

Baden-Powell's Scouting for Boys : governmentality, state power and the responsabilization of youth

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Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys*: governmentality, state power and the responsabilization of youth

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*THERE'S a breathless hush in the Close to-night -
Ten to make and the match to win -
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in.
And it's not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,
But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"*

*The sand of the desert is sodden red, -
Red with the wreck of a square that broke; -
The Gatling's jammed and the colonel dead,
And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.
The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And England's far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of schoolboy rallies the ranks,
"Play up! play up! and play the game!"*

That's an extract from *Vitai Lampada* by Henry Newbolt: translation, they pass on the torch of life. Telling the story of a young cricketer who learns how to cope on the battlefield through remembering the philosophy of his schools sporting endeavors, it follows in a tradition of public school decency being at the centre of British militaristic action, which stretches from *The Charge of the Light Brigade* to *Blackadder*. It also sits at the founding core of the Scout movement. Newbolt's poem equates the battlefield with the playing field. If boys

could be taught honour, duty and responsibility in the world of sport and play they would make good and honourable members of the armed forces later.

This paper will focus on two issues – those of responsibility, and how state power has gone through a transformation, from, as Simon Gunn has put it, ‘hegemony to governmentality’, and also on the impact of social class on ideas of participation for young people in organisations such as the scouts at the turn of the nineteenth century, and modern day volunteering.

My thesis is in the field of sociology, a comparative analysis of how working-class and middle-class areas organise and encourage young people to take part in volunteering. The past fifteen years has seen a burst of youth volunteering policy from both national and local government, with hundreds of millions of pounds invested, and of course is seen in the current debate concerning David Cameron’s call to create a Big Society, which can fill the void of public services in the wake of large budget cuts.

These volunteering schemes have risen to prominence due in large part to the establishment in the 1980s of permanent youth unemployment. The term NEET (not in education, employment or training) has been tagged to young people aged 16 – 25 who are not taking their full place in society. With volunteering comes skills and experiences which can help in a flexible neo-liberal job market, with the benefit, often thought of as secondary, that others will be helped along the way. This is nothing new though. Throughout time, from Plato to Peter the Hermit, to today’s Daily Mail, young people have been seen as a dilemma, what Bettelheim terms ‘the problem of youth’. And therefore those in power have constantly tried to construct answers to this subjective delinquency. The establishment

of comprehensive education and the charity schools before them, alongside ideas as diverse as the youth service and military conscription have in some ways been answers to the question 'what shall we do with our children?' Today I want to talk about one of the most popular and one of the most successful, which emanated from a piece of non-fiction literature, *Scouting for Boys* by Lord Robert Baden Powell.

The fourth bestselling book of the twentieth century, behind only the Bible, the Koran, and Mao's Little Red Book, *Scouting for Boys* was a manual for behaviour in children, introducing a set of common values across the globe. Written in 1908 and an overnight sensation, by Baden Powell, who was the celebrity of his day. His tactical conquests in the Boer War whilst heavily outnumbered, had become bedside tales for much of Britain who held him up as a heroic defender of the empire sensibility.

Scouting for Boys has been called "a response to the increasing demands of nation and empire" by Jon Savage, and allows us to understand the 'politicisation of childhood' according to Janice Hill. Baden-Powell's Boy Scouts had to swear an allegiance to God and to the King, and were thus brought inside, however subconsciously, into a position of working for the good of the empire, whilst also benefiting from the entertainments that being a scout could offer them. This mentality had immediate impact, with those who became Boy Scouts after the launch of the book being of age when the call to volunteer in the military came in 1914, and of age when conscription was enacted in 1916.

It is my belief that the Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality can provide sociological insight into the love the state feels for programs such as the scouts and modern participation schemes.

Foucault argued that governmentality had become “the common ground of all modern forms of political thought and action”. This is not government with an ‘-ality’ suffixed, but mentality with a ‘govern-’ prefixed. A mentality which is to be governed. A desire or acceptance, perhaps subconsciously, to have one’s behaviour guided or conducted. This is why the concept is often labelled ‘the conduct of conduct’. This should not be viewed as passivity, but a certain amount of constraint and management, and facilitating models of possible actions; encouraging citizens to govern themselves. The Big Society seems to be the culmination of this type of application of state power.

Nikolas Rose explains governmentality as “instrumentalizing the self-governing properties of the subjects of government themselves where rights and responsibilities can be handed back to the citizen in return for increased participation”. On the theory of power, Rose wrote that “to govern humans is not to crush their capacity to act, but to acknowledge it and utilise it for one’s own objectives”. The growth of volunteering policy acknowledges the great potential of young people to get involved in their communities, and attempt to allay some personal and social problems. Scouting for Boys is not the expression of an ideology, but a light touch guide for boys to act in a principled and dignified manner, whilst not limiting their spirit of adventure. Adventure has been a central plank of children’s literature, from the Famous Five, to Tintin, to Harry Potter. Here was Britain’s most famous adventurer, telling children how to make their own adventures.

According to Stenson and Factor, governmentality is a use of power which attempts to “unleash the productive skills and capacities which enable young people to adapt to a modern society”. Policies to tackle the economic and social ‘problems of youth’ have determined

that volunteering can be a instrument of which the state is the major primary active sponsor and director, rather than a passive beneficiary of the fruits of young people's voluntary labour. By encouraging scouts to take on responsibility, Baden-Powell was saving the state's resources, creating citizens who can look after themselves. Self-sufficiency and sustainability was at the core of the scouting ideology.

This trend continued, identified in the literature on the history of youth policy. The Education Acts of 1940 and 1960 led to the foundation and extension of many youth clubs and training opportunities. These were proactive policies which tried to engage with young people, with the hidden agenda of a collectivised technique to manage the risk posed by young people.

SfB also encourages a great deal of social and physical responsibility. This was through pushing boys to become entrepreneurs through putting their woodwork and craft abilities to the test, and saving for times of hardship. The British Armies pyrrhic victory in the Boer war it was felt was because many of the soldiers were deemed unfit and unhealthy and not fit for purpose. Between 40 and 60% of those who applied to the army could not join because they were not in the correct physical shape.

The armies recruitment of men from the working class had stagnated. Baden-Powell felt that when the men of Britain were strong, so was the country itself, the very notion of a governmentality approach to developing a nation through the proxy of developing citizens. The British working class had to be improved, otherwise the empire would fade. As Elleke Boehmer wrote in her preface to the latest edition of *Scouting For Boys*

“where the failing strength of the nation was mirrored in the alleged deterioration of the male physique at the time, a practical handbook that proposed physical training as well as lessons in strategy derived from the writer’s own military experiences , could not but be a winner”.

Given that the working classes were such an important strand of army recruitment, the impact of poverty at home on Britain’s empire abroad was growing.

There were several areas of voluntary action occurring at the time to encourage better values and create a better world for Britain’s working classes. Octavia Hill’s housing program, backed by the great social reformer John Ruskin provided better quality housing for some of London’s poor, alongside encouraging a more responsible attitude towards cleanliness and social decorum. The University settlements movement, where young undergraduates of Oxford and Cambridge lived in inner city London to provide advice and assistance to the poor, was another. These projects implied a general sense of the middle-classes ‘knowing better’ than the working classes a right way to live one’s life. As Steph Lawler has put it

“working class people, it is assumed, don’t know the right things, they don’t want the right things, they don't value the right things. They don't look right and they don’t act right. By contrast, middle-class identities silently pass as normal”.

This can be seen in judgemental popular culture, through the stream of reality television such as Wife Swap and Big Fat Gypsy Wedding. If you watch these shows, ask why do you watch them and why are they entertaining. Is it to point, and stare and gasp in horror. And if Lawler is correct today, she’s certainly right in 1900.

Baden-Powell was ambitious and wanted to make sure that public school values were not the preserve of public school boys, with the third scout law explicitly saying A SCOUT IS NOT A SNOB. But society at the time, as it is now, was more worried about the degenerate behaviours of working-class rather than middle-class youths. Baden-Powell was also worried by the threat of the Labour party, and those who wished for upheaval. He talks about those demanding rights, who'd "never done anything to earn any rights". He felt that first one should do his duty, and one would have shown he had earned his rights.

The Boy Scouts themselves developed from Baden-Powell's experiences of the prefect system at Britain's public schools, where boys were turned into men. Latterly a formalised voluntary sector has become another tool in the governments armoury in which to encourage working-class people to engage in middle-class behaviours and values. But how effective can a governmentality agenda be when there is a huge amount of hostility in working-class identity to responding to value and social change. To understand this we can look back at another of the twentieth century's most read texts.

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists by Robert Tressell is one of the classics of working class literature. Often held up as the book that won Labour the 1945 election, this tale of house painters in Hastings has become a central fable that examines the plight of the working-classes and how poverty is promulgated, both through the capitalist system and the attitudes of the painters themselves. It tells of Frank Owen, one of the house painters, but a committed socialist and politically engaged individual who tries to explain to his colleagues that it is the capitalist system that keeps them downtrodden, and that if they rose up they could overthrow their

cruel masters. However, the house painters have become blinded to this inequality, and instead prefer to blame the plight of the working man on 'the lazy unemployed, the over educated, and wimmin', preferring the easy joys of the pub and the football after a hard days graft to the political meeting.

The accepting and compliant nature of working-class life, exemplified in works such as *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* highlights the difficulties in changing the inhabited and set views of working class individuals, especially men. By focusing on Britain's youth, as social policy was increasingly wont to do, we can see an effort to affect a cultural shift before the transition to adulthood is complete. A responsabilization process, of which Scouting for Boys is in my view a great literary example, means the state does not have to punish in the future, but be a conductor and guide of behaviour. Imposing or encouraging a manual of how to live on youth is much easier than on adults.

Max Weber said that:

"...it is immensely moving when a *mature* man-- no matter whether old or young in years--is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul. He then acts by following an ethic of responsibility and somewhere he reaches the point where he says: 'Here I stand; I can do no other.'"

To conclude: with a responsabilized youth, the power of the state is increased, as the possibility of a threat to authority from young people within is reduced, and the work of the state is taken up by conscientious empowered scouts or volunteers.

Governmentality is a use of power which attempts to “unleash the productive skills and capacities which enable young people to adapt to a modern society”. Successive governments in Britain have realised that youth volunteering is a relatively cheap and effective way of delivering results that benefit not only the young person, but society and the power, financial or otherwise, of the state. A young population constructed to take responsibility for their communities will provide this long-term through social control regulated at the individual level.