural space, where even the possibility of civic capitalism might be too remote for comfort.

The changing structure of ownership therefore clearly matters to the possibilities for civic capitalism. This is not to collapse the debate into a politically sterile nostalgia for pristine, small-scale, localised circuits of production and consumption which perhaps never existed anyway in that form. The accumulation imperative has been ever-present in all economic forms that prioritise private over collective ownership. The objective has always been to make money, which is as true of a future civic capitalism as it is of today's corporate bypassing of the classical market stereotype. The only questions are: (i) how that money is made in the interests of meeting the accumulation imperative; and (ii) whether this is detrimental to forging a concrete civic rationality out of the increasingly abstract economic rationalities that shape the contours of mundane economic experiences in Britain today. This, to my mind in any case, is why more emphasis in the debate needs to be placed on the structure of ownership. The production of price-sensitive but socially-abstracted consumers has played a large part of the legitimation of the corporate bypassing of the classical market stereotype: so much so that the two now seem to be co-constitutive of one another. What scope is there for moving on from this situation, which seems so ill-suited to the embedding of civic norms?

Market Escapees as Obstacles to Civic-Oriented Regulation

There are numerous very important observations in the Hay and Payne paper about the need not to simply take markets for granted. All of these points are well made, and once again the only difference I have with them on this issue is a matter of emphasis. How might we begin to think about the limits of markets, and what might be done to create a potentially popular reform programme through specifying clearly where those limits are presumed to lie? Hay and Payne tend to reduce these questions to the need for a more assertively interventionist structure of governance, one which revolves around demonstrating that the state can be held to account for enhancing well-being much more effectively under civic capitalism than under whatever we can call the system we have today. I worry, though, that the degree of change they envision requires something much more profound than that. Arming the state with new capabilities and asking citizens to judge it on its performance must be bolstered very much by

getting people to reflect really quite systematically on what it means to be a citizen within a modern economic setting. Yet here we come across a potential paradox that it will be necessary to unravel if civic capitalism is to take root.

Some extremely significant academic work has been undertaken recently on the generalised acceptance that a collectively-experienced fiscal consolidation is necessary if the economy is to be given the breathing space to rise again from the ashes of the financial crisis (Konings 2012; Stanley 2014). Opinion poll data confirm that this is a developing trend, with more and more people reporting that they believe austerity is a necessary evil in the national interest of repairing broken markets (YouGov 2010). This would appear to be evidence of something approaching mass ideological buy-in to the idea that ‘the market’ is now the public good that trumps all others in providing rights of economic citizenship. Might it even be possible to go as far as to posit the presence of a ‘market citizenry’ for whom state interventions in the name of civic capitalism might represent incursions into what they expect to receive as citizens? Whatever the answer to this question, the broader point surely remains valid. Irrespective of the effect that the ensuing situation has had on their personal life chances, there is a widely-held feeling – cautious in its articulation but producing real effects nonetheless – that ‘the market’ somehow represents the furthest reaches of human economic aspiration. The cultural politics of Thatcherism thus remain deeply institutionalised at the individual level, and they pose an obvious problem for any mode of citizenship built consciously upon limiting the scope of markets.

The paradox here is that it is something very different to ‘the market’ that the vast majority of people experience in Britain today when going about their everyday economic affairs. The language of the market remains paramount, as increasingly does the image of economic citizenship it is used to promote. But still this is all very different to saying that people *experience* market institutions in their daily life to the same extent that their lives are *thought about* using market frames of reference. Despite the prevalence of market ideology since the 1970s, the economic structure that has evolved in its wake might more usefully be conceptualised in terms of its distinctly non-market institutions. The architects of civic capitalism will be confronted with a context in which power is exercised to escape genuinely market-based relationships. It is only those who lack such power that have to deal with the day-to-day realities of market imperatives. The powerful receive a distinctly anti-civic helping hand to circumvent market imperatives, and it is these actors and not the market per se that need to be subject to new forms of regulation in the first instance.

This is by no means a call for more regulation *by* the market, but it does show that regulation *of* the market is not necessarily a self-evident panacea. The key in this regard seems to be the degree of incorporation into the market prior to the new regulation. If it is something less than all-encompassing, then state interventions simply to limit the size, scope and reach of markets might not have the desired effect. Indeed, they could even miss their target altogether. Civic capitalism might very well work best when governing face-to-face economic relations in which it is immediately obvious how the civic mission can be expected to benefit all involved. But it is precisely this sort of face-to-face relationship that is ruled out when economic power is exercised at a distance by market escapees. Market escapees might

end up being more of an impediment to the successful introduction of civic capitalism than the market institutions against which the possibilities of civic capitalism are currently being thought through.

Conclusion

I am a relatively easy convert to the abstract idea of civic capitalism, especially in circumstances in which the choice boils down to that or more of the same. Even if its ambitions are limited to an incrementalism that will leave radically transformative change long in the making, it still deserves support as an antidote to what we have today. The Hay and Payne paper can serve as an important rallying point for harnessing disappointment, frustration and even resentment at how much of everyday economic life is now conducted in an anonymised and depersonalised manner. There is a potential world out there to discover which exists beyond the touch of a computer screen, the bland homogenisation of mass consumption culture and the gratuitous spectacles of financial excess. They invite us to begin exploring new political spaces within which such a world might be activated. Most importantly, their paper holds open the possibility of dignifying anew everyday economic relations and recognising the efforts that people make to negotiate even the most mundane aspects of livelihood struggles.

If any of what I have said in the preceding pages is in any way correct, though, there are as yet unresolved tensions that first have to be tackled. Perhaps most significantly, if civic capitalism is to open up unambiguously progressive political spaces, something must be done about those who have positioned themselves in the name of commercial self-interest beyond market logic and, in many cases, also seemingly above the law. It is surely ironic that this almost certainly means first bringing those ostensibly all-powerful actors back into the market fold before market logic can be subjected to a much-needed dose of the civic mission. Leaving them to continue roaming freely as market escapees will facilitate the circumvention of the normalising pressures of civic capitalism just as effectively as happens under whatever we choose to call today's system of capitalism in Britain.

References

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