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Sheffield's Tenants' Theatres in the 1980s: theatre, community and activism

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Abstract:	This essay offers an account of the tenants' activist theatres which developed in Sheffield, UK, in the 1980s, and the role I and collaborator John Goodchild played in their development. A response by working-class communities to the devastating effects of globalisation, rapid de-industrialisation, and mass unemployment, the theatres were a contribution to local and national campaigns. The essay sets out the political and social context in which the theatres arose, beginning with the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister of a Conservative Government in 1979. The key themes of what came to be known as Thatcherism, defined by a focus on free market economics, de-regulation, and attacks on trade unions and local government powers, are then detailed. These attacks gave rise to national and local resistance in the forms of strikes and campaigns, which provided the context for the emergence of Manor Campaign Theatre, the first of the tenants' groups. The main body of the essay offers a narrative of the tenants' theatres, their processes and organisation, and their role within campaigns around housing, welfare, credit unions, and water poverty. The conclusion connects these struggles with current injustices, sourced in the still-unfolding impacts of Thatcherism.

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> Many problems in a local community which seemingly have their roots in the neighborhood in reality stem from sources far removed from the community. To a considerable extent these problems are the result of vast destructive forces that pervade the entire social scene. It is when these forces impinge upon the local community that they give rise to a definite community problem. (Alinsky 1989, 60)

The British Context

In her contribution to *New Times*, a collection of essays published in 1989, journalist Bea Campbell (Campbell 1989, 279) makes the point that the election of UK Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1979 did not inaugurate the historical disintegration of an economic model which had dominated the British political, social and cultural landscape since 1945; and which had been constructed around the triad of capital, labour and state. Rather, Campbell argues, Thatcherism was one of several possible solutions to structural problems that had developed within the British economy in the post-war period, and which had been deepened and accelerated by the impact of decolonisation on the one hand, and the growing forces being unleashed by globalisation on the other. Thatcherism constituted a radical revision of historical developments. Stuart Hall offers a powerful summary of its revolutionary scope:

> Its project has been to reverse the whole post war drift of British society, to roll back the historic gains of the labour movement and other progressive forces, and to force march the society vigorously into the past. These aims give some indication of the radicalism of its project. It opened up a struggle on all fronts, the like of which has not been seen - from left or right - since the War. (1983, 9)

The themes of this revolution: the reform of trade union law: privatisation of state services and utilities: the redefining of power between local and central government: and the recasting of the welfare state as a support system for mass unemployment, were meant to create the British framework for capital globalisation. When Thatcher declared 'Economics are the means, the aim is to change the soul', she signalled the ambition of

her project and offered a neat appropriation of doctrinaire Marxism (*Sunday Times*, May 3, 1981). There was at the heart of Thatcherism a contradiction that would have devastating implications for the poorest and most vulnerable in society: for in order to maximise economic freedoms, the state needed to extend its powers and destroy or weaken social and civic bonds, and those intermediating institutions which had provided an historical bulwark against unfettered capitalism (Gray, 2002, 28). These institutions included trade unions, and also, and crucially, municipal councils, who since the mid-19th century had had the power, through local taxes, to develop civic provision in critical areas such as housing, education, culture and social welfare. By the end of the decade trade union power had been broken, and local council financial powers severely curtailed, leading social historian Anthony Sampson (1992, 43) to declare in 1992 that, ‘the British are now almost unique among western nations in the weakness of their local representation’. These seismic shifts, driven by neo-liberal ideologies, were felt particularly in Britain’s old industrial heartlands, including Sheffield, South Yorkshire, which was the epicentre of the two most decisive industrial struggles of the decade: the steel strikes of 1980 and 1981, and the miners’ strike of 1984-85. Sheffield was also, for a while, the centre of municipal resistance to the Conservative government’s assault on local powers.

The Sheffield Context

Sheffield Council leader David Blunkett [1]was a lay Methodist preacher, who had been born and raised, like the majority of Sheffield’s local councillors, on the city’s working-

[1] Blunkett served on Sheffield City Council from 1970 to 1987, when he was elected as the Member of Parliament for Sheffield Brightside. Between 1997 and 2010 he served in successive Labour governments as Education Secretary, Home Secretary and Secretary for Works and Pensions. He joined the House of Lords in 2015.

class estates. Blunkett's politics were a blend of Methodism and pragmatic co-operative socialism, and in the 1980s, under his leadership, Sheffield 'came to be seen as the vanguard for a new form of municipal socialism' (Pollard 2005,123). The local authority and Sheffield Trades Council developed joint industrial policies, including an Economic Development Unit. A network of Unemployment Centres, offering advice, support and informal education was created; community development work was expanded, as was adult education provision, in the form of neighbourhood centres. A cheap fares policy, with the council heavily subsiding local transport, was another extremely popular policy. Although the local authority owned 45% of the city's housing stock, tenants had been greatly neglected in the 1960s by complacent representatives who were now replaced by a younger generation of more radical actors.

Blunkett established neighbourhood tenants' committees with limited devolved budgets, under the umbrella of the Sheffield Tenants' Federation, with each committee overseeing a section of a council estate. To pay for these policies the council was obliged to substantially raise local rates; in 1980 they increased by 37% to compensate for cuts in central government grants. As the greatest weight of the rates fell on business, and the unemployed and working poor were exempt, it was a popular policy locally. But for the Conservative Government, Labour councils posed an unacceptable counterweight to state power, and it determined to greatly weaken them by controlling their ability to raise money. The term used was rate capping, and in 1984 a Rates Act was passed, giving central government powers to determine local council spending by fixing the level of rate rises. Under the new law, setting budgets outside these parameters would be illegal, and councillors could be disqualified from public office, and fined. Blunkett and other Labour leaders realised that Rate Capping would deal a mortal blow to local democracy, giving responsibility without power, and extending the

state's disciplinary powers. Local authorities in London, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield said they would not set a budget at all, obliging the government to disqualify thousands of councillors, and take over seventeen local authorities. In the event municipal resistance crumbled in 1985, on the very day, the 6 March, that the miners marched back to work, defeated after a year-long strike in defence of jobs, communities, and class culture. For historian Andy Smith (2011, 6) 'the miners' defeat was the most serious reverse that the British trade union movement suffered in its long history'.

The defeat of organised labour, and the attenuation of local democracy, meant the removal of the two most powerful and vital bulwarks which had protected, in some measure, the working-class and unemployed since 1979. In Sheffield the loss of coal field jobs accelerated the unemployment crisis, with its industries decimated in the space of five years, and unemployment levels, which up to 1981 had stood at the national average of 4.5%, rising exponentially, reaching 17% in 1986 (Seyd 1993, 93). Noting of the miners' strike that it had been a 'monumental and titanic struggle', Tony Benn (1994, 400) saw hope in the fact that 'at the grassroots level there has been a formidable development of support groups and so on. I think that is where we will see the moves coming now'. Events would prove him correct, as the 1980s became what Andy Smith describes as 'the age of activism' (2011, 7).

The Personal Context: Boal's Challenge

In 1982, three years into the first Thatcher government, I had moved to Sheffield where I met John Goodchild, presaging a collaboration that would span two decades. We had both read Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* but were not at that point interested in his methods, which we would not use for another 12 years. Rather we

found in a short paragraph a challenge that would shape our engagement. Here Boal (1979, 122) had written that the role of theatre workers was to

> Transfer to the people the means of production in the theater so that the people themselves may utilise them. The theater is a weapon, and it is the people who should wield it. But how is this transference to be achieved?

Practice was a pragmatic and empirical attempt to find an answer to this question. We talked of a 'politics of invisibility', in which the theatre worker was absorbed into the community or campaign, and in which power over the process was invested in the political organisation of the movement. Another principle followed from this: namely that we would never do 'projects', never impose time frames on engagement, never recruit a community or group into predetermined purposes. The theatre process would last as long as it needed to, whether that was days, months or years. We secured a base in Sheffield Unemployment Centre, the hub of a local network; we spent long days in these centres talking and listening to unemployed men and women; we performed at pit-head meetings during the miners' strike; we built links with community workers, adult education and youth workers; we took in short sketches on local and national issues to a wide range of community venues; in brief, we became a presence. In 1985, following the miners' return to work, we were contracted by the neighbourhood Adult Education centre to work on the Manor Estate, with a brief to initiate 'drama work'. The tours of the rate capping and miners' strike sketches had made us known to groups within the Manor community, and so we agreed, but on the condition, which was accepted, that we would not be expected to run classes, but be allowed to simply be present in the area, and free to wait and to respond to events.

Beginnings: Manor Campaign Theatre

The Manor Estate was at the heart of resistance in Sheffield; it was also the place where the first and most enduring of the tenants' campaign theatres was founded. Situated in

the south east of the city, it had been built in the 1920s to take workers from the slums of Attercliffe, the former steel centre of the city's east end. Overlooking the Don Valley, the new estate boasted tree-lined streets, but lacked basic amenities, such as play areas. A survey carried out in 1985 found that 60% of householders relied on state benefits, and that unemployment was 32%, well above the city average of 17.5%. Already there was evidence among young children of rickets, and other conditions caused by malnutrition, and mortality rates were 50% higher than the city average, with cancer, strokes and heart attacks the leading killers (*It Makes You Sick,* 1986). Drug-taking amongst the young was rife, as were the burglary and car crime used to fund it. Such social dislocation can create profound social trauma, a pathology of hopelessness. Betty Houlden, a leading local activist, put it eloquently:

> You might say to me, well, why do they get into a condition like this...accept and just let things go on around them. I can tell you why. Because they're so bloody well pushed down there that they can't lift themselves up anymore. They're so desolate. There's no hope. They're living in houses that's falling down around them…no money to pay everything out of…the bills…the food…the clothing. You try it, and you tell me you're not going to get down there too and have no hope whatsoever…when someone says 'I can't carry on anymore' I know exactly what they're bloody saying...because I've had that sort of experience. ('On the Manor', 1987)

In 1985 a White Paper was published which would push down even more on the community and others like it. Colloquially known as the Fowler Bill after its sponsor, Social Security Secretary Norman Fowler, the Bill proposed the most wide-ranging overhaul of the social security system since 1945. The core changes included the abolition of death grants and maternity grants; the replacement of Supplementary Benefit by Income Support; and the abolition of extra payments to meet the dietary, laundry and travel costs of the disabled, sick and those with children.[2] The review met

[2] Maternity and death grants were replaced by repayable loans, further eroding the income of the poorest.

with wide-ranging protests from the welfare lobby, churches, trades unions, and opposition parties, and would meet fierce resistance nationally from communities already devastated by unemployment and cuts in public provisions. The response on the city's Manor estate came from the Advice Centre management committee, which included representatives from all the local tenants and community organisations.

Alerted by local community workers, Goodchild went to the first meeting of the campaign where Betty Houlden set out the implications of the proposed bill. Pointing out that the provisions would affect everybody on benefits 'from the cradle to the grave', she called for the community to mobilise in resistance. It was at this point that Goodchild intervened. Rita Pennington, secretary of Lower Manor Tenants, recalled the moment in an interview:

> John Goodchild came to one of our campaign meetings and he were listening...and then all of a sudden, he stood up and said...well, has anyone ever been interested in doing theatre? So, we all looked at him as if to say 'Shakespeare?' You know…we can't do Shakespeare sort of thing. He says no. He says theatre's a good way of getting over to people any protests or anything like that, anything you want them to know. ('On the Manor', 1987)

Pennington, the secretary of Lower Manor Tenants, was one of eight people who put their names forward. The nascent group also included Ann Smith, chairwoman of the Shop Management Committee, Anne Matthews from the Advice Centre committee, and Pete Jordan from the Manor Community Centre. Their presence meant that the theatre was automatically meshed into community networks and located at the heart of its most prominent campaigns, and this was to have a decisive impact on its reception and use. And although over the following years Goodchild and I would develop strong friendships with the group, in the first twelve to eighteen months our presence in the community was viewed as conditional. While they accepted and valued our skill, we were outsiders, with our first year a type of unspoken probation, intended to test the durability of our commitment. They were rightly suspicious of outsiders who might

seek to take control of the community's agenda. Our thinking was deeply influenced by the writings of American community activist Saul Alinsky, who wrote of the relationships of power between outsiders and those suffering oppressions:

> They [the outsider] would like to see better housing, health and economic security, but they are not living in the rotten houses: it is not *their* children who are sick: it is not *they* who are working with the specter of unemployment hanging over their heads; they are not fighting their *own* fight. (1989, 134) [emphasis in the original]

Failure, Alinsky continues, is always a failure of respect 'for the dignity of the people', of a disabling 'superior attitude' (100). We consequently rejected the concept of consciousness-raising, believing that solidarity began from what sociologist Peter Berger has called the 'postulate of the equality of all empirically available worlds of consciousness' (1974, 141), and the humility that flows from this postulate. Practice was consequently founded on an absolute respect for people, for their experiences, and for the knowledge that those experiences embodied.

Six of the eight who volunteered were women. Most directly affected by cuts in public services and welfare, women were at the forefront of community resistance in the post-1985 period, and the influence of the women's movement was felt across all areas of community life, including in the tenants' theatres. Feminism transformed community life in a range of ways – directly through campaigns and activism; through the practical provision of crèches and child support; through developing education and community jobs around school timetables; and through a process of individual and group support and questioning. The campaign theatres also drew on a class culture that, while it was slowly changing under historical pressures, retained a reflexive solidarity and commitment to mutual aid, powerfully summed up by Houlden:

> Care about one another. Don't worry about absolutely number one anymore. It's not on. You must care about what's behind you, what's side of you...and take part in their problems if they need it or show them a way round it. To sit in your own home and say 'I'm too busy seeing to number one' is not on anymore. ('On the Manor', 1987)

The workshop was a place for the group to care, and to offer support to each other. The theatre was produced through social relationships, both those in the real world, and those in the aesthetic space. What connected these two worlds was a politics of relationships, prefigurative, and founded on respect and mutuality, a solidarity expressed through practical human responses. When a member's welfare payments failed to arrive, rehearsals were cancelled to enable the group to go and find food for the family: when another member was absent because their gas or electricity had been cut off for non-payment, then the group's role was to help them. Such actions caused ruptures in the creative activity, yet it became evident that, far from taking away from the theatre, such solidarity enhanced it, and bound both group and community, politics and theatre, the aesthetic space and the world, closer together. Neighbourhood and neighbours mattered: these were primarily local acts, although they were connected by ideology and material interest to national and even international movements.[3]

The Process

Rehearsals took place upstairs in the Manor Community Shop, in a small, oblong meeting room and were arranged to allow members to meet their personal and

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[3] Goodwin et al stress the critical role that emotion plays in activism, contributing to a power derived from 'a sense of solidarity among members of a social movement itself, suggesting bonds of trust, loyalty, affection' (2001, 9).

community obligations, taking place within school hours and for prescribed hours. At the first meeting we talked about how the theatre's content would come from their experiences, and that the theatre would be improvised. The formal challenge was to turn a government bill into a drama that would capture people's imaginations, educate, and inspire them to join the campaign. A working practice evolved based upon four steps:

1. Exercises and warm up within the constraints of the space
2. The exchange of stories based on the theme for the work
3. The construction of an agreed rough scenario for work based on the above, including the characters, situation and ideas to be explored
4. Improvisation around the scenario through a cycle of reflection: improvisation: reflection

From this reflexive process a route would be fixed and written out on large sheets of paper, setting out the scenes, the 'actions' of each character and the ideas each must communicate. The route allowed the group to track back and forward across the text, and made possible the recovery, inevitable in such work, of lost ideas and actions. Using this framework, it was possible to slowly construct an agreed script. It was agreed at this first rehearsal that the theatre should

- be fully integrated into the campaign and its structures
- be rehearsed outside campaign meetings, so that activists were not lost to the everyday work of the campaign
- be shown periodically to the campaign as a whole for criticism.

This approach, shaped by the specific engagement, would define all the activist theatres with which we were involved.

A forty-minute drama called *If Only We'd Done Something Then!* was slowly pieced together over ten weeks. With its stylistic mix, its surreal use of time frames, its satire, and its movement between realistic and presentational modes, *If Only We'd Done*

Something Then! drew on the tropes of agit-prop and popular theatre traditions. It told the story of a young couple who marry, have children, build a home on loans and Hire Purchase[4], and presume upon a future secured by paid work. Complacent in their good fortune the couple ignore the Campaign Against the Fowler Bill. When the wife is made redundant, their world collapses, and they reach for the security net of the welfare state. In a social security office, they meet others - pensioners, widows – who, like them, have come calling for collective aid that no longer exists. It was around and through this narrative that the facts were woven. The work of creating the show had provided us with a model for future work, clarifying central issues about the group, the community and the political and creative relationships between them.

The campaign had organised a major pre-Christmas meeting on December 9th, and it was towards this date that rehearsals were orientated. The location, timing and structure of the event were determined by the campaign. Local networks were activated to provide transport for the disabled and old, a crèche for the under-fives, and a range of cheap refreshments. The event was free, a vital principle for all campaign theatre work. By seven o'clock some three hundred and fifty local people had gathered in the Manor Community Centre Hall. There was not enough seating, and the overflow stood at the sides or sat on radiators at the back of the hall. The spread of ages was notable. The evening was opened by Betty Houlden, who began with a précis of the main themes of the legislation. In between each scene of the play, she would speak again, anticipating the content. She ended each statement with 'And that's what this sketch shows you, so

[4] Hire purchase is an arrangement for buying consumer goods, whereby the buyer makes an initial down payment and pays the balance, plus interest, in instalments.

watch it carefully!' This 'epic' effect was not planned but arose organically from the conjunction of the theatre and the campaign.

In the following months, the piece was toured to community centres, unemployed workers' drop-ins, pensioners' groups, tenants' meeting and advice centres as part of the national campaign. The tour demonstrated how critical Sheffield civic society in the 1980s was to the effectiveness of the campaign theatres, and in particular their social reach: without the Tenants' Federation and its local committees and centres, it is hard to see how the theatres could have secured a presence across the city and its region. Other networks, such as the Community Health Forum, the Sheffield Pensioners' Action Group, the Association of Sheffield Advice Centres, and the Sheffield and District Afro Caribbean Society were critical players in campaigns and acted as informal touring circuits. A significant minority of radical community professionals also operated as ideological allies and community advocates, mobilising audiences, and using their networks to facilitate the theatres. Tours were shaped around child-care needs, signing on dates, and other family and communal pressures, and the itinerary was agreed democratically, and managed by the campaign committee. The majority of performances took place as part of public meetings, and would always open the evening, so that the campaign could frame the political debate and set out the arguments for action. And, although the Fowler campaign failed to reverse the changes in welfare provision, it greatly strengthened grassroots organisation in the city, creating new networks that future campaigns would draw on. Buoyed by the reception of their performances, the Manor group decided to stay together, and would spend another seven years, producing new works and acting as a catalyst for new groups.

HOMES Campaign Theatre

> Under this government the property-owning democracy is growing fast. And the basic foundation is the family home. (*The Next Moves Forward* 1983, 14).

In November 1987, the government laid before Parliament a new Housing Act, whose provisions were due to take effect in September 1988. The Act's aim was to expand the private, rented sector, and to reduce the role of local councils as providers. Council building was to cease, with Housing Associations taking on responsibility for the development of low-cost housing.[5] However, the most immediate threat came in the proposal that private landlords could buy whole council estates if a majority of tenants voted 'yes' in a ballot. In a perversion of democracy, the bill determined that all abstentions should be counted as 'yes' votes. The Housing Act came in the wake of the Right to Buy scheme, and its aims were similarly ideological, with public provision projected as both a drain upon the collective purse, and a restraint on individual liberty.[6] Yet, the economic arguments were a sham. In 1981-2 subsidy to council tenants was £183 per household as against £285 to homeowners. For every £100 spent on public housing in 1975, just £21 was spent in 1985. Council house building collapsed to its lowest levels since the 1920s, and 80% fewer were built than at the start of the decade. Councils, restricted by rate capping, struggled to counter these effects. Even Blunkett accepted that Right to Buy was an extremely popular policy and should not be opposed directly: the best Labour could do, he argued, was persuade tenants not to buy. The

[5] Housing Associations in the UK are private but state-regulated non-profit organisations that draw on both public and private funding to build and manage houses and flats for rent.

[6] Introduced in 1980 by the Conservative government, the Right to Buy scheme allowed local authority tenants to purchase their homes at a heavily discounted price.

overall impact nationally was the loss of 600,000 publicly owned houses by March 1984 (Manwaring and Sigler 1985, 71). The proposed legislation generated great anger across the country, not least from housing charities such as Shelter, which saw it as a deeply retrogressive act.

In Sheffield, resistance was spearheaded by the HOMES (Help Oppose Mass Estate Sales) Campaign, based in the Parson Cross and Southey estates in the north of the city. Supported by community workers Paul Dearden and Geoff Wilkinson, local tenants' representatives such as Elsie Crookes, Mary Treeton, Harry Gunn, John Winston and Margaret Davidson, were to play a critical role in the housing campaign. All came from trade union backgrounds and were now retired or unemployed. They had seen *If Only* at the local adult education centre and approached Manor Campaign Theatre with a request: could the group, they asked, create another piece on the Housing Act? The housing campaign's aim was not to prevent the bill passing, but to render it unworkable by a process of political education across the region's council estates. Where the Fowler campaign had been essentially defensive, here was an opportunity for a proactive campaign. Manor Campaign Theatre agreed, and work began in May 1988 with the usual period of research into the legislation, and improvisation sessions to generate characters, and a narrative line that could carry the information. As summer approached, the HOMES group began to plan a series of evening meetings across the north of the city. The new show, *Norman and Beryl Go Private* was performed for the first time on Tuesday 9 August to Ecclesfield Tenants Association. *Norman and Beryl Go Private* was simple, episodic, didactic and humorous. In the first section Norman, passionately embracing the opportunity to give his house to a private landlord, draws Beryl into a deal with Grabitall Properties.

> **NORMAN**: Look at these brochures, Beryl! They're offering improvements…imagine that…improvements. We can have anything we want!
> **BERYL**: Are you sure, Norman?
> **NORMAN**: Of course I'm sure! We're not dealing wi' council now. No, this is a classy outfit. So, what do you want, love? Go on…dream, Beryl, dream.

While their house is 'improved', the rent is lowered. When the poor-quality refurbishment is completed, they are told their rent has tripled. Unable to afford the new rate, Norman applies for Housing Benefit, only to find that the government had now capped entitlement. Ruined by the mounting debt, he also loses his long-suffering wife. The last scene sees him searching for 'a cardboard box…high quality…I'll try Sainsbury's'. Upon this basic frame the argument for public housing was hung.

Toured across Sheffield in the summer and autumn of 1988, the show was drawn to the attention of Barnsley council leader, Headley Salt. The result was an alliance that saw the HOMES Theatre incorporated into the campaign in Barnsley in early 1989. The play would open public meetings on the Act across the town and the surrounding mining villages. Organised by the Labour Party and held in Miners' Welfare Centres or Working Men's Clubs, the average audience for these meetings was 300-400 people. The tour reached a notable conclusion when the group was asked to perform at a full meeting of Barnsley Council in the Town Hall council chamber. The Housing Campaign was deemed a significant success, and after the failure to block the social security changes, it offered a victory to local activists. No South Yorkshire housing estates were privatised.

Foxhill Credit Union Theatre

State policies in the decade produced social immiseration on a scale not seen since the 1930s. As wages were cut and benefits slashed the diseases of poverty - rickets,

malnutrition, tuberculosis - returned. The impact on the families and children of the poor was devastating. While the Conservatives projected themselves as the party of the family, the operation of free market policies worked to 'weaken the traditional social institutions on which it has depended in the past – the fragility and decline of the traditional family increased throughout the Thatcherite period' (Gray 2002, 28). As did the percentage of single parent households, growing from 12% in 1979 to 21% in 1992. Families where no-one worked increased in the same period from 6.5% to 19.1% (31). As Selina Todd (2014, 333) notes, 'during the 1980s being working-class had come to mean being poor or living in fear of poverty'. Forced to borrow to survive, family debt grew exponentially. In 1987 a group of residents, community advice workers and health professionals, came together on the Foxhill estate in the north west of the city to discuss the growing debt crisis in the community. Refused bank accounts because they lived on welfare, many were in debt to loan sharks, and lived in houses where the water and electricity had been cut off because of unpaid bills. The proposed solution was a local credit union, a model of mutual aid and co-operative care. The challenge was how to draw the community into the work of creating the credit union, and, in the longer term, to joining it.

Local community worker Phil Sadler, who knew of Manor Campaign Theatre, made contact and asked if they could help establish a similar tenants' group on Foxhill. Over the summer months, a series of meetings was held, attended by Rita Pennington and Anne Matthews from the Manor group, who talked about their own campaign work, and acted as persuaders for the theatre. The group that formed included these two, together with local women Jacqui Jessop, Marianne Dolan, Jackie Ballard and Catherine Smith. The resulting drama, *Loaning Our Lives* spearheaded the community educational campaign that laid the foundations for the credit union, touring community halls,

crèches, pensioners' clubs, and local schools and pubs. Established in 1989, Foxhill Credit Union was the first community credit union in the city.

Public Housing and Water Poverty: Sheffield Campaign Against Water Meters

The Sheffield Campaign Against Water Meters began in 1991 during rehearsals for Manor Campaign Theatre's *Safe in Whose Hands*, a piece for the national 'Save the NHS' campaign, and loosely based on the plot of Brecht's *The Mother*. During a break in rehearsals, Pam Leigh had broken down and wept. The cause of her distress was a water bill of £89 for three months: the average bill for a Sheffield City council house was £75 for a whole year. There were others like her, she told us, who had far higher bills: the cause was water meters. For fifty years British households had paid a one-off fixed sum for their water, regardless of usage; the smaller the property the lower the bill. But in 1989 the UK government had abolished local property rates and had told the newly privatised water companies that they needed to find a new way of charging for their water supply. In response to the government edict, Yorkshire Water had decided to meter water supplies to all new properties. However, in Sheffield not only were most new properties owned by the local authority, but they had been allocated on the basis of social need; consequently, it was the poor, the sick, the disabled and those with large families who found themselves with the new water meters, and vastly inflated bills. That day, at rehearsals, Manor Campaign Theatre founded the Sheffield Campaign Against Water Meters, which was, in the following months, to successfully mobilise the Sheffield City Council, the Sheffield Health Authority, the Community Health Forum and a wide range of local groups behind its demand for an end to compulsory metering. As part of the campaign the group created a sketch show, *Coming to a Town Near You!* which was toured to tenants' meetings across the region. Creating the show involved intensive research into the politics of water privatisation; monopoly capitalism; issues of

supply and demand; water law and local regulations; health and water needs; alternative models for local land taxes; interviews with local residents, doctors and district nurses, MPs, councillors, and Public Health officers, among others. Several campaign members, most notably Pam Leigh, were spokespeople for the campaign, which became the subject of a major national television documentary, *Coming to a Town Near* you, produced by Channel 4 television, and broadcast in May 1992. The campaign achieved a major victory when Yorkshire Water agreed to end compulsory metering of all its domestic properties. This was a considerable achievement, and yet Manor Campaign Theatre had not begun with the aim of mobilising local governments and health authorities. The campaign had begun as a communal response to a neighbour's immediate need: people became experts in the politics of water because they needed to. Here and elsewhere activism produced examples of what educationalist Grif Foley (1999,7) has called 'the powerful, informal and incidental education and learning which occur around social and political struggle'.

Conclusion

In his 2011 study of social inequality, social geographer Danny Dorling demonstrated how income inequality in the United Kingdom had fallen gradually between 1922 and 1979, when Margaret Thatcher's conservative government came to power, at which point it began to rise steadily to its historically high level in 2010: a period that included 13 continuous years of Labour governments which claimed to be committed to income redistribution. By 2010, the wealthiest 10% of London citizens were 270 times wealthier than the poorest 10%. Levels of inequality in the UK were the highest in Europe, excepting Portugal, and the fourth highest amongst the 25 richest large countries in the world. Inequality and social injustice are structural and systemic within the UK, and only the USA, amongst the largest economies, is more unequal across all indicators (Dorling 2011, 67). In their 2015 study *Breadline Britain: the rise of mass*

poverty, authors Stewart Lansley and Joanna Mack map in forensic detail the rise in social and material inequality in Britain. They begin in 1983, and, like Dorling, source the rise in the Thatcher decade. They propose a paradox: in the period since 1983 'Britain has got richer, but poverty rates have gone up, not down. Far from providing the means to tackle poverty, the growth of prosperity has been associated with a doubling of the number of the poor' (2015, xv). It is in the eighties, then, that we find the economic roots of present social crises, including in housing. The decimation of council estates and social housing provision, the stripping away of tenants' rights, the abrogation of the provisions of the 1977 Rents Act, the pillaging of land and housing stock by global hedge funds: all can be traced to the rise of neo-liberal economics and the deregulation of market capitalism.[7] The tenants' theatres in Sheffield were a response to these assaults, an assertion of the values of mutual aid, of caring, of community, and of social justice. They were produced through a historical moment of great complexity, in which distal, destructive forces, acting upon working-class communities, produced proximal acts of resistance, including through theatre. Campaign successes when they occurred were the product of political movements, of which theatre was only a part, however valuable. Agency was the agency of enabling networks, and of collective action. Contexts change, and forms change with them; and while the tenants' theatres of the 1980s cannot be reproduced, they remain as an example, and an encouragement.

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[7] The 1977 Rents Act protected tenants by preventing property owners from charging unfair rents, enshrined a right to long-term occupancy, and gave them additional legal protections against eviction.

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