

Commentary

Smile, be happy

Late December 2003 two publications arrived simultaneously in our mail boxes: the year's final issue of *Environment and Planning A (E&PA)* and the annual report of the (UK) Universities Superannuation Scheme (USS). In *E&PA* Sue Roberts wrote, mainly from an American perspective, on "Why we let each other down" (Roberts, 2003) while in the small print of the USS accounts we noticed that the UK academics' pension fund had, in just 12 months, fallen from £19.956 billion to £15.582 billion, losing almost a quarter of its value (USS, 2003). These are English billions and British pounds, so the amounts involved may be a little more than our US colleagues might appreciate. Furthermore, there are 98 344 active members in the UK scheme so their average holdings in the scheme are each now worth only £158 444. Not much to retire on. Try buying a pension for life with that and see what you would have to live on for a year, less of course if you are female and expected to live longer. However, USS pensions do not quite work in that way. Clearly, current contributions fund pensioner members and other beneficiaries. Thus as middle-aged academics we are all in favour of any rapid expansion of younger people into jobs in academia in the UK! Nevertheless, seeing the worth of your pension fund fall by almost a quarter makes you realise that even in the quasi-state sector you may not be as immune as you think to the vagaries of the markets. At the same time, and for completely unrelated reasons, the main teaching union in the pre-1992 universities is calling for a strike ballot on pay (again).

Why do we let each other down? Sue Roberts partly blames the demands for increased productivity, for 'excellence', for higher FTEs—full-time equivalent students, sources of money rather than people—and partly blames the fact that we are expected to do a little more 'at home' than were the generation who preceded us (and usually a lot more if we are female). This may all be true, but if we are all now working so hard why has our pension funding shrunk by 22% in a year? Why does our union claim that our wages have shrunk by similar amounts (in 'real' terms) over the last few years? If our US colleagues are better rewarded and looked after in their old age why are they too finding academia apparently more difficult? If we are working harder for money where is that money going and what are we working so hard for? Sue Roberts suggests that "... I am trying to situate all of this... it might be helpful if we could figure out the concatenation of institutional, social and economic pressures that frame (if not cause) the many ways we let each other down so badly so often" (Roberts, 2003, page 2096). As a first step it might be worth speculating on whether this degree of moaning is not always the case in universities...

Levels of happiness in the Western world when measured in various ways have generally held stable over the last fifty years (Dorling and Ward, 2003). As societies have become richer the increased levels of personal satisfaction have been eroded, it has been claimed, by increases in inequality. Increased affluence has raised general levels of happiness while increased inequality has diminished them, the net effect being no overall change. As people in work have seen their pay rise over time they have seen the pay of others paid more than them rise even faster. Thus right across the income spectrum people may feel relatively poorer as they compare themselves with those who are better off. At the end of the spectrum is either an individual feeling very pleased with himself or herself for having become very wealthy, or someone feeling

very insecure (perhaps waiting for the accountants to rumble them?) Given Sue Roberts's wish to situate the feelings academics so often express about their own situations, would not a good place to start be those studies which have been conducted of general trends in feelings of happiness and well-being in the population as a whole? If in the two sets of places we are familiar with here, the US and UK, the general standing and remuneration of academics have fallen slowly over time (relative to the wealthy in both countries), we should not be surprised that in both places the level of complaint is a little higher. If, in general, people are dedicating less time to "courtesy and civility" (page 2096) in society as a whole we, as academics, are simply reflecting those changes. Our ivory towers are not immune from changes outside their walls.

Concerns over trends on civility and citizenship are also part of the contemporary malaise. We (at least in the UK and US) do not vote in increasing numbers and we join fewer social and voluntary organisations than our parents (Pattie and Johnston, 2001; Putnam, 2000). Civic activity remains in part a function of affluence. The resource rich are more likely to be politically involved in their communities than are the resource poor (Pattie et al, 2003). To some extent, of course, it can be argued that alternative repertoires of political action are opening up. Ethical consumption is on the rise, and the idea of public protest in the UK undoubtedly received a boost in the aftermath of events such as the petrol and pro-hunting protests of 2000 and the antiwar protests of 2003. Even so, these countertrends may well prove blips on an otherwise downward trajectory of decreasing citizen involvement. Not only that, but the most common political acts are relatively 'low-cost' individual actions: collective action is becoming rare (Pattie et al, 2003). Close to home, this presages potential problems for academic unions seeking collective action to protect (collective) pay structures: current academic pay proposals in the UK have the potential to create wide gaps in rewards between institutions and within institutions with some academic staff in particular threatened with absolute cuts in their pay. Will potential winners set aside their promised gains to minimise the impact on potential losers? If society as a whole is anything to go by, don't bet on it!

So what do we do? Use what we have. Recognise that much of what is happening in academia is happening more widely but we, given our work, should be better equipped to cope with it, at the very least to understand it. Try to be civil, say no early rather than cancel at the last minute. Referee promptly the next paper that is sent to you (you might learn something)! Try to differentiate what absolutely has to be done, from what it is important to do, and that again from what it may be unnecessary or counter-productive to do. And when your pension fund is decimated twice in a year, reach for the latest economic geography textbook on geographies of globalisation and think "could I use that set of accounts in a lecture on this?" The world may be a very different place long before you retire. Smile, be happy, it may never happen ☺

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References

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