

Reparation for the Past and Preparation for the Future: Community Cohesion and a World City

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Biographical Details

Richard Ennals is Professor at the Centre for Working Life Research, Kingston University, with visiting professorial posts in Sweden, Norway and Lithuania. He is a Board member of the UK National Commission for UNESCO, the Council for Education in World Citizenship, and the UK Work Organisation Network. He has worked with many Directorates-General in the European Commission, specialist agencies of the United Nations, and non governmental organisations (including the International Commission on Occupational Health and the World Psychiatric Association). In the 1980s he managed British advanced IT research with Imperial College and the DTI Alvey Directorate, resigning when the Pentagon sought access to the research under his management, for use in the American Strategic Defense Initiative.

His books include: "Star Wars: A Question of Initiative" (1986, Wiley, Chichester); "Dialogue, Skill and Tacit Knowledge" (2006, edited with Bo Goranzon and Maria Hammaren. Wiley, Chichester); "From Slavery to Citizenship" (2007, Wiley, Chichester); and "Learning Together for Local Innovation: Promoting Learning Regions" (2007, edited with Bjorn Gustavsen and Barry Nyhan, Cedefop, Luxembourg).

Outline of Presentation

In the context of innovation and regional development, increasing attention is being given to the level between individual companies and national governments. At this intermediary or meso level, we see networks and development coalitions, with diverse partners, including universities. In a "Europe of the regions", cities can make a strategic difference, recognising their distinctive backgrounds, finding niche opportunities, and defining creative futures. At each level, diversity represents a positive resource, if dialogues can be created which engage the different communities.

Much can be learned from differences. In the presentation in Bristol we hope to learn from experience in other world cities, and to set out a new and inclusive agenda. In the context of new priorities of "Community Cohesion", we argue that the best form of reparation for the past is preparation for the future. In the context of the Legacy of Slavery, and beyond, Bristol is making a distinctive and valuable contribution.

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Innovation and Regional Development

In the context of innovation and regional development (Fricke and Totterdill 2004), increasing attention is being given to the level between individual companies and national governments, where social capital is formed. It has become clear that there are limits to what can be achieved at the single company level, but that policy makers in government are often remote from practical decision making. This requires fresh perspectives on policy development and implementation.

At this intermediary or meso level, we see the formation of networks and development coalitions, with diverse partners, including universities (Ennals and Gustavsen 1999; Gustavsen et al 2001). There is no one consistent pattern. It is important to know how to engage in collaborative working, alongside those who may previously have been seen as competitors. Networking needs to be more than merely social: it needs to be purposive, leading to action. New businesses and forms of work organisation may result. Arguably these developments are not entirely new, but involve a return to pre-industrial patterns of work and social relationships, with diverse approaches to social capital formation.

Europe of the Regions

In a "Europe of the regions", cities can make a strategic difference, recognising their distinctive backgrounds, finding niche opportunities, and defining creative futures. Insights can be exchanged, across national borders, but this requires engagement in international collaboration and dialogue. Participation by citizens adds value, compared with decisions by officials. Subsidiarity, a well-established European Union principle, means that decisions should be made at the lowest level, close to the citizen, and not reserved to the level of national governments. European countries vary in the extent to which such devolution has taken place.

At each level, diversity represents a positive resource, if dialogues are to be created (Gustavsen 1992; Göranson et al 2006) which engage the different communities. Cities need to be able to draw on their past, which has framed the present.

The absence of devolution in the English regions, in contrast to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, presents additional challenges. In the absence of regions with democratic accountability, there are opportunities for cities. Paradoxically, cities may be able to establish themselves as "regions of meaning" (Gustavsen 2004) despite the diversity of their constituent populations.

Learning from Differences

Much can be learned from differences. It is not enough to have good practice case studies, available on websites. Practical engagement in the process of change is a precondition for learning from the experiences of change by others. Cities may be able to facilitate the creation of development organisations (Ennals and Gustavsen 1999), in which alternative ways forward can be explored, with cross-fertilisation and experimentation. Indeed, this may be seen as a traditional feature of city cultures.

In the presentation in Bristol we hope to learn from experience in other world cities, and to set out a new and inclusive agenda. In the context of the UK government's newly declared priorities of "Community Cohesion", we argue that the best form of reparation for the past is preparation for the future. In the context of the Legacy of Slavery, and beyond, Bristol is making a distinctive and valuable contribution. The city has not waited for national policies.

Reparation for the Past: The Sound of Silence

Perhaps the loudest sound in 2007, which marked the bicentenary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, was silence. As I found when researching the subject (Ennals 2007a), this was not new. As we look back over British economic and social history, we find an absence of detailed treatment of the slave trade, and of slavery, in our mainstream courses and texts. We take a pride in the British Industrial Revolution and the British Empire, but we are reluctant to discuss some less palatable features of how these developments were possible (Rodney 1982). In 2006, as preparations increased, there was a new focus on the major ports of Bristol, Liverpool and London, seen as the parts of the country which had been directly involved, but a tendency to downplay the significance of slavery and the slave trade for the country as a whole.

This is perhaps not entirely surprising. How are we to make sense of the forced transportation of some 12 million African slaves to the new world, the majority in British ships? We can celebrate Britain's lead in abolishing the slave trade. What is to be said now about British domination of the slave trade prior to abolition, and the inconvenient truth that British slave traders continued to supply markets in Cuba and Brazil (Sherwood 2007), maintaining the flow of funds to London? The depth and breadth of British involvement in the slave trade, including the Church of England, Oxford and Cambridge Colleges, the royal family, members of the aristocracy, philosophers and writers, is now profoundly embarrassing: all were then happy to profit from the trade in human beings. Across the country, people consumed the products of slavery: coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate, rum. The foundations were laid for continuing social inequality. The campaigns by abolitionists to boycott sugar have their echo in the modern Fair Trade movement.

Denial has been widespread, and continues. Neither slave nor owner took pride in their situations, which were not well documented. Businessmen preferred to present themselves as benevolent citizens, funding schools and hospitals for the local community, rather than as successful slave traders. Owners of stately homes did not discuss the source of funds for their construction. Even Jane Austen conceded that she found it hard to write

about slavery and the slave trade, due to the fact that her family income depended on sugar, through the Knight family.

We are left with several problems. Not only has historic injustice escaped discussion, but inequality has continued, as confirmed by Sir Michael Marmot's report on Health Inequalities (Marmot 2008). The same areas of London, Bristol and Liverpool, which in the past housed freed slaves, were those where riots erupted in the 1980s. African Diaspora communities were robbed of their histories. Something similar, but less obvious, happened to the majority indigenous population, who were not taught about the slave trade and its impact on Britain. From autumn 2008 all secondary school students are to be obliged to be taught about the slave trade, slavery and empire, but much of the focus is on American slavery. What are the teachers to say about Britain, where few slaves came in person, but where the economy benefited from the slave trade and slavery?

It is still difficult to discuss the impact of the slave trade on the British economy. The City of London clearly benefited, as did major banks. Eric Williams (Williams 1944) had argued that the profits of the slave trade financed key stages of British industrialisation. He noted that at the time of abolition new imported slaves were no longer needed in North America and the British West Indies, but that abolition was an economic blow to the French West Indies. Wilberforce did not launch his campaign to free slaves, but to replace the trading of slaves by the breeding of slaves.

Jenny Uglow's research on the Lunar Society of Birmingham (Uglow 2002) enables us to form a revised picture. A network of radical dissenting entrepreneurs, outside the Church of England and thus excluded from Oxford and Cambridge, opposed slavery, as did Adam Smith. The continuing proceeds of slavery and the slave trade supported the conspicuous consumption of the ruling classes. Thomas Clarkson had the support of Josiah Wedgwood, Thomas Boulton, James Watt, Erasmus Darwin and Joseph Priestley. Clarkson's networks went further, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Benjamin Franklin, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and, indirectly, Toussaint L'Ouverture. L'Ouverture's successful slave rebellion could be seen as a demonstration of effective networking, as he united slaves from different plantations, formed a government, maintained control of Santo Domingo, and repelled armies from France, Britain and Spain.

We emerge with a different picture of the past, in which African resistance takes pride of place, and doubt is cast on the motives of some who advocated and implemented abolition, and claimed the moral high ground. We need to read internationally to broaden our perspective: we discover that the French first abolished slavery in 1794, and the Danes ended their slave trade in 1803. We have to rebuild our account of the Industrial Revolution, with a fresh appreciation of networking initiatives at city level.

In a series of Cross-Community Dialogue events with African Diaspora communities in the London area from 2006, it has been possible to explore different views of the past. Participants have not been obliged to agree on all points, but they have listened, and appreciated the concerns of others. In many cities, including Bristol, London, Liverpool, Birmingham and Hull, museums have been focal points for debate and reflection. The Museum of London in Docklands is working with a network of national museums in Africa and the Caribbean, proposing a UNESCO World Heritage site, and making collaborative use of digital archives (Ennals et al 2008).

Community Cohesion

A new UK government policy priority has emerged in 2008, partly due to the events of September 11th 2001 in the USA, and subsequent attacks in the UK. The realisation has grown that British residents, alienated from mainstream policy and culture, might be prepared to engage in acts of terrorism. Schools are being given a duty to promote community cohesion, tackling issues which are seen as jeopardising inequality of opportunity. In this context, less is being said about earlier duties to provide citizenship education, and the requirement to teach about the history of slavery, the slave trade and empire. Instead there is new discussion of allegiance to the monarch and her heirs, and the importance of the rule of law, as set out in Lord Goldsmith's "Our Common Bond" (Goldsmith 2008). Schools, already overburdened with directives, are now understandably confused. Guidance is being prepared. OFSTED inspections are to cover new duties from autumn 2008.

Here we seek to link these different policy themes. In a context of cultural diversity, we are seeking to develop community cohesion as a process (Ennals 2008), working on the basis of iterative inclusion in dialogue.

Bristol Fashion

Cohesion can be enhanced by joint collective action, presenting a common face to the outside world. This can follow formative dialogue, with the risk of disagreement and division. This is a risk worth taking, and essential for a sustainable enterprise culture. Initiating a process of debate can be more important than concluding it. Often the best conclusion will take the form of action, rather than just words.

We cannot turn the clock back. The past happened. It must be acknowledged before we can move on. Bristol has been addressing the Legacy of Slavery, raising awareness, and taking a leading role in preparing for the future. National government has not known how to cope. It has seemed easier to hold a set of events for a defined period, then to declare the exercise a success, arguing that it is now time to change the subject. Public opinion cannot be so easily managed. Community groups, having explored their past, cannot simply put the lid back on the box.

At the level of a city, social capital and community cohesion are not just slogans, but fundamental to sustainable economic and social development. They arise from, and define, shared meanings. Old patterns of division can persist, as we saw in New Orleans, where racial segregation and the Blues continue after Hurricane Katrina. Similar rhythms continue in Liverpool. Ideas can be smuggled, as in Marseilles. Dialogue can be staged, as in Stockholm. Peace can be a process, as in Oslo. Freedom can be regained, as in Vilnius. All roads can lead there, as in Rome. Sieges can be lifted, as in Lucknow. The walls can be old and crumbling, as in Kano. Bridges can be sold to the Americans, as in London.

Cities can imagine the past and remember the future. To work with UNESCO, taking the lead where national government has felt unable to do so, has historic significance. It advances Bristol's claims to be a world city, developing world citizens.

A New Architecture

“Bristol Fashion” implies addressing a world beyond the single city. Bristol has made an historic contribution to architecture, and in particular bridges. We now need an architecture which can take forward the best civic values, while addressing the best international principles. This is far from straightforward as the world order crumbles, and nationalist tendencies are resurgent, even in our own country. As in the 1930s, the importance of world citizenship becomes ever greater.

One key building block for this new architecture is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, whose 60th anniversary we mark in 2008. This was ratified by countries around the world, and provides a common standard against which to judge national legislation, as it impacts on individual citizens. Such declarations come from the tradition of “natural law”, in contrast to “positive law” which can be enforced by national governments. I want to argue that a world network of cities, using web technologies, and developing concerted dialogue, could move the aspirations of the Universal Declaration towards implementation.

I worked with Bristol University and locally based companies in the 1980s, in my capacity as a Research Manager in Knowledge-Based Systems and Parallel Computer Architectures in the UK government’s Alvey Programme in Advanced Information Technology. The architecture of our system was multi-layered. Hardware was built from VLSI components, including the transputer from INMOS in Bristol, and programmed to address a common compiler target language (CTL). This could support a number of operating systems, languages and software environments. Radical new approaches were taken to software development, with the logic programming initiative, which I designed, together with software engineering. There was talk of intelligence, knowledge, man-machine interface and human-computer interaction. National and international programmes competed to develop overall models to which collaborating partners could contribute.

We could now regard UDHR as the CTL for the new architecture for world citizenship. In a given setting it requires institutional underpinning. It should be seen as providing a base for law, action and communication, and for educational and social programmes. It is common and universal, but needs to be understood and reinforced. We need demonstration projects and networking, for example through the UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network in Education for International Co-operation and Peace.

As we are re-discovering with the UK National Commission for UNESCO, preparatory groundwork is required if UDHR is to take root. A field needs to be ploughed, weeded and fertilised. Cities can be nursery beds for countries. Networks of cities can facilitate development in many nations, providing an environment in which national governments can move forward.

The semantic web offers the prospect of a cyberspace dimension to the architecture. It was assembled from component ideas from contributors around the world, and brought together through shared understandings (Berners-Lee 1999). The resulting web offers support for further sharing. One extension of this philosophy is through mashups, an approach to software technology which enables elements of systems or websites to be combined in new dynamic applications. Tim Berners-Lee refused to claim ownership of

the web as a commercial product. Vendors of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 products need to be able to justify commercial exploitation rather than open source sharing approaches.

Preparation for the Future

The technology now exists which could enable delivery of the vision of world citizenship. The technology is not the problem. The challenge is to link with appropriate forms of work, social and political organisation. There will be no one best way.

In my own current work I am addressing the potential of student quality circles (in Asia) (Ennals 2007b), the legacy of slavery (in Africa and the Caribbean) (Ennals et al 2008), and the all encompassing UDHR, a key focus for 2008. In pragmatic terms, cities are probably a better starting point than countries. Action is preferable to rhetoric. Bristol will benefit from continued economic prosperity, based on a vision of community cohesion which is truly global, as well as national, regional and local.

The Severn or Denial? I am not arguing for a Barrage or a Bore, but for architectures which facilitate bridging of gaps, and for diffusion of new ideas and technologies. There can be several more bridges. Tolls must be paid. Minds must be opened and freed. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides a blueprint.

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