“Deaf co-operatives – Alternative spaces, alternative orders”

Script from Session entitled “Historical Geographies of Co-operative Praxis”

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Authors: W. J. Lyons and Mike Gulliver.

For any further information, please contact Mike Gulliver (mike.gulliver@bristol.ac.uk).

In 1859, seven Deaf men in London wrote to a charity named the ‘Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb’, with a request.

The request was simple, but extremely problematic. Given the irreverent nature of the rooms in which the Association had been providing them with Sunday teaching, they asked for a church for the exclusive use of the Deaf.

In support of the request, they offered £100, a sum, which they had already collected from within the London Deaf community to support such a venture.

The Association initially refused. Responding that they ‘did not think that, at present, it would be wise to build a Church for their exclusive use since it would only service to further widen the already wide gap between the Deaf and hearing…’ (this is a paraphrase)

When, however, it was pointed out to them that their choice was not really whether to grant or deny Deaf people a church of their own, but rather to have the church run under their auspices, or see it go elsewhere, they acquiesced.

The church build was started in 1870, and opened its doors in 1874. It sat on Oxford Street until 1923, when it was relocated to Acton in West London where it remained until earlier this year, when it was sold by that same charity.

In this shard, we offer this example, as a way into exploring the notion of Deaf cooperatives, and to problematize a key element of the cooperative movement, namely the nature of capital.

By tying together notions from Bourdieu and Lefebvre, we suggest that one of the reasons that Deaf people have traditionally explored cooperative solutions, is to secure capital – but capital that is not ‘financial’ in nature, as we might expect, but rather spatial.

Without further ado then, the definition of a cooperative by the International Cooperative Association; is “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.” From http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles

These three needs, 'economic, social and cultural' are the same three fundamental forms in which Pierre Bourdieu argues that capital appears.

- The first is Economic capital, which is relatively straightforward.
- Second is Cultural Capital, which is the sum of knowledge that society holds in common, arising as a product of social interaction.
- And a part of cultural capital is Social capital, which is the ability to leverage power from networks, or people; individuals, or groups.

For Bourdieu, the essence of capital is that it is valuable… because:

1. It comes about through human action… it represents an investment of 'doing' by humanity. As such, it accrues value (attributed by society in various ways… one of which being that…)
2. It represents 'potential capacity'. Capital is a lever that allows people to 'get things done'.

Move from Bourdieu to space, then… and the work of Henri Lefebvre, who suggested that

- Space, too, represents an outcome of 'doing' by humanity.
- And that that 'doing' is a context of potential, in itself providing the environment for life, and a site of interaction through which knowledge is produced, which is then held in common, and mobilised as that space is reproduced.

… knowledge… like language. Or, perhaps, knowledge *is* language… Lefebvre asks at one point in the Production of space whether social space could viably be conceived of as a language, or a discourse… a reality within which humanity resides.

Bourdieu concurs by suggesting that society is nothing more than accumulated history – the gathering together of cultural and social capital in common.

There is, it appears, a direct link that equates social space, with capital.

And it is here that we come back to the Deaf community.

A community who, by dint of their deafness are, to differing degrees, unable to share in the social spaces of the hearing world, and so – without Deaf spaces – are, effectively, capital-less.

We find, in the 19th century, a number of examples of Deaf community cooperative projects: mutual societies, employment agencies, printing presses, and so on.

Certainly, these had an economic aim – the pursuit of an economic capital that could be held, controlled, and deployed beyond the reach of others.

Projects like St Saviour's, however, suggest that that economic capital may have served to generate a different type of capital. The primary capital that the Deaf community pursued, and continue to pursue in cooperative projects is, in fact, the fundamental 'wealth' that allows them to be… that is the capital of Deaf space.