In search of lost attachments

Book review

Kraemer, S and Roberts, J (eds) (1996) **The politics of attachment: Towards a secure society.** London: Free Association Books.
ISBN 1-85343-344-6 pbk. 254 pages.

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The essential theme of this collection of essays is an exploration of the extent to which the theory of attachment can inform modern political principles and policy. The basic claims of the theory - that the quality of early attachment for infants is a key to their developing into integrated people - is transposed to the broader social world. The hypothesis is that for individuals to fully develop in all their capacities, the social context in which they exist must be conducive. The essays are aimed at exploring the implications of this suggestion and range from theoretical considerations of attachment theory itself to the implications for welfare and voluntary activity in civil society, including a number of detailed case studies. In the words of the editors: "The purpose of this book is to add to the prevailing political language an account of what we know about fundamental human needs and so renew our confidence in the possibility of more complex yet more cohesive societies" (p1)

The contributors to the volume include academics, serving politicians, an academic journalist and field professionals. Consequently, the issues are considered from a range of perspectives, which, while giving the book a sense of the link between theory and practice, does tend to generate a sense of blurred focus. One reason for this is the fact that the editors do not really adequately outline the basis on which their bold hypothesis rests. There is one chapter of thirteen pages dealing with the extent to which attachment theory can provide the base for social policy, but the discussion is truncated and the wider political debates current at the time are not addressed. This raises another issue regarding the readership the book is targeting. If it is assumed that the readership is largely drawn from the fields of academic and practising psychology, then the theoretical discussion will appear pedestrian. If it is aimed at a general readership then it would have been greatly strengthened by a more clearly articulated introduction to the theory itself and its contested history. Some of the information is in the text but not mustered in a way to give a lay reader a relatively clear position from which to assess the debate. In this sense the book falls between two stools.

The second chapter of the book underlines the way in which conditions that make for security in children are being acknowledged as having broader social importance - self esteem, sense of agency, problem-solving ability, social competence. While

recognising that these skills have to be learned, the cry is for the creation of social conditions that are conducive to both the growth and exercise of such skills. Central to such an environment is security. It is in this sense that social policy becomes the core of the debate, as security is dependent not only on the family context of the individual but the broad social and economic conditions under which life is lived. The way in which social conditions impact on the process of parenting, the damage caused to young people as a result of a failure to address personal development - manifesting itself in forms of depression and delinquency according to gender - and a *leitmotif* of the chaotic misery caused by mass unemployment, underline the relevance of the debate. The recognition of the dialectical relations between the subject and the social order is nothing new, but the authors are right to stress that there can be no healing unless the cause is adequately defined and addressed. There is a consistent call for politicians and personal support professionals to explore more fully the nature of these connections.

The answer for many of the contributors is to foster and develop varying forms of community in which people can find support and the chance of growth. As in many cases where the topic is addressed, space is dedicated to discussing the actual meaning of the term. There is a specific engagement with the communitarianism associated with Amitai Etzioni, which informed some of the social policy statements from the centre left in Britain. Etzioni suggested that in the cases of both the United States and Britain the perceived decline in social order was directly related to the absence of women from the home, leaving children inadequately socialised and likely to resort to anti-social behaviour. Such a view is savaged, and not only by the feminist contributions.

In more predictable terms, the concept of community as a living space is addressed in terms of planning and land use, and there is strong evidence that place still retains a strong element in personal identification. The way that people are given a chance to participate in the creation and management of their locations is exemplified by case studies of work done in London.

The issue of the community and the local state is addressed directly by one contributor who looks to new forms of local government to transform the experience of a localised democracy. He sees the future as best being achieved by more open active forms of participation with elected politicians and professionals working in collaboration with organisations rooted in civil society. The impact of such open models of democracy on state administrative systems is also considered and is posed as an open question. However, there is the recognition that there will be a need for capacity building in civil society to enable such a model to operate. A variation on ways of empowering people to be active in their democracies is supplied by an essay dealing with the possible impact of technology in facilitating participation in politics, citing the example of different techniques which enabled workers to take part in decision-making in Chile during the Allende years. There is also a celebration of the way in which electronic media gives access to many virtual communities and enables previously silenced voices to be heard.

Addressing the way in which people create and support identity through concepts of community, one contributor considers the ways in which even in the globalised age, individuals derive some of their identity from a sense of spatial location. Using the

examples of allegiance to football teams, the sense of regional difference and the identity with historically supportive agencies in local government, it is suggested that there is much for proponents of a secure society to work with.

Two other essays take a more sceptical view of the community debate. The first suggests that the focus on the community may be too wide and the real mechanisms of support and sense of belonging are better seen by the consideration of friendships. Again the capacity to make close friends is linked to healthy development and relates clearly to the stated focus of the book. The second piece points to the extent that there is a current irony in the developed world in that companies are structuring themselves along the lines of communities, using the same vocabulary but for very different ends. At the same time agencies in the community are moving more to being structured along organisational lines.

This last point leads to the fact that all this debate takes place within relations of late capitalism and that the economic factors behind the social realities, while being hinted at in many cases, are not directly addressed, except in one essay dealing with different models of capitalism and their impact on social life in general. The essay outlines quite clearly the logic of capitalism and the zero sum relationship between investment and welfare spending within globalised relations. This is a crucial point because if the aspirations outlined in the text do depend on a different distribution of wealth and opportunities, one is invited to question whether such change can be achieved within these economic relations.

This book is a child of its time. It was written by people in a country that was coming to the end of seventeen years of neo-liberal government, which had seen the vicious cutting of social welfare. Neo-liberal economics had been allied to a philosophy which at its height proclaimed that there was no society, only individuals. This book represents the thinking of largely centre-left thinkers looking for a way forward to redress the damage caused by those years of government and to create forms of support and relationships that do not regress to the previous statist bureaucracies. The left in Britain went to the people with a pledge to create a "stakeholder" society and this collection of essays is representative of the quest for what that might look like. In that sense the book as a political document might be already dated, as New Labour, with its rhetoric of inclusivity, has swept to power and its policies can be analysed in action. However, the claim that we can use theories from child psychology on a broader frame is well worth consideration. Although the material for this book is profoundly British, the broad issues it raises could still stimulate thought in any social context.