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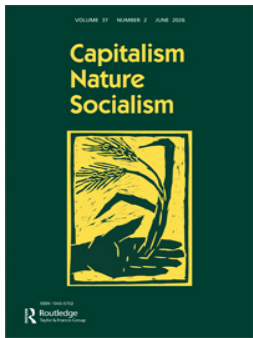
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Unintelligible Institutions: Neoliberal Rationality and the Restructuring of Relational Social Care in Botton Village

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ABSTRACT

This article uses social care provision in Botton Village as a case study to show how neoliberalism renders alternative institutional forms structurally unintelligible. Botton, an intentional community founded in 1955 in the UK as part of the Camphill movement, operated for decades on non-market principles. These principles were consistent with a relational model of social care, underpinned by a non-individualistic conception of the self, whereby residents with and without learning disabilities lived together, pooled resources, and organised work around communal need rather than wages or contracts. In the 2010s, regulatory and legal pressures forced a partial restructuring of the community to align it with mainstream neoliberal norms. This article argues that this transformation advances our understanding of how neoliberalism operates not only through markets or policy but as a hegemonic rationality that defines which institutions are thinkable, fundable, and legally sustainable. Unlike most case studies of neoliberalism's influence, which trace its encroachment into domains where market principles have long exerted some influence (such as education or healthcare), this article examines a community organised entirely around a non-neoliberal rationale. The pressures it faced thus offer a uniquely clear lens through which to observe how neoliberal governance renders alternative institutional forms structurally illegible.

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Main Text Introduction

Why do alternative ways of organising social and economic life struggle to form or persist under neoliberalism? Using the case of Botton Village

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(henceforth Botton), a long-standing intentional community in the UK, this article argues that such initiatives face systemic barriers because neoliberal rationality shapes the legal, social and institutional frameworks within which they must operate.

Founded in 1955 as part of the Camphill movement, Botton operated for decades on principles directly at odds with neoliberal norms: there were no formal employment contracts or individualised wages; income was pooled and shared according to need; and community life was structured around co-residence, shared responsibility, and mutual care (Weihs and Tallo 1988). These features reflected a deeper philosophical foundation, rooted in the work of Rudolf Steiner (1972; 1977) which prioritised economic fraternity and cultural renewal over market competition.

However, from the 2010s onwards, Botton came under increasing pressure to conform to prevailing norms of governance. Regulatory bodies began to impose employment contracts, managerial oversight, and market-like service structures that were arguably alien to the community's founding principles (Action for Botton 2024). These changes led to significant internal conflict and, between 2014–2018, the community split into two entities: one professionalised and contract-based, the other attempting to preserve the original communal model under tighter legal constraints (respectively, Camphill Village Trust (CVT) and Esk Valley Camphill Community (EVCC)). This article uses this as a case study to demonstrate the structural difficulties faced by institutions that operate according to non-neoliberal rationalities.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it will review key theoretical approaches to neoliberalism as a form of governance that extends beyond economic policy prescriptions into defining subjectivity and institutional possibility. It then outlines the history and political economy of Botton, examining the philosophical and practical principles on which it was based. The discussion moves on to an analysis of how regulatory and legal pressures contributed to Botton's restructuring, and how this reflects broader dynamics of neoliberal hegemony. The article concludes that Botton's significance lies in the fact that it makes visible the pressures neoliberalism exerts not only on marginal practices or broad sectors, but on the very boundaries of institutional possibility. This analysis will draw on published accounts, legal and regulatory documents, and the author's three-month residence in the Esk Valley Camphill Community, which provided firsthand insight into the rhythms and logic of Botton.

Neoliberalism – An Overview

Neoliberalism is among the most contested ideas in political economy, encompassing both policy agendas of market reform and broader logics of governance (Byrne 2017). Earlier analyses tended to frame neoliberalism

as either an ideology or a mode of regulation. Stuart Hall (1979; 2011) and David Harvey (2005) take the former view, seeing neoliberalism as a class project designed to restore elite power through the mobilisation of market rhetoric and the dismantling of Keynesian welfare structures. For Hall and Harvey, neoliberalism therefore refers to a deliberate, concerted attempt to privatise public goods, liberalise markets, and shift wealth upward. This account rightly emphasises neoliberalism's distributive consequences but risks reducing it to a deliberate strategy of class domination, as though it were a coherent plan consciously imposed from above.

Regulationist approaches theorise neoliberalism as a mode of regulation. Whereas Hall and Harvey emphasise neoliberalism as a class project driven by deliberate political intent, regulationist theorists view it instead as a framework of institutional coordination through which capitalism adapts to crises and reconfigures its forms of state intervention (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010; Jessop 2016; Peck and Tickell 2002). In this view, neoliberalism is not a monolithic project involving the continual (re)implementation of right-wing policies, but an adaptive governance regime that continually recalibrates the relationship between state and market. As Jamie Peck (2010) observes, neoliberalism's resilience lies precisely in its capacity to reinvent itself, embedding competitive logics not only in policy but in the micro-politics of welfare, education, and local governance. This moves beyond seeing neoliberalism merely as a class project driven by pro-market ideology. Yet even in its more sophisticated variants, the regulationist account tends to treat neoliberalism primarily as a set of institutional responses to crises, thereby underplaying the deeper transformations of rationality and subjectivity through which those responses become conceivable. It is this deeper transformation that the governmentality approach seeks to theorise.

The governmentality approach conceives neoliberalism as a distinctive form of rationality concerned with the governance of conduct, a framework inspired by Michel Foucault's lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008). Adherents of this approach, such as Wendy Brown (2015), Philip Mirowski (2013) and Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2013), argue that the neoliberal state is not one that is noninterventionist (as its advocates claim¹) but rather one that "reorders society in the image of the market" (Mirowski 2013, 92). In other words, neoliberal governance does not merely promote markets; rather, it models government on the market, transforming the principles of competition, calculability, and entrepreneurial self-responsibility into the basis of both institutional design and personal conduct. For example, the individual is reconceived as human capital, and institutions are evaluated not according to intrinsic goods or communal purposes but

¹A paradigmatic example is Milton Friedman, a prominent neoliberal who described his doctrine as being that "government should be as limited as possible" (Friedman 1962, 2).

in terms of measurable performance, auditability, and risk management (Brown 2015; Dardot and Laval 2013). In this way, neoliberalism remakes the world in the image of market rationality by redefining the possible. Mark Fisher's (2009) notion of "capitalist realism," the inability to imagine alternatives, captures the affective dimension of this process: neoliberal governmentality colonises the space of imagination itself, foreclosing non-market rationalities as impractical, inefficient, or irresponsible.

Understanding neoliberalism as a particular framework of rationality enables a richer analysis of its encounters with non-neoliberal institutional forms. It draws attention not only to how neoliberalism commodifies or privatises, but to how it governs through intelligibility: how it defines what can exist, what can be recognised, and what can claim legitimacy. This is precisely why intentional communities such as Botton provide an illuminating case study. They do not merely resist neoliberal norms in practice; they expose the ontological boundaries that make certain institutional forms unintelligible or untenable within the neoliberal order. Analysing the pressures that brought about Botton's transformation gives us a new angle² from which to observe neoliberalism's operation at its most fundamental level, the level at which it defines the horizon of the possible.

Botton: An Introduction

Nestled at the head of Danby Dale in the North Yorkshire Moors, Botton once stood as a living counterexample to the institutional logics that dominate contemporary social policy.³ Established in 1955 as part of the Camphill movement, Botton was not merely an alternative model of care but a community whose economic and social arrangements rested on fundamentally different assumptions to those underpinning later neoliberal governance. Labour was not commodified but shared; income was pooled rather than earned; and the relationships between individuals were grounded not in contractualism but in a lived ethic of mutual care and long-term co-residence (Weihs and Tallo 1988). As such, Botton exemplified a rejection of what Fisher (2009) described as neoliberalism's "business ontology", under

²While intentional communities have received relatively little attention in political economy literature, they are more prominently discussed in other disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, and religious studies. For example, Susan Love Brown's *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective* (2002) provides a comparative study of communal groups in the U.S. and Latin America. However, relatively few of these works explore how such communities come into tension with neoliberal governance, though recent exceptions are emerging, such as Chandler's (2025) analysis of social ecology and intentional community praxis in *Capitalism Nature Socialism*.

³The article uses the past tense because when it refers to Botton, it is (unless otherwise stated) referring specifically to the pre-split version of Botton that no longer exists. It should be noted that much of what it describes regarding pre-split Botton still exists in the present in the form of the Esk Valley Camphill Community.

which all institutions are conceived as service providers and social relations reduced to transactions.

Botton was home to approximately 320 people. No one earned a salary. Instead, community members shared a common life in which economic distribution was based on need, not market contribution. The majority of these residents were categorised into one of three roles: “co-workers” (permanent residents without learning disabilities who shared households and supported the community’s functioning), “villagers” (residents with learning disabilities), and “volunteers” (short-term helpers who lived and worked alongside the others) (Weihs and Tallo 1988, 26). These categories, however, were treated as pragmatic labels, not hierarchies of status or skill. As Maria Lyons (2015, 19) observes, the label “carer” was explicitly disavowed; co-workers preferred to speak of their commitments not as employment but as a “way of life.”

Inspired by the ideas of Rudolf Steiner and Camphill founder Karl König, the community resisted dominant trends in social care that frame support as a professional service delivered to passive recipients (Glasby and Dickinson 2014). Instead, care was enacted through the rhythms of daily life – cooking, farming, and living together – while economic life was structured around pooled funding (Weihs and Tallo 1988). Each household received income based on the number of villagers it supported and used this for communal goods such as food, clothing, or transport, whereas larger items, such as holidays or children’s school fees, were discussed and agreed collectively (HMRC 2024). An agreement was reached with HMRC (His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs), the United Kingdom’s tax authority, under which tax treatment depended on whether expenditure constituted personal liabilities of co-workers (taxable) or costs incurred and administered through the community structure (generally non-taxable) (HMRC 2024).⁴

In practice, the economic model of Botton blurred the boundaries between work and home, production and care, self and other. As a result, it defied the assumptions through which institutions are typically rendered governable nowadays. Social care regulation in the UK increasingly presumes that support is delivered by trained professionals in exchange for wages, overseen by external managers and accountable via risk-based metrics (Glasby and Beresford 2006; Lymbery 2012). Botton, by contrast, offered a vision of shared life in which care was co-produced and community life was inseparable from its economic and institutional foundations. As we will see, this meant its survival depended on a system of value and recognition that neoliberal rationality did not readily accommodate.

⁴The nuances of this are too tangential for further discussion in this article but the full details of this agreement can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/hmrc-internal-manuals/business-income-manual/bim22040> [Accessed 1st December 2024].

Discussion

Botton's Conceptual Underpinning: The Political Economy of Rudolf Steiner

To understand how Botton came to embody a radically different political economy, it is necessary to examine the conceptual foundations on which it was built. These foundations are most clearly articulated in the work of Rudolf Steiner (1972; 1977), whose political economy, though currently less well known than his philosophy of education or anthroposophical theories, offers a coherent and systematic critique of capitalism's reduction of social life to market exchange. What follows explores Steiner's core economic ideas and their practical realisation in the everyday rhythms of Botton.

Steiner (1972 [1921]) was writing in times of turbulence (rather like our own) just after WW1. Like Karl Marx, he recognised that workers under present conditions suffer from a sense of alienation from their work, caused by the sense of being just one cog in the machine established by the division of labour on industrial production lines; a situation that contrasted with a medieval craftsman or farmer who could personally see the results of his work⁵ (Steiner 1972: I).⁶ However, unlike Marx, Steiner's proposed solution was not focused on revolution caused by class struggle, but on the reemergence of a vibrant cultural sphere.

To Steiner (1972), the cultural sphere was one of three spheres of human social activity, the other two being the economic sphere and the political sphere. When the interrelationship between the three is optimal, they constitute Steiner's aspirational ideal of the threefold social order. The economic sphere "is concerned with everything in the nature of the production of commodities, circulation of commodities and consumption of commodities" (Steiner 1972, II). In other words, it is concerned with what must exist so that people can order their relationships with the material world around them and satisfy basic material desires. The political sphere concerns issues of rights, law, and governance. It therefore constitutes some of the functions of the current nation-state, specifically those functions with the purpose of ensuring equality before the law, democracy and human rights. Finally, the cultural sphere of society concerns education, science, religion, the arts, and all activities related to human creativity, knowledge, and intellectual development.

For Steiner (1972, II), the problem in industrial capitalism – which he diagnosed in Europe's post-WWI society – was that the economic sphere was having undue influence over both the political and cultural spheres,

⁵If not freely enjoy the fruits of their labour, since the clergy and the nobility levied taxes on these to support their privileges.

⁶All Steiner works are from the Rudolph Steiner Archive (<https://rsarchive.org/>) and, therefore, lack exact page numbers, instead being cited by chapter.

meaning society was far from his ideal threefold social order. Steiner's solution to this was a revitalisation of the sphere of culture and introducing fraternity in the economic sphere.⁷ The first of these meant the need for a strong cultural life, which could manifest itself in various ways ranging from fixed daily rituals to an emphasis on the Christian festival year.⁸ The second meant that economic activity should be run by cooperative associations, with income distribution controlled by the association (rather than the market or the state) and distributed based on the real needs of individuals to live a dignified life. For Steiner, society operated optimally when the three spheres operated and overlapped in accordance with these principles.

How was Steiner's ideal vision to be realised in practice? In *Towards Social Renewal*, Steiner (1977 [1919]) emphasized that change often begins in smaller, localized communities where individuals can experiment with and embody the principles of the threefold social order and that from there the practical innovations and experiences gathered could gradually inspire wider societal reforms. Karl König was inspired by Steiner to set up the first Camphill communities, including Botton. He argued that there would continue to be societal problems until the threefold social order gradually developed in small communities and from there spread outwards to countries and continents (König 1990, 73).⁹ Botton represents one of these smaller communities because it did not merely inherit Steiner's principles in theory; it sought to enact them in everyday life. As such, Botton offers a rare empirical case in which the abstract contours of an alternative political economy were institutionally realised over a significant period of time. By examining the practices, structures, and cultural norms of pre-split (pre-2014) Botton, we can see how Steiner's vision of fraternity in the economic sphere and renewal in the cultural sphere came to shape a distinctive way of life: one that stood in stark contrast to later prevailing neoliberal norms.

Randell and Cumella (2009) conducted an ethnography of pre-split Botton in the 2000s, trying to ascertain whether the prospect of living in an intentional community was better for those with learning disabilities than living in mainstream society. They describe the working economy in Botton as follows:

⁷Steiner's prescriptions for society were a lot wider ranging but these are the two most relevant to Botton.

⁸This refers to the annual celebration of traditional Christian festivals, including those such as Michaelmas (29th September) and St Johns (23rd–24th June) that are no longer widely observed in wider (Western) society.

⁹This notion of change spreading from the local to the general, or from the particular to the universal, strongly resembles the impulse found in 19th century Utopian Socialist projects, such as Robert Owen's New Lanark (2025). A very similar idea is also found in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's (1849) mutualism (see <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/economics/proudhon/1849/the-coming-era-of-mutualism.html>).

Members and co-workers of the village have a working role to help in meeting the shared and individual needs of the community. Employment is provided by: five biodynamic farms providing the meat, milk and vegetables for the community; a creamery, bakery, food centre and meat store; and various craft workshops that generate income for the village. Members and co-workers do not get paid for their employment. This includes both those with disabilities and those who support them. Because nobody receives a wage, members are able to work full time while still being eligible for public welfare benefits, (Randell and Cumella (2009, 719–720)).

So, the fundamental economic presuppositions that pre-split Botton operated on were very different to that of mainstream social care predicated on a neoliberal rationale. In pre-split Botton, work and life were not seen as opposites by co-workers but were rather integrated together. In mainstream social care, support staff “are employed and remunerated to carry out officially specified duties during designated hours of work” (Randell and Cumella 2009, 724), often for minimum wage, which may generate among staff a sense of alienation characteristic of industrial work. In turn, this causes problems with turnover and retention in the social care sector, which still remain today.¹⁰ By contrast, most of the co-workers in Botton at the time of the split in 2014 had been there for years (many decades), with the strength of community life being the most widely cited reason for staying (Action for Botton 2024).

In sum, the communal architecture of Botton, as developed through the philosophical lineage of Steiner and König, offered not just a moral critique of neoliberal social care, but a practical counter-model. Therefore, Botton constituted a rare institutional embodiment of non-market coordination. Whereas neoliberal governance presumes the universal applicability of market principles to social life, Botton organised its economy around need, its labour around vocation, and its care around relational co-residence. This made it not only an outlier but a challenge, one that, as Fisher (2009) might put it, resisted neoliberalism’s “business ontology” not just in theory, but in practice. The next section traces how this challenge to neoliberalism played out historically, leading to the attempted reorganisation and eventual fracturing of the community.

A Chronology of Botton and Its Split

To fully grasp the dynamics at play in Botton’s restructuring, this article will argue that we should view the conflict not merely as a local administrative dispute but as a microcosm of a broader struggle over institutional ordering. In other words, it argues that the attempt to restructure Botton exemplifies how neoliberal logic can be institutionally enacted by producing structural

¹⁰See Mencap (2024) and Skills for Care (2023).

pressures that render non-market forms of life difficult to sustain or even recognise. The following chronology shows how these competing rationalities unfolded over time.

There are three periods that Botton can be roughly divided into: firstly, the pre-split period (1955-May 2014); secondly, the conflict period (May 2014-February 2018); and finally, the post-split period (February 2018-Present), with the post-split Botton now clearly divided into a professionalised half run by Camphill Village Trust (CVT) and a communitarian half run by the Esk Valley Camphill Community (EVCC).¹¹

The pre-split period lasted from the founding of the community in 1955 until May 2014. During this period, inspired by Steiner's ideas on social order, the entire village operated on the communitarian co-worker model. All of the houses in Botton were full, and the village had five fully functioning farms that people worked together to run (Weihs and Tallo 1988, 29). In addition, there were several specialised workshops, including a bookshop, a woodwork shop and a doll shop. During this period, the whole village and its funding was managed by the CVT (Weihs and Tallo 1988, 29).

However, towards the end of this period, signs of conflict with both CVT and other outside authorities started to emerge. The first sign of this was a negative Care Quality Commission (CQC) report in 2011 (CQC 2011), which ruled that Botton was not meeting certain metrics used in the assessment of modern social care. This report will be examined in greater depth later. The important point for this article is that some of its criticism reflects the institutionalised epistemology of neoliberal governance, and that it was in response to this report that CVT started to change how Botton (and other Camphill communities it managed) ran.

That said, it is important to clarify that this article does not seek to idealise the pre-split Botton, nor to claim that its model of care was free from organisational flaws. Rather, this article treats Botton as a historically situated attempt to institutionalise an alternative care rationality, one that helps illuminate how non-market models interact with dominant regulatory frameworks. Some of the criticisms of pre-split Botton could be argued to be legitimate (including those about medication-related record-keeping and administrative capacity (CQC 2011)), and it is safe to say that this was partially responsible for the bad report. However, this article's main point is that neoliberal hegemony makes it hard for any organisational entity with a political economy in tension with neoliberalism to sustain itself. The validity of

¹¹To be clear, the article uses the term "conflict period" to describe Botton from May 2014-February 2018 when there was serious conflict between co-workers and CVT over how the community should operate and resultant legal action based upon this. In 2015 the EVCC was formed, with most pre-split Botton co-workers joining this and then pooling the income gained from this employment. The article uses the term "post-split" to characterise Botton once the split had fully taken place, which is defined as the point when EVCC was given the legal right to operate 13 of the houses (Post February 2018).

this main point requires that neoliberalism had a *non-negligible influence* on the report's outcome. However, it does not require that we think that neoliberal ideology was the sole or even the primary cause of the negative outcome. Additionally, it is also important to note that the criticisms in the 2011 CQC report were all judged by CQC as having been adequately responded to *before professionalization* in their positive 2013 report (CQC 2013) when they reinspected Botton and explicitly approved it as then meeting all the required standards. This clearly illustrates that the prior communitarian structure was capable of meeting the required standards of modern social care. Consequently, it suggests that the later push for professionalisation took place, at least in part, due to reasons beyond the local administrative need to meet the targets set for the community in the 2011 report.

With this context in mind, let us now sketch the history of the split that took place. According to many residents (Action for Botton 2024), the first negative change took place in 2011. Camphill communities used to be self-managing, with a local management committee (LMC) providing financial and organisational oversight and being answerable to the CVT. These LMCs were composed primarily of local people, some of whom were community members. However, in 2011, the CVT abolished the LMC at Botton, appointing care and support managers from outside the community as an alternative (Action for Botton 2024). This meant that the communities, instead of self-managing, were being managed and centrally controlled by managers. This development can be interpreted as an instance of what Mirowski (2013) and others describe as the technocratic tendency of neoliberal governance: the abstraction of local knowledge in favour of standardised managerial control.

Another key event occurred in November 2012, when members were asked to vote on proposed changes to the CVT's constitution. The question was whether a majority of independent trustees should be on the board (hitherto, most had always been co-workers). This was in response to the Charity Commission's concerns that having mostly co-workers on the board could create conflicts of interest. Ultimately the motion passed meaning that by 2014 there was not a single Camphill co-worker on the CVT board (Action for Botton 2024).

Along with the LMC changes, this resulted in a charity much less connected to the communities it is meant to serve than in the past. This is important because being a resident in the village (or even a parent who regularly visits) entails a greater degree of understanding and appreciation of the political economy of Botton because it has been part of someone's lived experience. By contrast, those outside the village did not possess this understanding as they had not seen and experienced this political economy as it was put into practice in pre-split Botton. As such, they would be more likely to default to conceptualising care according to the dominant logic of market provision,

compliance, and accountability metrics, rather than vocation, community, and shared life. This divergence produced what might be understood as a “crisis of intelligibility” between different institutional logics, one grounded in shared communal life, the other in professionalised models of contractual care and regulatory audit.

This crisis of intelligibility manifested itself in May 2014, when what is described in this article as the conflict period began.¹² On the 13 May 2014 the CVT announced that all co-workers had to leave the village community in the coming months unless they applied to become employed staff, with the employees needing to live separately from the villagers or outside the village (Action for Botton 2024). These changes were opposed by a substantial majority of co-workers at the time, with approximately 80% opposing the changes (Action for Botton 2024). Campaign materials framed the conflict in terms of a perceived erosion of vocational community life, highlighting a tension between long-term life-sharing and externally imposed employment models (Action for Botton 2024). Organised resistance was formed to this decision, concretised in the Action for Botton campaign and the formation of the EVCC in 2015 (Action for Botton 2024). This led to a High Court Case in 2015, followed by a mediation process from July 2015 to February 2018, which resulted in the present-day situation of CVT and EVCC now operating separate sections of the village.

These changes can be argued to form part of a larger story about the institutional viability of alternatives under a hegemonic neoliberal regime. The following section develops this argument further.

Botton and Neoliberalism – Two Political Economies in Tension

In this section, this article will argue that the incompatibility of neoliberal political economy with the political economy of pre-split Botton was a key reason behind the CVT’s decision to professionalise the community, and hence the subsequent division of the village. The article develops this argument in two steps. First, it shows that the trend toward professionalisation in Camphill communities is a global phenomenon, giving us *prime facie* reason to believe that neoliberal norms, rather than just local administrative priorities, shaped the decision to restructure Botton. Second, it explores the particular case of Botton to demonstrate how these norms operated through institutional mechanisms that rendered its communitarian model illegible.

¹²Of course, one could make a good argument that we should label the conflict period as beginning in 2011. However, 13th May 2014 represents a significant turning point in that it turned prior *disagreement* with CVT about aspects of Botton’s management into an *existential conflict* that fundamentally threatened to destroy the Camphill co-working way of life by professionalising it out of existence.

Global and Local Trends

The pervasive influence of neoliberal rationality and its associated consequences for intentional communities extends worldwide. This can be demonstrated by examining Camphill, the broader worldwide movement that seeks to provide social care within intentional communities in accordance with the principles of Steiner's political economy sketched above. Dan McKanan (2020, 112) shows professionalisation of Camphill roles that were formerly co-working is becoming more common worldwide by analysing the aggregate trends in the percentage of Camphill residents who are employed (rather than being co-workers). For example, in the USA, in 1976, 5% of people in Camphill Communities were employees; a similar census in 2018 showed this had risen to 26% (McKanan 2020, 112).¹³

This pattern of increasing professionalisation, while on its surface an administrative or managerial shift, illustrates what Brown (2015) describes as the rationalising reach of neoliberal governance, where domains once regulated by norms of reciprocity and community are systematically reorganised according to the principles of audit, accountability, and contractuality. The practical result in many care communities is a shift from informal, trust-based, and relational models of life-sharing to formalised, monitored, and commodified labour structures.

This dynamic is particularly visible in the regulatory and legal frameworks used to assess care settings. A telling example comes from Ireland, where Camphill communities underwent a professionalisation process analogous to that in Botton. A long-term co-worker at a Camphill Community, Elke Williams, brought a court case against Camphill Ireland after they singled her out by declining to transition her to an employee (whilst allowing all the other co-workers who wanted this to take this option). Williams claimed that in her role as a long-term co-worker, she was effectively an employee and, therefore, had a right to argue that she had been unfairly dismissed (CKT 2022). How did the Irish courts understand the category of Camphill co-worker (with its lack of legal definition) against the default neoliberal conception of workers as contractual employees? The court's framework to decide the case relied on the idea that Williams was either an employee (defined as someone who sells their labour for a price) or a volunteer (someone who provides their labour without fees, other than reimbursement for expenses). As the Law Firm CKT (2022) document: The Labour Court referred to the definition of volunteer in the Civil Law (Miscellaneous)

¹³McKanan (2020, 111) defines employee narrowly here "to include only non-residential employees – that is, people who engage in neither life-sharing nor income-sharing". Hence, the total sample is all "persons affiliated with Camphill" (McKanan 2020, 112). McKanan (2020, 111) also comments that if you included everyone who "receives a paycheck for work performed at Camphill" they would likely be the largest constituency within the movement. For more information on aggregate data in different countries see McKanan (2020, 111–112).

Act 2011 which states that, “volunteer” means a person who does voluntary work that is authorised by a volunteer organisation and does so without expectation of payment (other than reasonable reimbursement for expenses) or other reward. In face of evidence given, the Labour Court held that the Complainant received “more than reimbursement for expenses given that she received food, accommodation, use of a car etc”, and was therefore an employee (CKT 2022).

Therefore, neoliberalism was a lens that restricted the boundaries of possibility in this case. If judges or legislators had intimate knowledge of Camp-hill’s political economy, it is more likely that the category of Camphill co-worker could have been conceptualised on its own terms because Botton’s political economy allows for the existence of categories other than “volunteer” and “employee” as the legislation (and its interpretation by the labour court) defined them. This is because the Steiner-König ontology of care offers a conception of care that is different to the neoliberal conception of a labourer selling their service of caring in exchange for money or that of a volunteer gifting their labour. Rather, being a Camphill co-worker is seen as representing a holistic way of life (Lyons 2015, 19), in which one chooses shared living with learning-disabled people 24/7. This means that it lacks a clear work-life boundary (and correlate notions such as being “on duty” or “off duty”) that we see in neoliberal conceptions of the labourer. The Camp-hill co-worker role hence challenges binary legal categories such as “volunteer” (where this is defined as doing work with no expectation of reward) and “employee” (being paid for a service you provide), suggesting the need for more flexible conceptual tools to analyse hybrid institutional roles in non-market settings. Regardless of how much autonomy the judges had in their interpretation of this law, legal reforms could theoretically have been introduced to explicitly recognise intermediary roles such as the Camphill co-worker.¹⁴ This omission further illustrates the difficulty of sustaining non-standard institutional roles within existing labour frameworks.

This ruling could be argued to exemplify Fisher’s (2009) notion of “business ontology,” because it is a clear example of a case where social roles were interpreted only in terms of commodified labour relations. The Camphill co-worker, a figure based on shared life, mutual care, and non-monetised reciprocity, does not fit either side of the employee–volunteer binary. Yet within neoliberal legal rationality, such intermediary categories are foreclosed. The Williams case thereby could be argued to illustrate how legal and regulatory apparatuses act as vectors of neoliberalism not

¹⁴This could involve recognising a status analogous to ministers of religion (e.g. vicars) under UK law; indeed, HMRC (2024) guidance already treats aspects of Camphill co-workers’ economic arrangements in similar ways for tax purposes.

through overt marketisation, but through normative narrowing. Seen in this light, the global rise in Camphill professionalisation reflects a broader transformation in the governance of care. The cumulative effect is a narrowing of what counts as legitimate care and a concurrent delegitimization of those institutional forms, such as Botton, that cannot be easily codified within dominant regulatory frameworks. This contextual backdrop gives us *prima facie* reason to believe that neoliberalism shaped the professionalisation of Botton in ways deeper than those that would be acknowledged in a purely descriptive account of the administrative changes. The article now turns to the specific historical evidence to examine how this played out.

The Case of Botton

Let us now return our focus to Botton, examining the evidence in this specific case to show that neoliberalism played a role in professionalisation. One of the clearest examples of neoliberal rationality being applied to Botton comes from the 2011 Care Quality Commission (CQC) report, which ruled that Botton was not meeting certain metrics used in the assessment of modern social care.

In the report, pre-split Botton is criticised for maintaining a productive routine consisting of daily participation in workshops and cultural life (the essence of its cultural sphere as examined above). As the CQC (2011, 8–9) reported:

Each villager has a timetable of activities, which covers the waking day with little flexibility. If someone wanted to spend the day doing something different or have a lie in on a morning they are not aware that they can do this.

Why is it that the CQC are critical of this? The report suggests that the criticism is related to neoliberal notions surrounding the idea of choice and rights of those participants in the community. As the CQC report puts it: “people receive a service that is based on the application and interpretation by the individual community of the ethos of the Camphill Village Trust rather than a service they have determined by their choice, the result of this is people do not understand their right to choose how they live their lives” (CQC 2011, 3). Or, as another example, it was concluded that: “people who use the service are not enabled to make decisions about their own care and support” (CQC 2011, 4). On the basis of this, Botton was judged to have failed standardised CQC Outcome 1 which states: “people should be treated with respect, involved in discussions about their care and treatment and able to influence how the service is run” (CQC 2011, 3) and Outcome 2 which states: “before people are given any examination, care, treatment or support, they should be asked if they agree to it” (CQC 2011, 3).

Arguably these judgments reflect more than a procedural concern with standards; they expose the degree to which regulatory frameworks presuppose a neoliberal model of the person and of care itself. As explored in the introduction, neoliberal governance recasts the individual as a self-owning unit of human capital whose autonomy is defined through choice and responsibilities (Brown 2015; Dardot and Laval 2013). Within this frame, institutions like Botton, where care is structured through shared life, mutual routines, and interdependence, would appear aberrant, as the notion of autonomy is not central to Botton's political economy.¹⁵ Thus, taken in the context of capitalist realism, CQC's discomfort with communal routines and emphasis on individualised options can be seen as stemming at least in part from a deeper ontological incongruity. This is because the Camphill model is rendered unintelligible within a logic that locates agency in isolated consumer preference. In this light, the criticisms of Botton's routine, its shared timetables, collective rhythms, and absence of formalised autonomy, become not just regulatory concerns but symptoms of "business ontology" (Fisher 2009) in which only market-shaped relations are perceived as real and therefore within which the Camphill model is delegitimised and rendered, in a sense, unreal.

McKanan (2020, 134–135) highlights how this market logic reshapes inspectorate expectations, arguing that Camphill villagers "are almost treated as if they were customers, so that the customer with the widest proactive choice is the happiest customer" (McKanan 2020, 134). McKanan offers a particularly lucid example which illustrates the contrasting worldviews here. McKanan recalls someone telling him: "The Care Inspectorate came in and said, where's the choice of food on the menu. . . I said, we are trying to emulate family life. How many families have a menu?" (McKanan 2020, 135). The same person told McKanan (2020, 135) that "with the Care Inspectorate, the rights of the individual are all important. . . If the person wants it, the Care Inspectorate will come in and [insist that] they've got a right to it". Again, we see how the regulatory framework cannot make sense of relational modes of care. Instead, it simply presumes the care recipient to be a rights-bearing individual consumer, with services tailored to their expressed preferences.

Importantly for this article's main point, there is a good case that this emphasis on choice is part of the background regulatory frameworks with which inspectors are legally required to evaluate places of care. Rhodes and Davis' (2014, 7) provide a pertinent opinion when they state that:

Inspectors seem unable to understand or respect the fact they are visiting family-style groups in an intentional community and not a service ... they

¹⁵ Assuming autonomy is conceptualised according to the negative conception of freedom through which proponents of neoliberalism, such as Friedman (1962), typically define autonomy.

seem to be stuck applying the assumptions of contracts and commerce quite inappropriately to a system that functions in quite another way and to be unable or unwilling to conceive of the possibility that some other performance criteria could possibly apply.

It is important to note that Rhodes and Davis do not say that the inspectors simply disagreed with the family-style environment in an intentional community and preferred the assumptions of contracts and commerce (based on reflective thought). Rather, Rhodes and Davis (2014, 7) cite a lack of understanding and the lack of ability to comprehend that they are not examining a service as the reason for the poor judgement of pre-split Botton in the 2011 CQC report. In other words, the evaluation appears to reflect a lack of conceptual commensurability between the assumptions embedded in regulatory frameworks and the normative logic of the Camphill model, rather than a deliberate preference for one over the other. This failure of recognition is symptomatic of a broader epistemic closure under neoliberalism, a situation in which only certain institutional forms are deemed legitimate, measurable, or fundable.

There is one example in particular that strongly supports this view. Namely, McKanan (2020, 182) quotes a Camphill co-worker who takes exactly this view regarding his interactions with relevant inspectors. To quote McKanan (2020, 182):

Once he could engage the inspector directly, I realized that the bloke actually wanted to help us. But he didn't have the language that we were using and we didn't have the language that he was using. [...] These guys who were inspecting us actually liked what we were doing and they were keen to point us in the right direction, (McKanan 2020, 182).

Anecdotal evidence therefore suggests that some inspectors may have personally appreciated aspects of the Camphill model. Nevertheless, the regulatory frameworks they operated within prioritised metrics and categories that did not readily accommodate the Camphill model as a legitimate care structure. Viewed in this context, this example reinforces the central claim that the challenges faced by Botton arose not from interpersonal failings, but from a deeper structural misalignment between its communitarian rationality and the neoliberal frameworks shaping institutional assessment.

Rhodes and Davis (2014) similarly suggest that the issues with the inspection reports extend beyond the judgements of individual inspectors. As they put it, the CQC was “enforcing and reinforcing a commercial, contractual set of assumptions about what constitutes care and its ‘measurement’ on a system that ought to be ‘chalk and cheese’ different” (Rhodes and Davis 2014, 22). While acknowledging that professionals might reasonably be expected to offer more reflective analysis, they situate the root of the

problem in wider societal trends, specifically, “the silence around the inappropriate primacy of the market in ‘care’” (Rhodes and Davis 2014, 22).

These insights allow us to draw a clearer conclusion: the push for professionalisation in Botton cannot be simply reduced to internal administrative flaws or external malice on the part of inspectors of CVT. Rather, it also reflects the structural reproduction of neoliberal norms through bureaucratic processes. Even when co-workers met regulatory standards, as they did in the 2013 CQC reinspection, the underlying institutional grammar had already shifted. That is, professionalisation was no longer just a means to an end (improving care) but had become an end in itself, a signal of organisational legitimacy under neoliberalism.

In this light, Botton’s transformation can be understood as having been heavily influenced by a deeper ontological conflict. On one side stood a model of care grounded in long-term shared life, communal economy, and non-contractual relations. On the other stood a neoliberal regulatory regime structured around measurable outputs, individualised services, and the commodification of labour. The former offered a coherent and historically durable alternative; the latter imposed a universalising grammar under which that alternative could no longer be seen.

Conclusion

This article demonstrated that the partially successful restructuring of Botton was not simply a case of local disagreements or mismanagement. Rather, it exemplifies how institutions grounded in non-market rationalities have become increasingly illegible within a policy environment shaped by neoliberal assumptions. Grounded in the political economy of Steiner, Botton embodied a form of social care based on fraternity, shared life, and non-commodified labour. This model was institutionally structured in ways that resisted dominant norms of employment, contract, and individual choice, making Botton not just difficult to regulate, but difficult to even recognise within the prevailing institutional grammar. Even when co-workers fully complied with regulatory requirements, as they did in the 2013 CQC report, the underlying assumptions of their way of life remained incommensurable with those embedded in professionalised social care frameworks.

By tracing how the political economy of Botton clashed with the logic of neoliberal governance, this article contributes to existing scholarship by offering support for the claim that neoliberalism constrains institutional diversity by rendering alternatives unintelligible. This suggests that scholars interested in neoliberalism and potential alternatives should pay more attention to institutions that operate by logics irreducible to the market. Botton’s significance lies precisely in its idiosyncrasy, as it makes visible the pressures neoliberalism exerts on the very boundaries of institutional possibility.

Future work might build on this analysis by examining how other marginalised institutional forms, such as cooperatives, similarly confront epistemic barriers within neoliberal regimes and how they can overcome them. More broadly, this work points to the importance of taking relational models of social organisation seriously, not only as philosophical alternatives to neoliberal individualism, but as viable frameworks for the practical organisation of social care for those with learning disabilities.

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