

Conservatism and an End to Poverty

Kieron O'Hara

*Web and Internet Science Group
Electronics and Computer Science
University of Southampton
Highfield
Southampton SO17 1BJ
United Kingdom
kmo@ecs.soton.ac.uk*

Introduction

Conservatism is not an ideology associated with analyses of poverty. Its dictionary definition is resistance to change, and those resistant to change are most happy with the status quo (Oakeshott 1991), and unlikely to be in poverty. Conservatism is also reactive (Freeden 1996, 335-347), concerned with problematizing innovation rather than identifying and correcting problems within society.

Nevertheless, the issue of poverty is a missed opportunity for conservatives. Conservatism's focuses on effectiveness of policy, plurality of value, localism and the importance of meaningful institutions all suggest that it has something important to say, even if only as a corrective to misguided and uncritically accepted policies.

What is conservatism?

Defining conservatism is surprisingly hard, and various supposed or self-described 'conservatives' have adopted incompatible positions in recent years. 'Conservative' means more than 'right wing'. I shall focus on the classical conservative tradition, whose key text is Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. I have described this in more detail in (O'Hara 2005, 2011).

Uncertainty, knowledge and change

The key concept is *uncertainty*; the conservative claims rationalist ideologues cannot know what effects their policies will have. The first principle upon which conservatism is based is the *knowledge principle*:

Because society and its mediating institutions are highly complex and dynamic with natures that are constantly evolving ..., both data and theories about society are highly uncertain. (O'Hara 2011, 49-50)

That in itself says nothing about change, but if we add to the mix a consideration of risk we get the second principle of conservatism, the *change principle*.

Because the current state of society is typically undervalued, and because the effects of social innovations cannot be known fully in advance, then social change (a) must always risk destroying beneficial institutions and norms, and (b) cannot be guaranteed to achieve the aims for which it was implemented. It therefore follows that societies should be risk-averse with respect to social change, and the burden of proof placed on the innovator, not his or her opponents. It also follows that change, when it does come, should ideally be

(a) incremental, (b) reversible where possible, and (c) rigorously evaluated before the next incremental step. (O'Hara 2011, 88)

From the conjunction of these two principles, many things follow, including conservative themes such as authority, tradition, social stability, the rule of law, sound money, personal responsibility, conformity to norms and plurality of values. Much social wisdom about how people coexist, cooperate, allocate resources and settle disputes is encoded in the traditions and institutions of a society, and is rarely formulated explicitly. Changing or abolishing institutions and suppressing traditions and practices therefore risks destroying intangible social resources (Burke 1968). On the other hand, conservatism does not *condemn* change; the two principles shows that they merely shift the burden of argument. Change is more desirable when the state of society is less satisfactory, and therefore when the *risk* of change is relatively small. Burke wrote "To make us love our country, our country ought to be lovely" (Burke 1968, 172), and the loveliness of a country is surely inversely proportional to the extent of poverty within it.

Conservatives therefore reject universalist ideas about 'humanity' – humankind is an abstraction, but real people are situated in contexts which matter to them. Theories of universal justice like that of John Rawls (1972) ignore the things that matter most to people, their specific circumstances, family, friends, religion, job, gender. People do not have a defined identity, but their identities certainly matter to them and are deeply entwined with significant contexts in their lives (Gray 1993b). Conservatism is in tune with Wittgenstein's ideas about forms of life (Wittgenstein 1958, §§241-242), the importance of the particular and the irrelevance of the general.

However, it is important for those making decisions about a society to understand that society. One must be realistic about its faults – one should not try to recreate a mythical Golden Age, nor should one simply ignore massive social changes or inconvenient truths (O'Hara 2011). Data and information are uncertain, yet also necessary; they need to be interpreted carefully and not turned into headlines to laud or berate the government. Most important are consistent series of data that can be used to understand the effects of policies over time. Yet Conservative Party governments have often neglected data collection – Thatcher's government slashed the statistics office, which she later regretted, while the current Coalition government has also cut back shamefully on collecting data. We have lost surveys on local services and community cohesion from DCLG, drinking and drug taking among children from DfE and even the national census. Local councils spend much less time consuming data (Economist 2013). At a time when Big Data has revolutionised science, social science, business and policy (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier 2013), UK governments will be in total ignorance. The knowledge principle tells us that government policy will be even less informed than usual – and the consequences of that policy will therefore be even more unpredictable.

Unintended consequences

It will always be impossible for policymakers to determine what their policies will achieve – the problem of unintended consequences. This is especially tragic for the poor, who are often harmed by half-baked interventions, as John Bird, founder of the *Big Issue*, has cogently argued (2013). Free-spending governments often spark inflation whose malign effects hurt those at the bottom of the pile; when a pound buys less, those with fewest pounds suffer most. In Latin America, the poor will turn against a politician who can't control inflation, which is why the populist Argentinian

President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner has gone to absurd lengths to falsify inflation figures.

At independence in 1957, Ghana was as well-off as South Korea; yet misguided, Western-influenced post-colonial ideology, intended to make the nation self-sufficient and to eradicate poverty, put it at an enormous disadvantage. The Koreans, in contrast, went down the capitalist route with relatively few safety nets for the poor. The result? The gross national incomes per head of the two nations in 2011 at purchasing power parity were \$1.8k and \$30.3k respectively, and much less poverty in the latter. India's economy and politics are hampered by concern for the relief of poverty, which remains stubbornly high. Meanwhile poverty has declined rapidly in China since Deng Xiaoping instituted the "socialist market economy." Its rough and ready capitalism has brought 680m people out of extreme poverty since 1981, and now generates sufficient surpluses to put in place, for the first time, decent healthcare and pensions.

There are many examples of unintended consequences of ill-conceived policy from the major democracies. The push to sell subprime mortgages was driven by politicians of the left who wished, for entirely compassionate reasons, to get poor people on the bottom rung of the property ladder. Raghuram Rajan (2010) argues that a flood of misdirected mortgage credit from government-backed lenders Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac was unleashed by US Congressmen concerned about stagnating incomes among the less well-off and less educated.

Another example: 'sin taxes' are designed to make people live longer and healthier lives, but when the price of a packet of cigarettes goes up, the poor suffer most. Cigarettes provide a social bond – a shared cigarette is often a focus for interaction and conversation across classes and social groups. Furthermore, high prices of fags and booze have helped drive thousands of pubs out of business – but pubs are useful meeting places and support diverse social networks (that is why pubs nowadays only thrive in soap operas). Those heterogeneous social networks stifled by health campaigners can be useful in ameliorating the effects of poverty (see Afridi 2011 for a measured appraisal). Wide and diverse networks are correlated with higher income (Eagle et al 2010, Aharony et al 2011).

The seven deadly sins of poverty policy

Adam Smith was "tolerant in his view of government interference, especially when the object [was] to reduce poverty" (Rothschild 2001, 69). However, the knowledge principle implies that it is impossible to know whether some policy will have all and only the desired effects. So conservatism must engender principles of good and bad policies. Here are seven sins of poverty policy.

Calls for redistribution

Taking money from those who have it and giving it to those who do not may seem a no-brainer, until we consider potential unintended consequences. Capital taken from its owners might alleviate poverty temporarily; yet left with its owners, it might be put to productive use funding permanent jobs. The net effect of redistribution might be to put people out of work (either by moving capital to a less productive area, or by incentivising investors to leave the economy altogether), thereby exacerbating the problem it is intending to address.

Ignoring personal responsibility

People the best judge of their present and particular needs, so interference in their decisions should be sparing. This is important to reduce moral hazard, where people indulge in riskier or less productive behaviour because they know that they are likely to receive support if the risks don't pay off. Individuals should make the decision about whether to risk their current assets, but in most circumstances should shoulder the burden of risk. That does not mean risks cannot be socialised (e.g. pensions, health care), but we must avoid unrealistic discounting of risk and subsequent transfer of resources from the prudent to the reckless.

Welfarism

Valorisation of personal responsibility entails dislike of unconditional transfers to the poor. At a certain level of income it becomes rational to not work, which is hardly sensible. We should reject the canard that people on benefits prefer that way of life, but many must find themselves in a trap where extra work will affect them negatively. Being sheltered, or trapped depending on your point of view, by an impersonal system is neither pleasant nor empowering. A strand of conservative thought has documented the ill effects of welfare on the poor (Banfield 1974).

Ignoring local norms and existing identities

Surely no-one would maintain that “the poor”, despite always being with us, form a homogeneous group with a single set of interests, yet that is what the welfare system treats them as. Poverty has multiple causes, and multiple forms. Conservatism finds meaning in the local and the situated, not within some abstract statistical characterisation which draws an arbitrary line at earnings of \$2 per day, or 40% of the median income or whatever. Experiences of poverty, and solutions to the problem, will vary across communities depending on the traditions, institutions and communal resources (economic, social and intellectual) to which a poor person has access. Furthermore, these traditions will be an important aspect of a person's identity, and even if they are mutable, it is not the business of government to change them.

The implication is that localism looms large in the search for acceptable means to address poverty; giant faceless bureaucracies and national programmes are more likely to crush the humanity out of communities than provide welcome support. They are more likely to deconstruct local identities and treat poor people as rational utility maximisers to be ‘nudged’ (hateful word, hateful ideology – Thaler & Sunstein 2008) toward a favoured lifestyle with carrots and sticks. It also means that links and communications should be fostered between different communities – the function of bridging communities or brokering between different attitudes is vital for genuine understanding of the problems associated with poverty, and construction of solutions that might help. It should also be pointed out that if that bridging role is not occupied by reliable people, the vacuum can be filled by malevolent forces, such as loan sharks, who can exploit the short term needs of the poor to their longer term detriment.

It is also worth pointing out that the same is true of private sector attempts to address poverty by improving the economy. Microlending has been an important innovation, while decisions to lend money ought always to be taken by a person with experience of a local context who can size up a commercial operation or an individual's financial situation. Lending decisions made by algorithms in large banks rather than people in small bank branches, allocate money much less safely and productively (Bhidé 2010).

Paternalism

If we accept local norms, paternalism cannot be acceptable. Paternalism often arises when those on the left are frustrated when anti-poverty strategies fail – the poor are blamed, not the policies. Labour politicians complained about Britain's 'vulgar' 1950s consumer boom, despite the widespread dissemination of labour-saving devices which liberated a whole generation of women from drudgery. Even post-Thatcher, David Piachaud (1993, 16-17) was arguing that "many people are impoverished by their own behaviour and their own patterns of spending", citing "heavy smoking, drinking or gambling" and "ruinous video games" as examples. He suggested the bizarre policy of "invading consumer sovereignty" in order to "[give] people greater control," which is greater control in the sense of not being able to do what you wish.

Ignoring wider legitimacy

Transfers of resources from the relatively well-off to the poor have to be democratically legitimated, ideally by a politician standing up and making the case, risking rejection at the ballot box – which few politicians have dared to do for some decades in the UK. Redistribution of wealth 'on the sly' can only end in tears. There are three likely outcomes.

First, those who believe they make a net contribution without being consulted will become angry, leading to unpalatable and usually false myths about the 'feckless poor' and benefit cheats. Indeed, the closer one is to the possibility that one might need benefits in the future, the angrier one is likely to be; the left has always struggled with the evident fact that those most irritated by the supposed prevalence of welfare cheats are often disadvantaged themselves (cf. e.g. Harris 2013).

Second, the relatively well-off will use their greater numbers and greater propensity to vote to co-opt the system and milk it for themselves. Education and pensions are areas where one suspects the poor get an especially raw deal. It is a reasonable hypothesis that the serious waste in welfare, both in terms of needless use of government-funded services and of evasion and fraud, is down to wealthier citizens, not those in poverty.

The third possibility is the New Labour solution of by-passing taxpayers by borrowing the welfare money which is fine until the economy is bankrupted (when the money has to be clawed back to pay interest to rich investors), and which anyway is less useful than borrowing to invest in infrastructure and education.

Universal, bureaucratic solutions

A faceless national bureaucracy is unlikely to provide the help that the poor need, because the poor are not homogeneous. It is also unlikely to weed out fraudsters, which requires a nimbleness it will not have. However, it will be set up to deter fraud, and therefore simply repel or confuse the majority of honest folk who it persists in viewing as helpless supplicants. At worst it will incentivise an absolutely understandable 'fuck you' attitude – Lister describes those in poverty "getting (back) at" the system (2004, 140-144). The chief beneficiaries of a faceless bureaucracy are faceless bureaucrats, who become a political grouping with their own interests and claims to government resources. The poor are short of money, not daft, and they understand this; it is unsurprising that many view the welfare state, not as a benign benefactor, but as a nut to be cracked.

Far better are small schemes, prototypes, self-help ideas, letting a hundred flowers bloom. Something that works in a council estate may not in a crowded immigrant-dominated area, or in an area of rural deprivation. Even a major success like the conditional cash transfer scheme *Bolsa Família* began as a small-scale experiment. Local people understand context, and the poor understand most about what they need. Such people need power and respect, not handouts.

To avoid these seven sins, the conservative's rallying cries must be more power to the poor, less interference, fewer unconditional handouts.

Conservative views on key distinctions

Conservatism, rooted in respect for the local and the situated, and sensitive to the complexities of real-world contexts, is well-placed to contribute to the myriad debates on the conceptualisation and measurement of poverty, and to critique some of the more abstract line-drawing exercises. However, as noted earlier, conservative voices are rarely heard. Adam Smith's interest in poverty was already being airbrushed out of accounts of his philosophy as early as 1800 (Rothschild 2001, 69).

In this section, I will briefly discuss three well-known distinctions, arguing that conservatism entails particular views on them.

Absolute v relative

One thorny issue is the distinction between absolute measures of poverty, in terms of a particular amount of money or a quantity of wealth or goods below which one is counted as 'poor', and relative measures, for example as a proportion of median incomes. Perhaps the most stark statement of the importance of absolute measures is Keith Joseph's famous declaration that "An absolute standard means one defined by reference to the real needs of the poor. ... By any absolute standard there is very little poverty in Britain today" (Joseph & Sumption 1979, 27-28).

This statement was influential, partly because Joseph's book was published in 1979 and seemed to be part of the roadmap for the then-nascent Thatcher revolution. Yet – even though he had spent some time on a Quaker project living with miners in Rotherham – he had an abstract and statistical view of poverty, and found it hard to empathise with the quotidian demoralisation of the able-bodied poor (Denham & Garnett 2001, 134). The association with absolute conceptions of poverty has remained strong. Many have complained that Conservative Party governments have used Joseph-style arguments to airbrush the phenomenon away (Corden 1996, 18).

However, the Burkean tradition is sensitive to the state of society as it stands, not as we might like it to be. Key indicators evolve – the modern suburbanite leads a millionaire lifestyle compared to their immediate postwar equivalent, while a comfortable existence circa 1945 would be intolerable now. For example, it is virtually impossible to imagine life without a fridge in a modern democracy, whereas as late as 1970 40% of the population managed without. Even Thatcher argued that "Capitalism works by increasing what used to be the privileges of the few to become the daily necessities of the many" (a position with which Joseph used to concur – Denham & Garnett 331).

This view of the changing nature of necessity has been evident within the conservative tradition since its beginnings. Adam Smith was quite clear about it.

By necessities, I understand not only the commodities which are indispensably necessary for the support of life but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is strictly speaking not a necessity of life ... [b]ut in the present time ... a creditable day labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt. (Smith 1976, V.ii.k, 869-870)

Conservative attitudes to inequality are nuanced (O'Hara 2011, 168-171). Some commentators both sympathetic (Cowling 1978) and hostile (Eccleshall 2003) have claimed that the preservation of inequality is central to conservatism. This cannot be correct. Conservatives do not recognise inequality necessarily as an evil, but different societies have different tolerances – a level of inequality acceptable in the US may be unconscionable in the UK, never mind Sweden. Not all inequalities can, need or should be addressed in politics. Even if we accept “the importance to children and young people of clothing as an expression of their emergent identities”, it cannot be the job of the taxpayer to furnish them with acceptable designer gear, as Lady Lister seems to suggest (2004, 118-119) – especially as in a consumer society stigma can attach not only to the goods one consumes but also to the routes by which one comes about them (Williams 2002).

Some levels of inequality may be argued to be a social problem – the dust hasn't settled on the evaluation of Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level* (2009), but their evidence, if substantiated, would have to be taken seriously, while (Kumhof & Rancière 2010) among others find that inequality may induce dangerous patterns of debt and leverage. Higher levels of inequality undoubtedly make it harder to reduce *extreme* poverty (Chandy et al 2013). So the conservative should assess inequalities on a case-by-case basis, to understand whether in a particular context social stability was threatened by inequality at particular levels.

Money v status

The truism that poverty is a lack of money seems to coarsen the issue. To focus on the quantity of money to which a person has access will tempt us into some of the seven sins. For instance, the fungible nature of money could lure the unwary into an arbitrary, context-independent ‘cut-off’ level definition, and then the inevitable pointless debates about whether someone on £50 per week is or is not poor, ignoring the question of whether he or she lives in London or West Belfast, is disabled or not, has a particular level of education etc. Furthermore, when such definitions are incorporated into policy, the consequences of earning £50.01 as opposed to £49.99 can be enormous.

There have been a number of alternatives proposed, most notably by Amartya Sen (2009, 253-268), who follows Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in arguing for a focus not on income but *capabilities*. This is a salutary perspective, sensitive to the notions that (a) different people value different things, and (b) different things are required for “credible people” in different cultures.

Nevertheless, although Sen's arguments are important, ultimately we cannot define poverty independently from levels of wealth. Someone who is incapable yet wealthy is no doubt in an unfortunate and unenviable position, but is certainly not poor. It also threatens to nullify the notion of poverty, since ‘capabilities’ and ‘opportunities’ can be defined and discussed in many ways. After all, everyone is denied *some* opportunity, and the concept may become vacuous.

Yet the distinction is always worth bearing in mind. Poverty is bad because it brings with it a lowering of status and a lack of respect. The low-paid person often becomes invisible (Toynbee 2003). Poverty brings needless expense (the inability to buy cheaply in bulk, difficult commutes, complex transport arrangements, the inability to save) – as the singer T.V. Smith opined, *It's Expensive Being Poor*.

Many issues surrounding poverty could at least be ameliorated by increasing the respect afforded to the poor, and empowering them to make decisions and craft their own solutions to the problems *as they perceive them*, rather than simply transferring money. The welfarist solution to poverty does precisely the opposite, cheerlessly doling out money to no obvious purpose in a setting so mechanistic and dehumanising that recognition and respect are the last things one is likely to feel.

So conservatism should be well-placed to interpret and support the aspirations of disadvantaged groups and individuals. However, post-1992, the Tories have been absent from our inner cities. Given that many successful initiatives to ease poverty, whether carried out by charities, community groups or churches, are often conservative in spirit, focusing in personal responsibility, respect, ‘taking control’ and avoiding blunt bureaucratic solutions, one feels this is an opportunity missed.

The lack of empathy that Conservative Party politicians have with the poor (who would never vote for them) is surely responsible for unnecessarily brutal policy ideas intended primarily to balance budgets rather than to help people out of a fix. It is hard to see the bedroom tax, or a benefit cap insensitive to variations in property prices, as anything other than kicking people who are already down. It is absolutely essential for the government to bring the UK's spiralling debts down, and preferable to eliminate them. Welfare spending will have to be squeezed alongside everything else. It could, and should, be done sensitively, and preferably at a local rather than a national level.

Deserving v undeserving

Conservatives certainly have form with regard to the idea of the ‘undeserving poor’. Personal responsibility is important, but all too often Conservative Party politicians find the path of least electoral resistance in demonising the poor as welfare scroungers (and in this they are not unique; the Labour Party does its own populist pandering). This is a shameful practice, but we should bear in mind that the parties indulge in it because they see electoral gains. They go where voters lead them. Communities are perfectly capable of making their own distinctions along these lines, and have little or no confidence in the authorities getting it right. In any case, evidence is surely better than gesture politics – for conservative reasons (O'Hara 2011, 301-315). To this end, data gathering exercises like (Wood et al 2012) must help – the majority of poor people are in low paid employment, with difficult lives. Most unemployed people are more than willing to work, although they may retain enough dignity to want to make some sort of a choice.

The notion of desert is important for democratic legitimacy. If money is transferred from taxpayers on the basis of need, there will be inevitable calls for control and conditions. It will be visible if welfare is ‘frittered away’ on cigarettes, smartphones or subscriptions to Sky. Even some Labour politicians, such as Frank Field, believe that a contributory principle is more just. Although Chris Mullin bizarrely blamed the “benefit culture” on the Thatcher decade, he still argued that it was real: “it hangs around our neck like a huge albatross” and we are “destined for ever to go on

manufacturing sullen, indifferent, useless youths; pouring [money] into a bottomless pit (Mullin 2009, 229-230).

The idea of transfers based on need will – in the mind of someone who has just paid a tax bill – raise the question of what ‘need’ is and of why I, who have worked hard and just seen 20% or more of that effort disappear in the general direction of George Osborne, have slaved to keep someone rooted to his couch watching Jeremy Kyle. This is unfair, but welfarism creates this dialectic, to which thesis government responds with the antithesis of benefit caps, workfare schemes, interminable forms, anti-fraud devices and other ways to push the poor around to please disaffected taxpayers.

Far better to try to support and create opportunities. Translation roles, such as brokering between communities and government, and bridging between different cultures are important. Training and education are vital functions of government. Spending on infrastructure is helpful too, reducing the costs of work and cooperation; for the absurd cost of the High Speed Rail link, many local rail, bus and tram networks could be improved or updated, making it easier and cheaper for people to get to and find work. Unhelpful Victorian ideas of deserving and undeserving poor disappear when a politics of support, recognition and respect of agency replaces bureaucratic redistribution and giant flagship projects.

The role of the market

Conservatism is not slavishly devoted to free markets as the only, or most efficient, method of resource allocation (that would breach the knowledge principle), and does not advocate marketising where markets did not exist before without careful study and analysis (that would breach the change principle). Markets can undermine social stability (Gray 1995). Yet conservatives admire free markets and support them where possible (O’Hara 2011, 211-227, Gray 1993a). It is worth a brief excursus to outline what is so good about them.

Adam Smith understood that markets operated in a context and depended on many other social structures (e.g. the rule of law, widespread social trust – Muller 1993). More modern thinkers, whether neo-liberal free market evangelists or market-bashing anti-capitalists, are far less sophisticated – right wing economists ignore their social context while sociologists of the left fail to see the value they add (Smart 2003, 80-84).

Markets are important for several reasons. Firstly, we should refute the bizarre, not to say insane, charge that they promote selfishness. It is true that markets do not prevent people acting in self-interest, but that is not the same thing. Selfishness will cause failure in a market, because to succeed you have to do what someone else wants doing. You have to make yourself useful to someone else, otherwise nothing will come your way. You have to be other-directed. You have to think of others to prosper. Markets promote sociality, not selfishness. Compare a transfer system, where one is not obliged to think of the needs of others. Compare a planned economy, where political lobbying of producer interests replaces demand and supply.

Secondly, markets may not allocate resources perfectly – whatever that might mean – but they do do it well. As Easterly points out (2006, 4, 13-14), an aid programme can’t necessarily get mosquito nets where they are needed, but the free market in books managed to get the latest Harry Potter tome to devotees within minutes of its

going on sale at midnight. If we assume that smartphones might be useful to the poor, could any system other than a free market ensure that 36% of Americans with less than high school education, 43% of those earning under \$30,000pa, and fully 77% of 18-29 year olds earning under \$30,000pa possess a smartphone (Smith 2013)? Any government-sponsored effort to get smartphones to the young or poor would (a) miss the target, (b) subsidise middle-class expenditure that would have happened anyway, and (c) inhibit technological innovation as companies stopped competing on services and began reaping in oligopoly profits from a dozy government department with a budget to spend.

Thirdly, markets demand trust to operate. Trust is a useful habit, closely related to social capital; the ability to trust enables cooperation and reciprocity (Fukuyama 1995). It does not come naturally, especially when the risks of trust are high. Free markets help coordinate the rewards for trust and trustworthiness.

Fourthly, the free market allows people to spend their money wisely or unwisely, and no doubt results in some people being fatter, less healthy, uglier, more bizarrely spray-tanned, more oddly-dressed and less edifyingly entertained. On the other hand, it does pay people the courtesy of respecting their autonomy. Any other system ultimately diminishes autonomy, telling people what they need and giving them what they should have. Sometimes this is important for social reasons – many areas thought to be intrinsically valuable (from the production of French cheeses to healthcare to the preservation of art and ancient monuments) are often insulated from market forces. There is a political argument to be had over which goods should be allocated by free markets and which not, but if there is to be liberty and autonomy in a society, free markets are an essential part of the mix.

Finally, markets are the most reliable source of the economic growth that has been the main cause of the Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people in poverty since 1990 (Ravallion 2013).

In many ways, the problem of poverty is to identify who needs what resources for their own aspirations and projects, and then to target and distribute resources appropriately. Targeting and distribution is what free markets do well – it is important not to neglect their capabilities.

Conclusion: empowerment

Tackling poverty is *not* the process of getting a fixed list of resources into the hands of a passive group of supplicants. The inevitable failure of such a Sisyphean process leads to the normal frustrated paternalist scorn for the supplicants who, either through ingratitude, ignorance or fecklessness, have ‘frittered’ the resources away before they ‘improved’ themselves sufficiently to take their place as fully-fledged ‘stakeholders’ in society. This is a fundamentally corrupting and disrespectful view which is almost designed to alienate the poor.

Ultimately, conservatism is about taking power from governments and giving it back to people, not as individuals but in their community settings. Empowerment can take many forms. Support needs to be personalised and targeted (cf. e.g. Holmes & Oakley 2013), and technology can be an important aid. Local solutions, including payment by results to allow experimentation and innovation, need to be tried. The tools for self-government should be provided, including open data to allow community groups to understand and negotiate their own environment more fully. Indeed, some techno-

optimists even see government withering away and civil society sidestepping officialdom for the first time in many decades (Carswell 2012).

That is no doubt unlikely. But there is far more mileage in supporting poor communities and devolving power. To understand a community, one needs to be involved in it, yet government is not; neither will it leave the community alone. Old-fashioned welfare involved building a concrete bunker and plonking it down in a shopping centre – the poor would go in and out and interaction would be minimal. New-fangled welfare is now online, and the human element has retreated further. We need data – which makes the government's neglect of data collection so regrettable. Data is needed almost at the household level, as argued by (Wood et al 2012). Where possible, that data should be open data (this may not be completely possible where the data might be identifying). And data is only one half of the story – the qualitative side of the story is also important. Lines of communication need to be opened between those who live or work in disadvantaged communities or campaign for disadvantaged groups, and policymakers.

There are many means of tackling poverty. Most of them involve leaving people alone to make their own decisions about what to do to earn money and what to exchange it for, and providing an infrastructure to support their decisions where necessary. For the conservative, every group of people is unique, and every society precious and vulnerable to interference. People understand their own situation; outsiders don't.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Lizzie Coles-Kemp of Royal Holloway, University of London, for many stimulating conversations and discussions over some years now about poverty and disadvantaged communities. Many ideas in this paper stem from those discussions, as does the references to T.V. Smith (whom I was happy to discover was formerly with the Adverts) and John Bird; she does not endorse the ideological perspective in this piece. More generally, responsibility for the use, phrasing and ideological context for those ideas, and for the many gaps in the coverage and understanding of the literature, is entirely mine.

References

Asif Afridi (2011). *Social Networks: Their Role in Addressing Poverty*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation Programme Paper, <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/poverty-social-networks-full.pdf>.

Nadav Aharony, Wei Pan, Cory Ip, Inas Khayal & Alex Pentland (2011). 'Social fMRI: investigating and shaping social mechanisms in the real world', *Pervasive and Mobile Computing*, 7(6), 643-659.

Edward Banfield (1974). *The Unheavenly City Revisited*, Boston: Scott Foresman.

Amar Bhidé (2010). *A Call For Judgment: Sensible Finance for a Dynamic Economy*, New York: Oxford University Press.

John Bird (2013). 'Beware unintended consequences', *The Big Issue*, 16th May, 2013, <http://www.bigissue.com/features/columnists/2372/beware-unintended-consequences>.

Edmund Burke (1968). *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Douglas Carswell (2012). *The End of Politics: And the Birth of iDemocracy*, London: Biteback.

Laurence Chandy, Natasha Ledlie & Veronika Penciakova (2013). *The Final Countdown: Prospects for Ending Extreme Poverty by 2030*, Policy Paper 2013-04, Brookings Institution.

Anne Corden (1996). 'Writing about poverty: ethical dilemmas', in Hartley Dean (ed.), *Ethics and Social Policy Research*, Luton: Luton University Press.

Maurice Cowling (1978). 'The present position', in Maurice Cowling (ed.), *Conservative Essays*, London: Cassell, 1-24.

Andrew Denham & Mark Garnett (2001). *Keith Joseph*, Chesham: Acumen.

Nathan Eagle, Michael Macy & Rob Claxton (2010). 'Network diversity and economic development', *Science*, 328, 1029-1031.

William Easterly (2006). *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*, New York: Penguin.

Robert Eccleshall (2003). 'Conservatism', in Robert Eccleshall, Alan Finlayson, Vincent Geoghegan, Michael Kenny, Moya Lloyd, Iain MacKenzie & Rick Wilford (eds.), *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 3rd edition, London: Routledge, 47-72.

The Economist (2013). 'Stats, spats and spads', *The Economist*, 8th June, 2013.

Michael Freeden (1996). *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Francis Fukuyama (1995). *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity*, New York: Free Press.

John Gray (1993a). *Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government and the Common Environment*, London: Routledge.

John Gray (1993b). 'The politics of cultural diversity', in *Post-Liberalism: Studies in Political Thought*, Abingdon: Routledge, 253-271.

John Gray (1995). 'The undoing of conservatism' in *Enlightenment's Wake: Politics and Culture at the Close of the Modern Age*, London: Routledge, 1995, 87-119.

John Harris (2013). 'We have to talk about why some people agree with benefit cuts', *The Guardian*, 31st March, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/mar/31/we-have-to-talk-why-some-want-benefit-cuts>.

Ed Holmes & Matthew Oakley (2013). *Route2Work: Employment Support for the Very-Hardest-To-Help*, London: Policy Exchange, <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/route2work.pdf>.

Keith Joseph & Jonathan Sumption (1979). *Equality*, London: John Murray.

Michael Kumhof & Romain Rancière (2010). *Inequality, Leverage and Crises*, IMF Working Paper WP/10/268, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2010/wp10268.pdf>.

Ruth Lister (2004). *Poverty*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Viktor Mayer-Schönberger & Kenneth Cukier (2013). *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work and Think*, London: John Murray (Publishers).

- Jerry Z. Muller (1993). *Adam Smith in His Time and Ours*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Chris Mullin (2009). *A View From the Foothills: The Diaries of Chris Mullin*, London: Profile Books.
- Michael Oakeshott (1991). 'On being conservative', in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, revised and expanded edition, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 407-437.
- Kieron O'Hara (2005). *After Blair: Conservatism Beyond Thatcher*, Thriplow: Icon Books.
- Kieron O'Hara (2011). *Conservatism*, London: Reaktion.
- David Piachaud (1993). *What's Wrong With Fabianism?* Fabian Society pamphlet no.558, London: Fabian Society.
- Raghuram G. Rajan (2010). *Fault Lines: How Hidden Fractures Still Threaten the World Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Martin Ravallion (2013). *How Long Will it Take to Lift One Billion People Out of Poverty?* World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 6325, http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/IW3P/IB/2013/01/22/000158349_20130122091052/Rendered/PDF/wps6325.pdf.
- John Rawls (1972). *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Emma Rothschild (2001). *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet and the Enlightenment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Amartya Sen (2010). *The Idea of Justice*, London: Allen Lane.
- Barry Smart (2003). *Economy, Culture and Society*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Aaron Smith (2013). *Smartphone Ownership – 2013 Update*, Pew Research Center Internet and American Life Project, <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Smartphone-Ownership-2013.aspx>.
- Adam Smith (1776). *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 volumes, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Richard H. Thaler & Cass R. Sunstein (2008). *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Polly Toynbee (2003). *Hard Work: Life in Low-Pay Britain*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Richard Wilkinson & Kate Pickett (2009). *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better For Everyone*, London: Penguin.
- Colin C. Williams (2002). 'Social exclusion in a consumer society: a study of five rural communities', *Social Policy and Society*, 1(3), 203-211.
- Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958). *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd edition, G.E.M. Anscombe (trans.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell
- Claudia Wood, Jo Salter, Gareth Morrell, Matt Barnes, Ally Paget & Duncan O'Leary (2012). *Poverty in Perspective*, London: Demos.