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The English University Settlements 1884-1939: A Social Movement Becalmed?

Voluntary organisations whose founders and adherents offer a solution to 'the social problem' of their time are always likely to attract the scrutiny of their fellow organisations within the sector. Intra-sector evaluation of each other's performance and intrinsic worth is a persistent feature of the sector's life; some of it informed and valuable, some of it unthinking, even malevolent. The history of the impact of intra-organisational relations of this kind, whether expressed publicly or privately, is itself an intriguing area. The university settlements in England, as a distinct group of organisations, appear notable for the amount of support from other organisations which they initially attracted; and then, relatively quickly, the degree of ambivalence, uncertainty and even downright hostility which they then faced. What is striking about them is that through an increasingly public expression of uncertainty as to the validity of their 'offering', they continued (at least for the period covered by this paper), to offer essentially the same model for social problem solving, and to be based on the same assumptions of their sources and outlets of support and influence.

In thinking about the life cycles – or 'histories' – of voluntary organisations, we have grown accustomed to looking for what can be described generally as evidence of 'growth' and 'change'. Perhaps encouraged by an implicit managerialist streak of thinking, we look naturally for increased organisational capacity and income, greater influence in public policy making, an upward trend in institutional numbers, or some rethinking or adaptations of philosophy and practice in line with shifting public thought. But for the university settlements of this period, the 'onward and upward' plans of their early founders did not happen. There was no development or expansionist 'boom'. But neither, in the face of what will be seen to be very deep-rooted concerns about their role and future, was there a 'slump'. In this sense, the English university settlements by the end of the period under discussion (but probably very early on within it) seem to represent organisations which do not align with the expected patterns of growth and change. If we were using the language of personal career development rather than organisational career development, we could describe them as having 'plateaued'. An alternative metaphor is to see them as being 'becalmed' in an otherwise turbulent voluntary sector sea.

This paper therefore sets out briefly the nature of the university settlement concept, and discusses the quality and quantity of relationships with the English universities, the failures of which are central to the lack of ultimate 'take-off' of the model. It presents some of the key critiques and criticisms of the concept

and the concept-in-action. Finally, it reflects on the state of organisational stability rather than change which the university settlements nevertheless attained, and considers the reasons for such a becalming of a group of institutions whose founders believed that they made major inroads into solving 'the social problem'.

What was a 'University Settlement'?

A university settlement had both institutional expression and a conceptual base. It was, classically, a deliberately dominant building located in a poor urban area, providing the basis for a range of social service activities for and with the local community. Its operating ethos was derived from its director – originally its 'warden' – a role modelled loosely on the Oxbridge college role of the same name. Its workforce was primarily voluntary, living as residents in the settlement to ensure local neighbourliness, if not friendship; albeit for relatively short periods, as a prelude to, or in addition to, their professional concerns. That workforce was drawn exclusively from the ranks of young university members, 'repaying' their educational advantages to the wider community in distinct practical ways; and with the added advantage that their resulting learning would be a wider and enduring influence on public and social policy. Settlements began as a male-only model and were adapted by the gradual association of university women. The word 'settlement' – which has the dual connotation of putting down roots and settling difficulties amicably – provided an initially attractive label. Very quickly, the name was prompting ambiguity also.

As an innovation given voice, if not invented, by Canon Samuel Barnett, Wadham College alumnus and East End clergyman in the early 1880s, the institutional plan of settlements took shape through the establishment in 1884 of 'Toynbee Hall', the intended paradigm for an ever-increasing number of such institutions, all with enduring, if informal, university ties. The rationale for settlement 'work' – social clubs, debating societies, advice provision – was the vague notion that there was such a thing as the 'friendship method' in social provision. This argued that cross-class friendships, best mediated in such overtly grand and generous settings, were capable of being developed and sustained; and that they would best solve 'the social problem' – class antagonisms, distrust and hurt. As friendship presupposed mutual concern, so social reforms would consequently flourish. The university settlements relied on a historicist approach to provide architecture both reassuring to university supporters and impressive to the local community. The social programmes and activities to be run in the settlements were vital to show 'up front' concern and relevance, but were only the expression of an underlying and perpetual social concern and social conscience among the university educated.

Within the period of this study, ten 'university settlements' – that is, settlements with an overt university link or claim – are identifiable. These were:

· In east London, Toynbee Hall (1884), Oxford House (1884) and Mansfield House (1890).

· In south London, the Women's University Settlement (1897), Bermondsey University Settlement (1891), Cambridge House (1894) and Lady Margaret Hall Settlement (1897).

· Outside London, Manchester University Settlement (1895), Liverpool University Settlement (1906) and Bristol University Settlement (1911).

This period was also marked by the establishment or increased growth of universities in a number of major cities in England, where the foundation of university settlements might also have been expected. These cities included Durham, Leeds and Sheffield; also Exeter, Southampton, Newcastle and Nottingham, where University Colleges were established (in Birmingham; a settlement without the 'university' label was founded in 1899).

Critiquing the concept and the concept-in-action

External commentators had been initially friendly, but grew to regret their support. The prominent, influential and, one might say, managerialist-minded Charity Organisation Society (COS) affirmed in its journal in 1884 that 'there must be many like us who share our conviction that this is an experiment which of all others at this time is most hopeful and most worth trying'.1 With hindsight, the term 'experiment' may have been more significant than it then appeared. By 1895, the Society was asserting that, if the university settlement leaders believed that their model for social problem solving would work, they 'must have been sleeping for twenty years'.2 In the same year, the continuing vagueness of what the settlements 'wanted' as well as what they 'stood for' was the subject of the COS's concern. Thus, when university settlement heads sent a Memorial on Unemployment to the Prime Minister (containing no specific recommendations, but essentially urging that 'prominence be given to this problem'), and the Prime Minister formally promised 'urgent attention to the views expressed', the COS's response was caustic.3 It noted with surprise the diligence of the civil servants able to find '*any* views expressed'.4

It could be argued that such exchanges were the commonplaces of much intra - voluntary sector life, in this or in any other period. The appearance of the university settlements could be seen as implied criticism of the COS 'solution'; and after their first decade, the settlements were willing to hit back, blaming the COS for scorning those who would 'solve the social problem by audacity' and – at the heart of the concept – stressing how unlikely it was that COS Council members would be 'personally familiar with the needs of the poor'.5 More a matter of concern were the early and accumulating internal critiques of the concept and its working-out that were being expressed, both publicly and internally in minutes, reports and correspondence.

E.J. Urwick, Subwarden of Toynbee Hall from 1901 to 1903 and later Director of LSE, recognised the over-emphasis on keeping the structures going. In 1902 (in an address to women graduates interested in emulating the men's actions), he was forthright that, whilst founded as 'a protest against "reform by machinery", settlements themselves are centres of machinery and the machines are running away with the inventors'.6

The full-time Subwarden following Urwick was William Beveridge, again for a two-year period, during which time his expertise on unemployment was becoming established. The 'friendship method' of working with social classes and thus solving social problems was certainly not one that commended itself to him; and it seems safe to assume that he would have been unable to commend it to others. In personal correspondence to friends, he wrote concerning a key lecture at Toynbee Hall, in which the advocacy of this method

was central, that he had not received it well, since it was 'all about doing things for other people and other people's children'.7

From an Oxford House perspective, Hensley Henson, one-time Warden and later Dean of Durham, wrote in his diary whilst at Oxford House that it was 'an impossible scheme . . . and [one which] must in the long run fail'.8

Less exalted associates of the settlement voiced more cautious but in some ways more basic and central issues. The 'friendship method' and its variety of expressions in social programmes led to practical difficulties in judging the efficacy of those programmes. The lack of appropriate performance measures were as much a concern in the 1890s as in the 1990s. In 1894, women university settlers developing academic programme links (notably at LSE – links which proved transitory) did so as part of 'some attempt to arrive at a clearness as to the methods and objectives of settlement work'.9 In 1913 a confidential memorandum by 'three residents' at Toynbee Hall contained an outright request: 'What we require is something fairly definitive . . . by which to judge the work of the institution.10

Not only was the organisational working-out in some disarray, but the fragility of the university associations was becoming clear, calling into question the validity of the entire model. Thus, while the movement's founder, Samuel Barnett, could only express a kind of disappointed astonishment that things were not improving all the time – 'that methods that have proved so satisfactory have not become more widespread'11– others in public life were more ready to accept that the concept was limited, if not flawed, since university communities had strictly limited their support. Thus, for example, C.F.D. Masterman, Liberal MP for Dulwich and former Cambridge House resident, asked and answered his own question: 'Has just two decade shown the power of settlements to kindle the interest of the universities? . . . For my part, I realise the call has failed.'12

After a fallow, 'on-hold' period for the university settlements from 1914 to 1918, when their strong institutional presence and the availability of their buildings gave them a utility that was important, but which did little to match their wider objects, a return to their entire meaning and purpose began with a vengeance. Although university settlements were survivors over this period, no new institutions were established in the inter-war years. Most university contacts were, if still extant in some form, at best attenuated; at worst, they were shrinking on the vine. The availability of residents had fallen away; and the case had continued to be made that, because of the existence of the settlements, the university-educated young would be able to liquidate the obligation that (through their university education) they owed – but it had little effect. If young graduates and undergraduates were acknowledging such an 'obligation' during this period, it was being done in ways other than those offered by the university settlements. Individual struggles to reopen after the war even caused a brief debate – as at Mansfield House – on whether it was better to 'close down altogether or risk dying by degrees'.13

In 1922 the First International Conference of Settlements, at which the university settlements were the largest single group, was held. Here, a core critique which sums up much of the uncertainty around the university settlements – whether as a spirit of social action or as federation of social action programmes – was made by Liverpool US warden Walter Mabane.

Mabane's distinguished predecessor at Liverpool, F.W. Marquis, had been in post for eleven years; Mabane was to last two years. After offering unsuccessfully to work for the university settlement movement nationally, and despite the acknowledgement from within the movement that he was 'a first class businessman . . . and would do the public work which the movement wants most excellently', Mabane pursued a political career and played no further part in university settlement affairs.14 His candid, abrasive style stands out in a series of worthy and complex papers at this conference. He asked the entirely reasonable question: 'No-one desires to prevent an Oxford man from living in a slum, but why make an institution out of it?'15

No direct response to what seems to have been a metaphorical – even witty – question, to help nudge delegates into some re-evaluation rather than continued assertion that their model was complete, was recorded in the Conference's official proceedings. Asserting their 'universityness' proved difficult and near-impossible by the end of the period under review. Tentative links with academic social science programmes in universities were made, but not sustained: for example, between women's settlements and LSE in London and briefly Bedford; between Bristol University and the university settlement there, whilst Hilda Cashmore, former university lecturer and founder-warden was at its head. The 'social programme' rather than the more obscure 'friendship method' was to dominate completely the inter-war period, with 'club work' for boys and girls perhaps the most characteristic of all activities. Even this, of course, was not confined to the university settlements. In such concentrations of the familiar, further problems of fundraising occurred. In 1919 Henrietta Barnett, Samuel Barnett's formidable wife and advocate of the movement, had rebuked Cashmore for her efforts in accessing a portion of funds raised in the US by American settlements for the English counterparts: 'I gather . . . you want help [for] . . . work already undertaken; and this is the thing they will probably not care to do.'16

The mutual disdain that had marked relations with other prominent voluntary organisations was not such a feature in the inter-war years, when the primary relations were with the growing and developing councils of social service movement; there was some interchange of staff, but predominantly of a one-way variety, with the Councils of Social Service the net gainer and settlements the net loser. Cashmore, in Bristol and then in Manchester University Settlement, had unparalleled experience as a settlement warden from 1911 to 1937, bringing academic status and reputation to her work. Contributor to theoretical thinking about the settlements and their university associations, even she saw the inherent problems, where residents were likely to 'plunge out at intervals into another world where they are no more of it than

they were before, except that they are physically nearer.'17

The University settlements becalmed

The non-linear progress of the university settlements, the problems for all other such institutions working in Toynbee Hall's shadow, the very lukewarm-moving-to-cold response of universities in their formal capacities to these institutions, and the problematic issue of whether inter-class friendship was the best basis for social problem solving: all these left this collegiate-style social movement in an intriguing position by 1939. Its hopes and plans to influence public policy for the better 'behind the scenes' had proved difficult, as political activists and

influentials moved in with settlements but then moved on, tending not to return as their champions. Setting up an institutionally-orientated pattern of friendship-motivated services, in the name of future as well as current university members, had not been so sound a scheme as it had first appeared. The efforts, especially after 1918, to keep any remaining university relations meaningful were enervating, and possibly embarrassing, for both parties. The benign neglect (if such it was) of the Oxford and Cambridge colleges was not remedied when, as in Bristol, Manchester and Liverpool, geographical proximity existed. Only one settlement, that in Bermondsey, had moved away from its efforts to maintain uncertain and fragile links with university associations – or perhaps it had recognised the pretensions of its uncertain claims and had moved further towards the not dissimilar mission model, through its Methodist links.

Although residential numbers came to matter more than residential quality, the notion of residency by 'settlers' remained an institutional cornerstone. The 'friendship method' – never fully defined and explored – was hard to operate, with much of the artificiality of the 'pen pal' system. As an alternative basis for 'social work' in its professional sense, it proved impossible to 'teach'. The belief that there existed some form of corporate university social conscience which could be tapped into permanently, and was best activated by the replication of collegiate lifestyles, proved too shaky to give the settlements strong foundations; but all these flaws were still not sufficient to end these institutions' claims for continuance and ability to survive. They were becalmed, to the extent that no major shift in their development could be expected other than through the major push of external events (wartime years proving important watersheds); but they did not, to take the watery analogy further, sink out of sight. Although their underpinning philosophy was increasingly shown to be on the wane, and their external reputation was variable, they were still sufficiently robust not to vanish. The fact that they were part residential hostel, part educational institute, part embryonic community centre, part training college (even, for some, part church) seems to have been the means, not for their disappearance, as one might logically have expected, but for their continuation. Ironically, if there had been a purposive plan to put university social science teaching and training more at the centre of the settlement work, this might have made them less attractive than they were. Rather than seeing their development as 'arrested', regarding it as 'becalmed' acknowledges the possibility that, as the winds of public and social policy rise, so the settlement ships could restart their journeys. Although their surprising robustness is conventionally explained in terms of their 'plant' – buildings, equipment, land, plus some residual affection for them as venerable social service bodies – this is to underplay the usefulness of their chameleon-like qualities.

Estranged from 'their' universities they undoubtedly were, but their local impact and value seems to have continued. It may be that the flaws in their conceptual basis, so well attested and worryingly repeated by settlement 'insiders' as well as by critics, were, in the last resort, not that important in determining their chances of keeping going. The message from this period seems to be that the university settlements did not have to have been 'good', in the sense of utterly comprehensible and demonstrably effective, but only 'good enough'. Thus, being becalmed organisationally was no bad thing; and it may, through its very familiarity and consolidation, have assured them a continuing, if rather fragmented, presence – and possibly even rediscovery – in urban Britain in the 1990s.

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