Contesting public accountability: A dialogical exploration of accountability and social housing

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the interaction between neoliberal inspired reforms of public services and the mechanisms for achieving public accountability. Where once accountability was exercised through the ballot box, now in the neoliberal age managerial and market based forms of accountability predominate. The analysis identifies resistance from civil society campaigns to the neoliberal restructuring of public services which leads to public account-ability (PA) becoming a contested arena. To develop this analysis a re-theorisation of PA, as a relationship where civil society seeks to control the state, is explored in the context of social housing in England over the past thirty years. Central to this analysis is a dialogi-cal analysis of key documents from a social housing regulator and civil society campaign. The analysis shows that the current PA practices are an outcome of both reforms from the government and resistance from civil society (in the shape of tenants' campaigns). The out-come of which is to tell the story of the changes in PA (and accountability) centring on an analysis of discourse. Thus, the paper moves towards answering the question – what has happened to PA during the neoliberal age?

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1. Introduction

> "I think 20 years from now we will realise that council housing was actually quite a good thing with locally owned housing with local accountability and sustainable forms of management." Colin Wiles, chief executive of King Street Housing Society (Inside Housing, 2007)

The past 30 years have seen reforms to the public services across the globe according to neoliberal principles (Harvey, 2005; Saad-Filho and Johnston, 2005); pursued in the form of deregulation, privatisation and the extension of market mechanisms over service provision. This process has been examined from many perspectives in the accounting literature[1] but one aspect has been almost completely absent from these examinations.[2] As the neoliberal reforms have been rolled out, they have also generated resistance in the form of a variety of social movements. These movements have occurred across the globe; for example, the right to water campaigns in South Africa and Veracruz, Mexico or the right to housing in Mombasa or the health campaigns in Cabo, Brazil (Newell and Wheeler, 2006). In the UK the same processes are at work

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[1] For example Broadbent et al. (1996); Arnold and Cooper (1999); Broadbent and Laughlin (2003); Edwards and Shaoul (2003); Gill-McLure et al. (2003); Chow et al. (2008).

[2] The clash between neo-liberal reforms and resistance has been addressed by Broadbent et al. (1996) and Laughlin (1996) through an ethics framework.

in campaigns against City Academies[3] and in favour of maintaining the NHS (National Health Service) in public hands. An important motivating factor and area of contestation in these campaigns is the question of accountability. As the market is extended across public services the mechanisms of public accountability (PA) change from democratic and bureaucratic forms to managerial and market-based forms (Law, 1999; Goddard, 2005). It is this process of reform and resistance in public accountability, specifically in the context of social housing, which is the focus of this paper.

The marketisation and neoliberal reforms of public services (Harvey, 2005; Whitfield, 2006), have impacted on social housing (as much as any other part of the public sector) in the UK. Including the right-to-buy policy and attempts to privatise large slices of council housing in the form of LSVTs[4] (Large-scale voluntary transfers) (Daly et al., 2005). LSVTs have had a variety of impacts for those whose homes have been transferred to private housing associations (e.g. higher rents and eviction rates). In relation to PA there is a transition from local authority housing committees with democratically elected members to management boards of private not for profit organisations. However, this transition has also generated resistance in the form of tenants' campaigns and other groups such as Defend Council Housing (DCH)[5] and the House of Commons Council Housing Group (HOCCHG).[6]

It is argued here that the existing literature on public accountability (PA) only partially addresses these neoliberal changes and ignores the resistance from service users they have generated. This paper posits an alternative approach drawn from the development studies literature (Newell and Wheeler, 2006; Newell, 2006). It conceptualises *Critical Public Accountability* (CPA) as a "...dynamic social relationship through which civil society seeks to control and challenge the state" (Smyth, 2007: p. 29). By adopting a Critical Realist approach (Bhaskar, 1989; Fleetwood, 2004; Sayer, 2004), with an emphasis on a stratified emergent reality and a subtle understanding of the structure/agency dichotomy, CPA also embraces a range of research tools that enables a robust analysis of accountability relations. Thus, defining PA in these terms, space is opened up for an exploration of this multifaceted concept in its social context.

The paper is divided into two parts – the first discusses the intersection of neoliberalism and public accountability, setting out the generative mechanisms of the former and their impact on the latter. Two key points become evident. First, the neoliberal reforms have generated resistance from civil society groups. And second, that those reforms have sought to extend governance by elites and experts (Harvey, 2005), displacing existing democratic forms of accountability. This section concludes by setting out the foundations of CPA. The second part shows how PA has become a contested arena between the state (in this case the Housing Corporation[7]) and civil society (House of Commons Council Housing Group). Documents from both organisations are analysed using a dialogic approach, where their *utterances* on accountability are compared and contrasted. Dialogic method (Bakhtin, 1981)[8] argues that each *utterance* is composed of tension-filled competing meanings that reflect broader socio-economic and historical forces, such as the marketisation of public services. In addition, in both the literature review and the document analysis the role of tenants in accountability relations and governance is highlighted. Building on the foregoing the paper concludes by identifying the need to study civil society campaigns' impact on accountability mechanisms. This is not just to fill a gap in the literature, but also as examples of agents who are challenging neoliberal policies both locally and nationally, a form of accounterability (Kamuf, 2007).

2. Public accountability

Dubnick and Justice (2004: p. 7), point out accountability's "notorious ambiguity". Roberts and Scapens (1985: p. 447) definition of accountability as the "giving and demanding of reasons for conduct" sets out some of the key elements of accountability – a relationship, an account, an underlying power basis. However, the definition is essentially limited to the issue of answerability.[9] This confusion pervades the literature on accountability, where a series of related concepts are often used interchangeably. For example, Jones (1977) distinguishes between responsiveness, answerability and accountability. Kamuf (2007) identifies this problem, where accountability is equated to transparency; and Barton (2006) stresses the import of information (i.e. transparency) when discussing outsourcing and accountability in the public sector. Repeatedly the literature on PA and accountability is framed in the context of reporting mechanisms only. In contrast for this paper, in addition to the elements of transparency, answerability and report giving, the essential core of an accountability relationship

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[3] City Academies are schools taken out of local authority control and run by private organisations such as businesses or charities. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's Free Schools are a type of City Academy.

[4] LSVTs occur when council housing stock is transferred over to a Housing Association. For this process to be completed the local tenants must vote in favour in a ballot.

[5] DCH is a national umbrella campaign group that has tenant groups, trade unions and politicians affiliated to it.

[6] The HOCCHG is a group of backbench MPs drawn from both the Labour Party and Liberal Democrats. A membership list is available at www.support4councilhousing.org.uk.

[7] The Housing Corporation is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) that acts both as a funder and regulator of registered social landlords.

[8] There is some debate to whether Bakhtin and Volosinov are one the same person (Morris, 1994). It is most likely that they were in fact two individuals both part of intellectual circles in Nevel, Vitebsk and Leningrad between 1924 and 1929. Volosinov "disappeared" sometime in 1934 during Stalin's purges and Bakhtin never officially denied or accepted that he wrote the texts ascribed to Volosinov (Holborow, 1999).

[9] This is not a new problem. In the early 1970s, a debate took place in the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* on the difference between accountability and answerability (Blatz, 1972; Harris and Spannier, 1976). The debate turned on a distinction between 'being answerable' and 'being accountable'. Harris and Spannier (1976: p. 254) make the point that it is perfectly possible to '...fulfil the requirements of answerability without meeting the requirements of accountability.'