

How Democratic Professionals Can Contribute to Democracy: Reflections on John Boswell, *How Citizens Encounter the Democratic State*

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Abstract

This article applies a democratic professional lens to John Boswell's *How Citizens Encounter the Democratic State: Weapons of the Meek at the Frontlines of Public Services* (OUP, 2026). Democratic professionalism is defined as an approach that enables public services professionals to work more democratically with clients and other public service users. Its three principles—plurality of expertise, helping to shape the public realm and taking action—are illustrated in the article by examining how democratic professionalism has worked in the austere state, the neoliberal state and the carceral state. The three chosen cases are the Leeds City Council Family Valued programme, the response by local schools to the Grenfell Tower fire and the response by probation officers to privatisation proposals. The article concludes that more needs to be understood about the changes taking place in the different forms of the state and their implications for democracy.

Keywords: democratic professionalism, privatisation, neoliberalism, citizens, expertise, plurality

Introduction

I WOULD LIKE to thank John Boswell for this opportunity to respond to *How Citizens Encounter the Democratic State: Weapons of the Meek at the Frontlines of Public Services*. This book provides an important account of different forms of citizen involvement or public encounters with the democratic state. By identifying four different forms of the democratic state (carceral, austere, neoliberal and participative), he shows how they create new citizen–state relationships. The book uses James Scott's *Weapons of the Weak*, which shows how people exercise subtle forms of agency. These are identified as dissent, disassociation and personalisation and are a form of 'repertoire of response' by citizens to each form of the democratic state. *Weapons of the Weak* is combined with concepts of 'hidden transcripts' and 'infrapolitics' to form a theoretical framework. They contribute to a more detailed understanding of how people react to the state, both consciously and unconsciously.

The use of meta-ethnography is an important contribution to future research for public policy and administration. It successfully brings together a wide range of different forms of the state and how citizens react. This informs new international examples and studies.

Democratic professionals

Acknowledging my interest in and knowledge of democratic professionalism, I have structured my response in relation to the questions that arise when seeing *How Citizens Encounter the Democratic State* through a democratic professional lens. Democratic professionalism is defined as an approach that enables public service professionals to work more democratically with clients and other public service users:

It was originally a reaction to the changing role of the state and the expansion of private sector provision of public services. Democratic professionals try to identify and establish settings in which democratic professionalism can be

exercised. Current discussions about democracy in public services and how to create more democratic spaces are part of this process.¹

John Boswell argues for more of a 'human touch' in public administration, with less emphasis on proceduralism and more attention on achieving desired goals. Democratic professionalism could be described as contributing to this human touch.

There are three basic principles that public professionals can use to build democratic professionalism in public services:

- (1) Plurality: working to ensure that multiple views are valued and so identify diverse sources of citizen expertise
- (2) Developing an inclusive public sphere: building a bridge between individual and collective interests and help in shaping the public sphere
- (3) Having a belief in the capacity to act: contributing to change and building a democratic process by taking action²

This article will now discuss how practices of democratic professionalism can be identified within three forms of the state discussed by John Boswell—the austere state, the neoliberal state and the carceral state.

Austere state

The austere state has emerged from what was previously called the welfare state. A significant change has been the shifting of 'administrative burdens' from the state to the public. Instead of the welfare state taking responsibility for meeting the needs of citizens, citizens are now expected to take responsibility for meeting their own needs. For example, this has made accessing social security benefits more complicated and stringent through complex assessment processes and limited rights of appeal. For austere state professionals, such as social workers or welfare rights officers, the evolution of the austere state presents challenges to operating as democratic

professionals and has made their freedom to act to meet the needs of citizens more limited.

In terms of the 'repertoires of response', how to deal with dissent or disassociation is the most immediate way of starting to engage democratically with clients. This may involve developing a greater understanding of where their clients live within families and communities. They may draw on services or facilities not operated by the state. They may also be drawn into the personalisation process as an expert. Yet, how does a democratic professional deal with a client 'learning the game' or 'playing the system'?

One approach is for public professionals to start to value diverse sources of expertise, so contributing to a redefinition of the relationship between public professionals and citizens. For example, the power of public professionals to take away a child from her/his parents is deeply contested even though, as a result of campaigning by family rights advocates, the rights of parents are now more widely recognised. Families can now challenge these decisions although they often require support to do this.

The Family Valued programme, run by Leeds City Council since 2018, works to recognise the caring capabilities of birth families.³ This is an example of recognising diverse sources of expertise, which can be a starting point for working more democratically. It uses a restorative approach to build relations between families and public professionals. This is defined as placing 'value on behaviours, interactions and approaches which help to build and maintain positive, healthy relationships, resolve difficulties and repair harm where there has been conflict'.⁴ It allows families and public professionals to work together to build relationships that create change. This process can involve both support and challenges. Families are supported to write an alternative plan before a child is taken into the care of the local authority.

New elements of democratic working are introduced to the way in which space is organised, where people sit and how meetings are run. People sit in circles when in a meeting,

¹J. Lethbridge, *Democratic Professionalism in Public Services*, Policy Press/Bristol University Press, 2019, p. 53.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 48–51.

³P. Mason, et al., *Leeds Family Valued: Evaluation Report*, Department for Education, July 2017.

⁴Leeds City Council, 'One minute guide: restorative practice', last updated March 2026.

without tables, so that physical and psychological barriers are taken away. The focus is on building relationships.

The Family Valued programme aims to value the knowledge, skills and experience of caring within the family and so use it to inform how a decision about a child's future is made. Recognising that family care is important begins to value this expertise, which is most often seen as women's expertise. This is part of working with a pluralist view.

An essential part of this programme is the use of the 'family group conference' service, which is sometimes used as an alternative for a child protection conference. Initially, it was introduced from New Zealand by the Family Rights Group (FRG), a not-for-profit organisation set up in 1974 to support the rights of families to question the power of social workers to take children into the 'care' of the local authority. The family group conference brings together families and social workers, but the family must make the decision to have a family group conference. The terms are subject to agreement with the family. This service provides practical support for families to develop their own solutions which are safe for the child.

The Family Valued programme requires public professionals, such as social workers, to operate in a different way. Multi-agency practitioners are trained in restorative techniques to work with families.

The success of the Family Valued programme has been replicated by other local authorities. It has shown how democratic professionals can introduce new ways of working within settings which are traditionally areas of conflict between professionals and citizens. In the case of Leeds City Council, the programme was supported by practitioners, managers and politicians as part of a city-wide initiative for children.

However, this raises wider questions about how a democratic professional engages with different forms of the state. This will depend on how the professional expresses their own 'agency'. There is a growing awareness that effective democratic professionals have to be aware of both the potential and the limits of their own agency.⁵ This will be explored in relation to the neoliberal state and the carceral state.

Neoliberal state

An important characteristic of the neoliberal state is that citizens are seen as 'consumers' with rights that should apply to all service users. However, this is not the reality. People from marginalised, racialised and deprived communities find it more difficult to claim their consumer rights. For democratic professionals to address this requires them to have access to resources and experts they can use to support their clients. As with the austere state, democratic professionals need training and awareness raising to identify solutions for their clients.

This might start from an understanding that choice in access to services for many people is an illusion. John Boswell expands the concept of engaging with the neoliberal state as more than being a consumer. There are a range of different ways in which citizens and the neoliberal state interact with each other.

In the case of the Grenfell Tower fire, which destroyed a high-rise block of flats in west London in 2017, killing seventy-two people, there was evidence of a lack of trust and respect between the local authority, housing agencies and local communities long before the fire took place. The struggle to get local people recognised as having an important contribution to make to the public inquiry set up to investigate the causes of the fire and the responses of public services illustrates this.

In contrast, the way in which local teachers worked with their pupils and their families shows that a more democratic approach is possible. During the night of the fire, one headteacher went to the rescue centre and offered practical help in the form of new uniforms and bags for children and free places in breakfast and after-school clubs. After the fire, schools had to deal with children experiencing grief, the loss of their family and friends and their home. Teachers were also experiencing grief. Many of them lived locally and were part of the community. The way in which schools dealt with these changes was a combination of taking a caring role and providing a stable environment. Special events were laid on for young survivors. Headteachers attended

⁵M. Walker, and M. McLean, 'Professionals and public-good capabilities', *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015, pp. 60–82.

funerals of children who died. This widened the scope of what a school and its teachers can do.

An interview with a headteacher conducted over six months after the fire explained her approach: 'It's almost like locking the gates to keep everyone safe and so we can work through this together. Because we don't really know what we are doing and the only way that we can do that is by not having someone watching us.'⁶

The headteacher says, 'we don't really know what we are doing'. This is admitting a professional and personal vulnerability, but she is not doubting what the school is doing. She is admitting an uncertainty that is unusual in more conventional professional situations. Teachers took action at a time of crisis, not knowing exactly what they could do, but deciding that providing an environment of care and support was needed. This showed how teachers and the local community were motivated by a spirit of plurality and the expansion of the public sphere to work together after this disaster. This has been replicated by many schools which have taken on new responsibilities in response to Covid-19 and child poverty.

Carceral state

The carceral state, defined as prisons and the institutions which implement justice policies, is one of the most difficult forms of the state for which to advocate a democratic professional perspective. Boswell, drawing from Vesla Weaver and Joe Soss, writes: 'For those on the margins, carceral institutions are the democratic state ... the carceral state intrudes on their lives frequently and intimately ... These encounters have a profound influence in shaping how these individuals and communities view the democratic state.'⁷

The way in which 'weapons of the weak' are used by citizens in the face of the carceral state is 'hidden and subtle'. They may be 'dipping

and dodging' (dissent) or 'playing dummy smart' (dissociation) or adopting a 'politics of hospitality' (personalisation).

Where can democratic professionals be found within the carceral state? In the probation service, the role of probation officers is key to how citizens coming out of prison engage with society. This depends on access to services, systems of support and the workload of the probation officer. For prison officers, opportunities to work in a democratic way will depend again on access to resources and working within a setting that is testing out new ways of working and supporting citizens within the carceral state.

This example of democratic professionals trying to operate within the carceral state explores the power of democratic professionals to take action. The case of probation officers and their reaction to the privatisation of the probation service shows how many elements of their practice, until 2015, were democratic. This emerged from a study which explored how this sense of democratic professionalism among probation officers was challenged during the privatisation process.⁸

Gill Kirton and Cecile Guillaume examined the way in which the probation profession tried to challenge government plans—introduced by Secretary of State for Justice Chris Grayling and known as Transforming Rehabilitation—to privatise the probation service in 2015. One of the significant features of this study is to acknowledge that probation officers saw themselves as 'professionals to use their expertise to act in ways that they deem beneficial to service users'.⁹ This belief informed the actions that they took to defend the probation services from privatisation.

A key player in the campaign to save publicly run probation services was the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO), which plays a dual role of trade union and professional association. In response to government plans to privatise 60 per cent of main-grade probation officers, NAPO developed a three-part strategy. A national

⁶S. Rustin, "'We tried to cope hour by hour': the schools in shadow of Grenfell Tower', *The Guardian*, 27 November 2017.

⁷J. Soss and V. Weaver, 'Police are our government: politics, political science, and the policing of race-class subjugated communities', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2017, pp. 565–91.

⁸G. Kirton and C. Guillaume, 'When welfare professionals encounter restructuring and privatization: the inside story of the probation service of England and Wales', *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 33, no. 6, 2019, pp. 929–47.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 932.

publicity campaign was launched which challenged the idea that Transforming Rehabilitation was necessary. There was a widespread belief among NAPO members that the privatisation 'would destroy the profession'.¹⁰ Secondly, NAPO argued that privatisation would threaten the safety of the public and probation officers. A judicial review was planned, but withdrawn owing to costs. A third strategy was industrial action through two one-day strikes.

Although these strategies were ultimately unsuccessful, NAPO members felt it necessary to defend their professional identity. One of their arguments against privatisation was that the relationship between probation officers and their clients had a moral component which could not be translated into a 'customer' relationship. They did not agree that probation services could be an income-generating business, although some of the companies bidding for services after privatisation were profit-making.

The result of privatisation has proved the 'death of the probation' to be a correct assessment. The twenty-one privately-run Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) formed to work with low- to medium-risk offenders operate by using 'payment by results'. Probation officers have become de-professionalised, opportunities for training have been reduced and their work no longer focusses solely on their relationship with clients, thus reducing time spent with them. Instead, there is more focus on organisational excellence, a decreasing ability to engage deeply with clients and less time to reflect and discuss issues with colleagues.

Even though the national probation service was renationalised in 2021, this has been a painful process, with difficulties in re-establishing professional expertise.¹¹ It has resulted in a service which still does not allow probation officers to work intensively and operate as democratic professionals.

The privatisation of probation services shows that, although some groups of public professionals aim to function as democratic professionals, some of the changes introduced

by neoliberalism have damaged their potential effectiveness to do this. Even when policies change, the overall environment does not contribute to developing new ways of operating as a democratic professional. This case study can be seen as an example of trying to act as a democratic professional, but being defeated by the power of the neoliberal state during the privatisation and outsourcing of the probation service.

Conclusion

Looking through the lens of democratic professionalism onto how citizens experience the democratic state shows that there are both opportunities and limitations facing public professionals working in the austere, neoliberal and carceral state, many of whom would like to work more democratically. Identifying and valuing diverse sources of expertise can contribute to addressing some forms of inequality. The support of local authorities and other organisations working on the same issues plays an important role.

Working to build an inclusive sphere which brings individual and collective interests together after a crisis can provide opportunities for democratic professionals to work with communities and to challenge the lack of rights shown by the neoliberal state to some of its citizens.

Perhaps a more complex process is for democratic professionals to identify opportunities to take action. Probation officers took action to save their way of working as professionals which acknowledged the rights of their clients. Although they failed in stopping the privatisation of probation services, the way in which they argued for their principles of working with clients remains important. The need for this way of working is now recognised.

This book examines—very effectively—forms of citizen engagement within four different forms of the state, but there is no attempt to discuss the changing roles of the state. The four forms of the state which are examined—carceral, austere, neoliberal and participative—are all different expressions of the neoliberal state. The last forty years have seen considerable changes in the way that the state operates. This is characterised by privatisation, regulation, outsourcing, personalisation and financialisation.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 936.

¹¹M. Millings, et al., 'A fork in the road: probation unification in England and Wales two years on', *Probation Journal*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2025, pp. 256–73.

The state is not a static entity and is continuing to change.

To explore further how the state can become more democratic, a stronger understanding of how the state has changed under neoliberalism and is continuing to change is needed. This could link to *How Citizens Encounter the Democratic State: Weapons of the Meek at the Frontlines*

of *Public Services*. It would show that our understanding of the democratic form of the state is changing, and this could lead to different ways of supporting democratic involvement.

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