

The Struggle for Botton

Recently back from our class 9 trip to Botton village in North Yorkshire, this place is still very much on people's minds in school. It is the subject of English writing assignments, discussions in History, student articles here in the Flier. It is a topic for conversation amongst students who spent the first ten days of term in the village working alongside villagers, farmers and co-workers harvesting, weeding, herding, milking, fencing and ditching. But this won't be a write-up of that trip. Ask any student in class 9 or 10 about the transformative experience of being in Botton – they will have enough to say.

As somebody who has a long history in, and commitment to community organising in Torbay, the current context of Botton struck me as full of radical possibilities for change and social experimentation. This September was my second time in the village with class 9 and my first as a teacher in the upper school. What follows are a few personal reflections on the current struggles in Botton.

Things are kicking off. Villagers and co-workers are beginning to organise against a barrage of neoliberal restructuring which threatens to hollow out entirely the radical way of living practiced in Botton for almost 60 years. Since the beginnings villagers, co-workers, house parents and farmers have organised themselves around an egalitarian social model which which aspires to a horizontal communitarianism. Farmers, co-workers and villagers live together in a cluster of small farmsteads which coexist around mutual need, crop diversity, redistribution of food, resources and labour.

This small community is as much a site of agricultural productivity as it is a place in which a form of social care is practiced which is otherwise sadly disappearing into obsolescence. Farmers, co-workers, house parents and villagers all actively participate in relations of care. Many villagers need care for mental and physical conditions which would make an existence for them outside Botton all but impossible. These relations of care are participatory and reciprocal. All those who live on the farms are responsible for their collective operation. Villagers, farmers and co-workers are all farm or workshop labourers and participate to the best of their ability in the housekeeping, cooking and other tasks necessary for the farm to reproduce itself. This is an affective labour and only a few days on one of the farms will tell you that the relations of care are structured around deep affinities between all who live in the village. Care here is not merely the paternalistic management of medical disorders widely performed in current clinical models of social care. The villagers equally reciprocate the roles of care-givers for each other and for the co-workers and farmers with whom they spend the majority of their time.

In this sense the affective relations and commitments in Botton are defiantly resistant to the neoliberal concepts of “*duty*” or “*regimes of care*” which structure much of the provision of care in the bureaucratic, managerial state welfare context. Care is constituted in friendships, labour, cooperation, conviviality, in the everyday.

What makes Botton radical is its aspiration to a communalised co-existence. Until now all labour on the farms has been voluntary. Co-workers do not receive a wage. Their lodgings and food and small symbolic amounts of spending money are the only remuneration for their labour. Some spend just a year, others spend a lifetime, grow-up, raise their own families in the community and never amass any wealth or personal assets. Any income from the farms' labour is redistributed according to need for operational costs and improvements.

Recently co-workers and villagers have begun to organise themselves in resistance to the imposition by fiat of new labour relations by the Camphill Voluntary Trust (CVT) which is the governing body of all Camphill Villages of which Botton is the largest. The CVT is attempting to introduce formal employment contracts for co-workers, work would therefore become salaried and subject to conventional employment relations and law. Co-workers would no longer be able to live together with villagers as safeguarding directives would prohibit this practice. Co-workers, house parents and other carers would become shift-workers and would consequently have to live off-site. For some this will be anathema to their existence in Botton and are already contemplating leaving the village. For many, this would force them into a position of extreme precariousness having nothing but a few modest personal possessions and little financial security.

For those who decide to stay this would entirely transform the affective relations and accountabilities between the co-workers and villagers. Contrary to what we expected to hear (that this pressure is “external”, imposed by the Quality Care Commission or such like) we heard from house parents that Botton enjoys relatively good relations with the NHS and state bureaucracy. The structural reforms which envisage a “business model” as the future organisation of the village emanates from the CVT, the very body charged with defending Botton from neoliberal economic pressure.

A small group of co-workers and local supporters has begun to organise resistance in Botton. They have openly articulated their rage at the market model approach espoused by the CVT and are preparing for a protracted struggle. Where else could we find a current example of people resisting waged labour and fighting to stay volunteers? Many villagers have also expressed their intention to resist the imposition of these measures. They will, in many ways, be the protagonists in the struggle as the CVT will, sooner or later, have to decide if it is prepared to dismiss the needs, wishes and welfare of those it has charged itself with caring for. To ignore them would not only be contempt, it would also signal a crisis of legitimacy for the Trust.

Leaving Botton, we parted company amidst much uncertainty “See you again next year ... hopefully” came the parting words at High Farm. The struggle for Botton is just beginning. We can do a lot to show solidarity. Action for Botton has its own website where supporters can donate, write the customary letters to MPs and sign petitions. Perhaps more importantly, and certainly for those who have been to Botton and who have personal experience or contacts, letters of solidarity will go a long way to keeping spirits up in difficult times.

You can email or write Action for Botton at: action@actionforbotton.org

Action for Botton, The Vicarage, Danby, Whitby, North Yorkshire, YO21 2NQ

Visit the Action for Botton website at: www.actionforbotton.org

Pick up an Action for Botton leaflet at the school reception.

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