

Whose Quality of Life? In What Kind of City?

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1 ABSTRACT

This paper aims to open a debate about ‘quality of life’ in cities and asks whether the latest instruments, the Big Society and Localism promoted by the British government may provide the answer.

2 WHOSE QUALITY OF LIFE? IN WHAT KIND OF CITY?

2.1 Spatial Equality?

The UK has been living in an era of targets and indicators for the quantitative allocation of finite resources. Growth was presumed to continue indefinitely and these instruments were aimed to regulate growth sustainably and equitably. Similar tools were also used in planning. Examples are spatial allocation of affordable housing construction,¹ creation of eco-towns with targets to reduce CO2 emissions to a near ‘zero carbon’ state,² congestion charges to reduce car traffic, and more public transportation investment.³

The theory goes that during periods of expansion, which have a considerable effect on urban development, everyone is benefiting from growth while quality of life is increasing overall. Is this really the case? What happens when growth turns into decline, and how does that affect cities and the quality of life of those who live, work and play in them?

Industrialisation and urbanisation have evolved unevenly in space and produced wealthy as well as impoverished areas. Charles Booth’s poverty map of London⁴ is a telling example.



Fig. 1: Charles Booth map of poverty 1898-99 (the darker the poorer the areas). British Library

¹ The previous labour government designated growth areas for housing, especially in the South East with measured targets. With the abolition of regional planning, only London (through the Mayor and the Greater London Assembly) have kept the powers to impose housing targets which will be included in the Replacement London Plan to be published in 2011.

² The eco town programme launched by the labour party is continuing with 50% cuts.

³ After decades of wrangling, the new Crossrail link traversing London east-west has been approved by government with a budget of £16b, half of which paid by (mainly Inner) London boroughs and a business rate supplement.

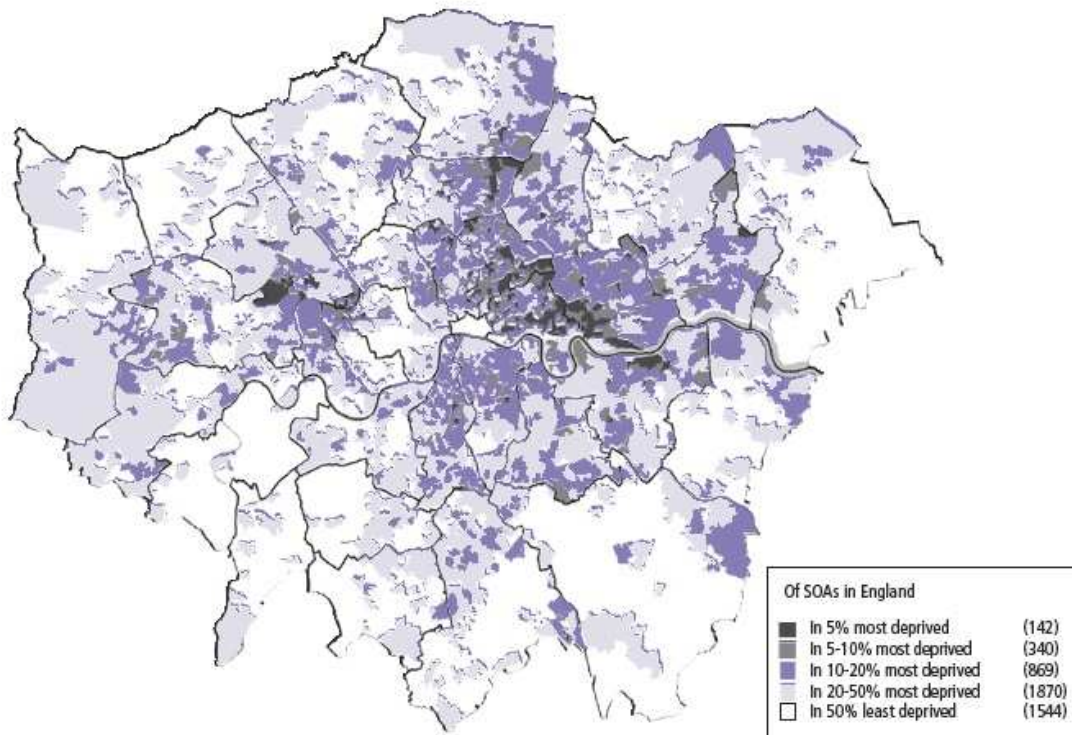
⁴ Charles Booth mapped poverty in London (original map at British Library).

Even under ‘egalitarian regimes’, cities have never been uniform in terms of quality of life, as could be observed in communist countries. For their defence it could be argued that the Bolshevik revolution had inherited the spatial and social inequalities of tsarist regimes. An interesting aspect of such an argument is that in seventy years an alternative authoritarian regime has not managed to equalise ‘quality of life’ (or absence of it) in cities of the Soviet Union, a stern recognition of the powerlessness of spatial planning and social engineering.

A vast literature deals with social and spatial (in-)justice and occupies a central position in the debates about the current crises. Examples are David Harvey’s Marxist interpretation of the uneven distributional effects of capitalism⁵ and Edward Soja’s pragmatic views on activism fighting for spatial injustice.⁶ Statistical data⁷ show that over the last few decades, city growth and also shrinkage have exacerbated spatial and social polarisation, notwithstanding that all levels of income have risen in absolute terms. Attitudes have changed under the influence of consumerism, and arguably manifestations of obscene wealth popularised through the mass media have exacerbated envy and frustration. Sociological studies show how unemployed male youths from ethnic minorities on deprived housing estates who aspire to fashion icons and fast cars resort to marginalised lifestyles to satisfy their wants, and are thereby perpetuating their spatial segregation.⁸

IMD for Lower Super Output Areas in London in relation to England for 2007

Percentiles



Source: Indices of Deprivation 2007, Department of Communities and Local Government

Fig. 2: London deprivation map, In: DMAG Focus on London 2008, GLA

2.2 After the Crisis?

The global financial crisis and ensuing policies deployed by indebted countries to cut public sector spending at all levels to within their means have shaken the growth model. Lower public spending will ultimately curb the quality of life in cities, as savings from wastage have their limits. Even ministers in office warn that the

⁵ e.g. David Harvey. 1973, *Social Justice and the City*. Arnold. David Harvey. 1982. *The Limits to Capital*. Blackwell. David Harvey. 2009. *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom*. Columbia University Press.

⁶ Edward W Soja. 2010. *Seeking Spatial Justice*. University of Minnesota Press.

⁷ see for example the output of the Greater London Authority Data Management and Analysis Group, available on <http://data.london.gov.uk/datastore>. Also controversially: Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett. 2009. *The Spirit Level, why equality is better for everyone*. Equality Trust.

⁸ ref e.g. Younes Amrani, Stephane Beaud. 2004. *Pays de malheur, un jeune de cite ecrit a un sociologue*. La Decouverte. Eric Maurin. 2004. *Le Ghetto francais. Enquete sur le separatisme social*. La Republique des idees. Seuil.

middle classes are not yet aware of how hard they will be hit by these measures.⁹ In the UK, urban services are being curtailed, public libraries and swimming pools closed, housing benefits capped, capital investment halted, to name but a few. All these cuts have a direct impact on the quality of life in cities, affecting poorer areas and deprived people more than those who have alternative means to purchase such services.

The voices of the latter are getting louder both on official websites and social networks. Why should their taxes be used to provide niceties for ‘undeserving’ others? The UK Prime Minister, David Cameron may well be right in saying that society is broken, when the better-off retreat from assisting the less fortunate in accessing essentials of civilised living they have fought for and acquired over the last century.

Unimaginative means to raise state income and reduce expenditure are to sell public assets, real estate, forests and land, and pass public services into private hands. In the UK, privatisation of most public utilities and transportation infrastructure has taken place during the Thatcher years,¹⁰ including the right to buy social housing which has depleted the public housing stock and increased scarcity of affordable housing, especially for essential workers in cities. Each government has been tempted to “sell the family silver”,¹¹ but this leaves nothing much after that. Despite enduring one of the highest personal indebtedness in the civilised world, English citizens seem to be aware of how much the common good is contributing to their quality of life, and how necessary it is to keep it in collective hands. The U-turn about selling off public forests confirms this.¹²

Piecemeal erosion of the public good to refill public coffers effectively contradicts the ‘Big Society’ and ‘Localism’, the big ideas of the current coalition government to improve the quality of life for all.

2.3 Big Society and Localism: for a Better Quality of Life

The government is putting into place the Big Society and Localism to ‘liberate self-reliance in the citizenry’. With more than 80% of the population living in cities in the UK these policies should benefit urban society most of all. Local groups will be able to purchase schools from the public sector at a rebate price and run them free from public interference, sack their governmental representatives, be their own boss, and as few as three people will be able to devise their own local plans. Unelected, unaccountable Local Enterprise Partnerships, and the voluntary sector are encouraged to provide the services soon relinquished by the central and the local state. At a time of fast growing unemployment, salary freezes, rising taxes, lower social benefits, tight borrowing finance and no gain from savings, the private sector and altruistic individuals are expected to provide communal services more economically, efficiently and effectively than the state. There is a touch of ‘déjà vu’ about the idea of rolling back the state and devolving responsibilities to communities and individuals and, more recently, to territorial entities such as neighbourhoods, a departure from sustainable communities.¹³ The question is whether these proposals are increasing the quality of life in cities and whether replacing public sector provision with volunteering and private or social enterprise can improve urban development.

Regrettably, neither the Big Society nor Localism are clearly defined. “A Britain energised by a million centres of neighbourliness and compassion that together embody that very British idea – civic society”¹⁴ shows the ‘New Labour’ ancestry of the Big Society concept which the current government interprets as: ‘giving power to people, opening up public services to be run by locals, and encouraging volunteering’. It has now become the Prime Minister’s absolute passion to repair the broken British society and to lead a radical revolt against the statist approach of Big Government.¹⁵

How this ideal is going to be translated into real life is riddled with contradictions and casts doubts over the very ones who are supposed to be the willing activists in the construction of the Big Society. Utterances like “bigness will be the remedy for bigness”, “we must use the state to remake society”¹⁶ and “social revolution

⁹ Ken Clarke, Justice Secretary. The Telegraph. 11 February 2011.

¹⁰ Margaret Thatcher, UK Prime Minister 1979-1992.

¹¹ a famous saying of Harold MacMillan, the British Prime Minister who saw Britain out of post war austerity.

¹² Michael White, et al. 17 February 2011. Forestry sell-off: public and political opposition forced U-turn. The Guardian. “I am sorry I got it wrong” says Caroline Spelman, Secretary of State for environment, food and rural affairs.

¹³ Sustainable communities, possibly an ill defined and ill fated predecessor of the Big Society and localism, has been postulated by the ‘New Labour’ government in 2002. See Department for Communities and Local Government.

¹⁴ Gordon Brown at a BBC interview on 31 January 2005.

¹⁵ David Cameron, Hugo Young lecture 2009.

¹⁶ David Cameron in The Independent 20 February 2011.

needs a revolutionary in chief¹⁷ expose the profound contradictions between centralisation and devolution inherent in the Big Society concept. Localism adds a territorial dimension to these socio-political postulates. A further affirmation, the failure of 'state multiculturalism'¹⁸ compounds the contradictory complexity of the promised radical changes to British society.

2.4 Localism and Multiculturalism

How local is localism? Surely, if the Big Society is a form of localism, locals cannot be dictated upon by the state, not even how they should spend the money collected by the state and reallocated to public services, usually delivered at administratively defined local level. Most crucially, how is localism going to translate the political objective of a Big Society into action without taking account of multiculturalism, an objective fact not a political perception, especially in cities where most people live.

In the UK, an increasing number of people belong to ethnic minorities and London is becoming steadily more multi-cultural, a continuing trend. In London over 300 languages are spoken and more than 40% of the 'local' population is foreign born, not counting members of ethnic minorities born in the UK.

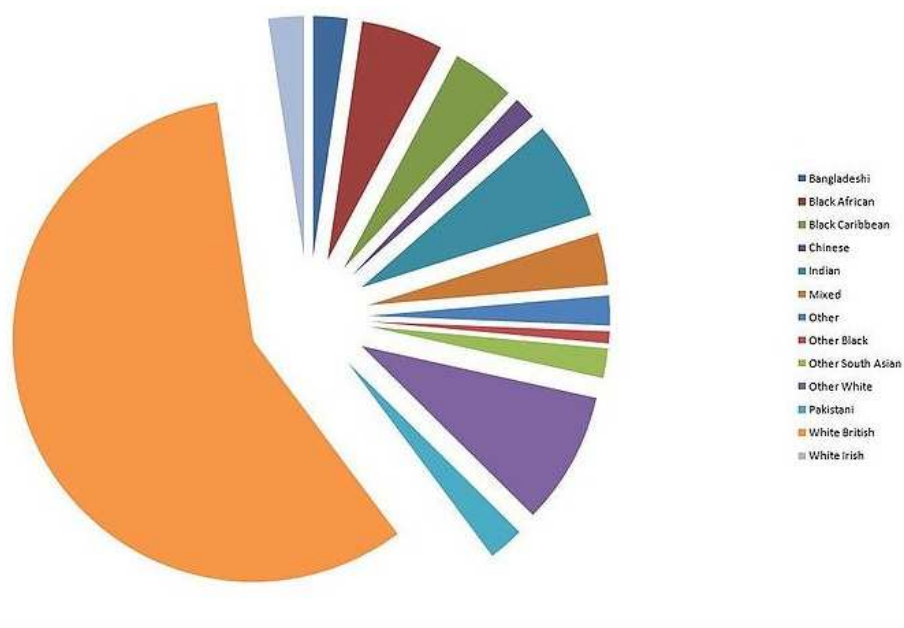


Fig. 3: Composition of London's ethnicity, source Greater London Authority, DMAG, Intelligence Update

How do these diverse people and groups define 'quality of life'? How much is it linked to their cultural values, their urban condition, their status as London residents, workers, students, or pensioners? Do they, and do they want to belong to Cameron's Big Society? Do they have a local choice?

It is not straight forward to identify the multicultural nature of cities. Migration flows have taken place over centuries and what were once minorities have often become settled integrated groups after a few generations. In post-colonial countries like Britain, many ethnic immigrants tends to come from the commonwealth, added to that are EU nationals, as well as migrants which follow international corporations, notwithstanding mixed race groups. London's key economic sectors - finance, related business services, creative industries and universities - are important attractors also of white non British immigrants. In 2007 London's ethnic minority population¹⁹ was estimated at 31% and overall non British population at 42.3%²⁰ Despite various race relation acts and efforts at social integration, cosmopolitan London remains diverse and divided. What effect Cameron's onslaught on 'state multiculturalism' will have on inter-cultural relations in London remains to be seen.

¹⁷ Danny Kruger, Cameron's speech writer.

¹⁸ David Cameron's speech at the Munich security conference on 05 February 2011.

¹⁹ essentially Bangladeshi, Chinese, Ghanaian, Greek and Greek-Cypriot, Indian, Irish, Jamaican, Pakistani and Turkish, with many smaller groups from other countries.

²⁰ Office for National Statistics, neighbourhood statistics.



2.5 Making the Big Society Come True

Even if activists complied with the Big Society scenario and managed to turn the broken British society into a caring self-motivated one, it could not be verified. “I don’t want to produce a sort of top down target” said Cameron.²¹ Instead he advocates that “we can find some ways of showing and saying: well look, these are the things we were talking about; these are the things that have now happened”. Meanwhile his government has suspended the ‘place survey’ and cancelled the ‘citizenship survey’.²² This begs the question whether the Big Society is no longer about evidence based policy and rational implementation, but rather about random local citizen interventions without coordination or overall goal.

The Localism Bill²³ currently debated in Parliament is rather short on answers to such questions and focuses on tasks and procedures instead, neatly arranged from top to bottom with new powers entrusted in the minister of state. The purse strings remain firmly in the hands of central government and reserve powers ensure that localism is implemented in line with what the centre has in mind, which amounts to serious contradictions. A Big Society conjured by a government imposing amount and pace of cuts from above without properly consulting those who have to undergo them seems to contradict the big tent idea where “we are all in it together”.²⁴ Similarly, trying to coerce people into offering their own time, expertise and money to provide services for which they are paying taxes may not be in the spirit of localism, self determination, freedom of choice, and may rather erode than improve quality of life. Even a happiness index may not convince people that philanthropy is contributing to their happiness.

2.6 Happiness Index

Conveniently, the political discourse is resorting to ‘quality of life’ when the state is imposing austerity beyond reason in many citizens’ minds. Politicians claiming to seek the well-being of their electors draw attention to happiness. Part of the new paraphernalia of the Big Society and Localism is the establishment of a ‘happiness’ index as a measure of quality of life to supplement GDP which may be ruffled by the current austerity measures.

All surveys, including the one from which this happiness index would be construed, are not facts but a collection of opinions, shaped by the way the questions are phrased, in what circumstances they are answered and how the results are calibrated. In a diverse society like the UK, even more so in big cities and especially in cosmopolitan London, the survey would include many different, not necessarily compatible cultural perceptions of happiness. No doubt it amounts to an interesting academic exercise, but can it be a reliable tool for policy making, and in particular can it establish ,whose quality of life in what kind of city’?

Can such an index truly measure happiness and will such a measure command confidence among a very insecure people, fearing for their jobs, not knowing how they will be able to make ends meet in the light of increasing living costs and waning services? Would the happiness index include free time for volunteering, even for personal though short lived gain, like setting up and managing a local school to benefit one’s own children. More problematic is how such a happiness index would inform spatial and social development policies for neighbourhoods, cities and the country as a whole, and how it could foster successful development, and assist foresighted planning of transformation processes.

2.7 True Self-Determination?

Implicitly, the Big Society and Localism aim to change society and way of life, in the hope to achieve greater quality of life through more personal fulfilment, a feel good factor due to good deeds, possibly a more cohesive society with greater compassion for each other, home-centred education and training, and a stable family structure providing intergenerational support. Localism aims to give people power to shape their own environment, be in charge of their own planning, and managing their own neighbourhoods, if not their cities themselves. The reforms proposed in the Localism Bill “to make the planning system clearer, more democratic and more effective” include the abolition of regional strategies, while strengthening ministerial powers to decide on nationally significant infrastructure projects guided by national policy statements. The

²¹ Speech to re-launch the Big Society, 15 February 2011.

²² John Perry. 18 February 2011 in Public Finance.

²³ Localism Bill presented to Parliament on 13 December 2010 by Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government.

²⁴ David Cameron during the election campaign.

state is thus not withering away completely. It is also imposing a duty to cooperate on local government and other bodies responsible for specific infrastructures and services. France has introduced SCOTs,²⁵ an ingenious informal framework to facilitate cooperation between various bodies in a region. Whether this formula is suitable for all planning cultures may be put to the test with British Localism.

Like the shift from journalists to popular journalism neighbourhood planning will move from professional planners to local activists who will draw up local neighbourhood development plans, compulsorily in line with national planning policy and with the strategic vision of the local authority. If approved by a majority at a local referendum such a plan will come into force. Government financed professional assistance is available and may produce new job opportunities for planners made redundant by local government cuts. Small developments are left to the community (not defined) while large developments need to acquire local community comments before proceeding and bringing in a community levy. Similar localism applies to housing.

How will these planning measures provide greater quality of life and what kind of city will they produce? The first issue is whether the community, whoever that may be, is willing and able to spend their spare time on drawing up plans, an unfamiliar form of expressing how they wish to shape their local environment. Experience shows that 'communities' are far from homogeneous, especially in multicultural cities. No conflict resolution procedures are foreseen and the chances are that those with stronger motivations and clout will decide and thereby deepen resentment and alienation. In such microcosms increased quality of life would be confined to parts of citizens or parts of the city. How this can represent the Big Society, the idea of open cities securing a right to the city for all is difficult to imagine. Big Society and Localism promote change for stability, new rights for communities, greater freedoms, more democracy, but reality may produce more gated communities, more gentrification, more segregation, more instability.

3 CONCLUSION: BIG SOCIETY AND LOCALISM: UNIVERSAL RECIPE FOR BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE?

From a broader perspective, a Big Society brought about by bottom up mediated Localism may remain in the realm of the possible in Britain, compared to what is happening in cities in many unstable parts of the world. Could the idea of the Big Society and Localism be of use in divided European cities? More challenging even, could these approaches help reinstate and improve quality of life in the many cities in turmoil in the Maghreb, the Middle East and elsewhere in an increasingly turbulent world?

How realistic are the Big Society and Localism in cities where new revolutions are springing up every day, where people are too frustrated to be afraid, where they no longer accept oppression and contradiction between the rulers and the ruled? How relevant are they to their fight for change towards more self-determination, greater freedom, a better quality of life as they see it, even if it means engaging in risky long term processes which may only benefit their descendants? These cities seem to possess preconditions of localism, considering that those who rebel against the oppressive state are local citizens from different walks of life, but longing together for a better quality of life. Is the British notion of localism the recipe for better quality of life and can it be exported and applied elsewhere? Or would it have to demonstrate its validity at home first before engaging in wider ambitions? And how would its success or failure be measured to the satisfaction also of those who have their doubts?

²⁵ SCOT: Schema de coherence territoriale.

