

Making, contesting and governing the local: women's labour and the local state

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Abstract

This paper explores how women's activism contributed to the generation of local capacities and resources ('making' the local); how women attempted to subvert or co-opt emerging patterns of local governance ('contesting' the local); and engaged with strategies of governing and managing local communities ('governing' the local). In elaborating these themes the paper draws on empirical research that suggests how these practices succeeded each other within different political-governmental regimes, but also how they were entangled in individual working lives. The paper then draws on the analysis to show how it might speak to the present regime of cuts, retrenchment and the closure of many of the spaces of power that previous generations of women had forged.

Key words: activism; women's labour; social movements; Thatcherism; New Labour; Coalition government policy.

Introduction

Economic recession, state retrenchment and public service cuts offer a gloomy picture for women struggling to sustain a productive engagement with local communities and local government. As other studies have shown, the programme of the 2010 Coalition government in the UK had a disproportionate impact on women, both as workers (in the public and voluntary sectors) and as service users (Women's Budget Group 2010). The rolling back of the local state – albeit spatially uneven – has profound consequences for women as the co-producers of services, as entrepreneurial actors and as the source of volunteer labour, all subjects summoned to action in the UK Coalition government's localism policies. But it also has consequences for women staffing local government services or working as policy officers and manager within the local state and its partners. Many of the 'spaces of

power' which women had opened up in the past – spaces from which they could influence social and political change - were fast closing as governmental programmes and initiatives are curtailed.

What, then, are the prospects for women seeking to influence change and open up alternative pathways for the future? To address such questions this paper looks back over the last 40 years to show something of the ways in which women brought activist commitments into their work – paid and unpaid - in 'community' projects, in local government and in other local institutions. This introduction offers a brief summary of the empirical research on which I draw. The following sections use extracts from the interviews with those participating in the research to trace how they engaged in 'making', 'contesting' and 'governing' the local in different periods. It then shows something of how the participants in the researching are engaging with the current period of retrenchment and cuts, and suggests how the analysis might can 'speak to the present'.

The paper by no means seeks to offer a systematic history, whether of different cycles of community work, of government programmes directed towards locality and community, nor of the history of local government. Those interested in a more complete narrative could well turn to Cochrane (1993, 2004, 2007); Craig et. al. (2011); Durose et al (2009), Mooney and Neal (2008); Morphet (2008); Newman (2001); Pollitt et. al. (1998); Stewart (2003); Stoker (1999, 2000, 2003). Rather, my aim is to explore how women's activism has contributed to the generation of local capacities and resources; how women have attempted to contest emerging regimes of central and local state power and subvert or adapt new policy initiatives. The paper draws on a study of women who have taken activist commitments into their working lives. The larger study is reported elsewhere (Newman, 2012); here I report on those working in community programmes, local government, partnership bodies and other local agencies concerned with local governance. These forms of work were entangled in different ways in particular configurations of governmental power and evolving traditions of community activism in the UK. They cut across common distinctions: between state-work and community activism; between paid and unpaid labour; between formal and informal politics; and between the politics of gender, race, class and other social movements.

The study comprised interviews with 50 women across four generational cohorts, from ages 21 to 75. Interviews were conducted between 2008 and 2011, and

combined political biography (Mulinari and Rätzzel (2007) with accounts of working lives. The selection of respondents sought to reflect the complex entanglements of different political identifications and commitments; and different patterns of working life. Access to participants was gained through a number of different networks; sampling was purposive and iterative, with emerging foci providing the basis for eliciting further interviews that added depth to particular areas of analysis or that extended the profile of those participating around issues of age, class, generation, race and sexuality. Most of the participants had fractured working lives, moving between a succession of different roles, accreting political and organisational skills and networks on the way. Many took considerable risks: working in informal spaces while securing resources for activist projects; leaving 'secure' forms of state work to take up campaigning roles; or moving between professional, N.G.O. and entrepreneurial spaces. They were highly committed to their work, often opening themselves up to forms of exploitation that only became visible in retrospect. But their relative advantage in terms of class position, education and often professional background tended to mask the costs of intensive form of emotional and affective labour (cf Gregg, 2011). All were living in or visiting Britain at the time of the interview, though their accounts suggest the significance of transnational encounters and political formations in India, the Middle East, South America, the Caribbean and the US. This paper draws on the work of fifteen of the fifty participants in the research, all of whom were from the generation who became politically active in the 1970s and 1980s, and who brought a combination of feminist, socialist and community activism to their working lives. Their accounts illustrate the diversity of the local interventions, local actions and local labour that contributed to the shaping and reshaping of local economies.

Making the local

The analysis begins by noting the ways in which the social movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s – including, but not restricted to, feminism – created new resources and capacities: local playgroups and other resources for children, women's health groups, cooperative and collective housing, community arts and education projects, free schools, women's refuges and other alternative forms of provision. Some of these developments emerged from critiques of existing provision – challenging, for example, the inadequacies of municipal socialism and the limits of existing public services and of political party manifestos:

When I first got involved in community development housing and planning were the important issues, but what people actually got when they went out and knocked on doors was play and childcare and stuff. But at the time these were not viewed as such important issues, and it was before the time before gender issues were acknowledged – it [current local authority policy] was all about redevelopment (participant A).

Others were inspired by the civil rights movement in the US or radical education projects in Latin America. The next extract is taken from the account of a woman who, prior to going to university, had been involved in community work in Islington as a volunteer, and who, on a visit to the US during her studies, became deeply involved in community activism at the time of the civil rights movements.

So by that point (age 17) I had done 1 year volunteering in England, involved in this amazing community work in Islington, 1 year at LSE stepping back and trying to do some thinking, some policy formulation, then 2 years in America, and I thought of myself by that time as a community worker, that's what I did. And to be honest if you asked me today what I did, who I was, I would say that the same thing. I kind of feel that's what I've been (participant B).

This is echoed in the accounts of a number of other women whose first encounters with political action were those of setting up playgroups, playgrounds and new forms of schooling – sometimes provoked by trying to get better provision for their own children, but more often as a form of community action in areas of high poverty. The experience of encountering such poverty was often hugely formative; another participant, who also later worked in the civil service, recounted how, in the 1970s:

So working in the nursery at [name of estate] was enormously formative and there was very little that happened later (in government roles) that I can't trace to work I did there. It is the true, the real experience. I was there for five years, and I still use stories from that time in speeches and everything (participant C).

Particularly striking in this quotation is the reference to such experiences as 'the true, the real': the local is the place where real poverty and disadvantage are lived. This theme is also evident in the following extract from the interview with the coordinator of a women's centre:

Over recent years I have been doing something that was fulfilling an ambition, bringing grassroots women who were currently experiencing whatever

disadvantage it might be, in this case poverty, into direct contact with those who shape society to ensure that they know about its impact where reality bites, where reality meets policy (participant D).

Many remembered the early governmental attempts to address what were viewed as 'pockets' of poverty and disadvantage. Community Development Projects (CDPs) ran from 1968-78 as action research projects, initially in 12 areas of local deprivation; the Inner Area Studies of the 1970s linked research and intervention in projects in Liverpool, Lambeth and Birmingham. One woman, a Labour party activist and later leader of Birmingham City Council, recounted how she had successfully negotiated a CPD project for Birmingham, a project that funded initiatives on which other participants later worked. Several participants viewed Community Development Programmes as opening up extensive opportunities for local activism to flourish: one recounted how 'CDP was a very open initiative that drew in experienced activists. The Home Office *couldn't control it*' (my emphasis). CDP was underpinned by radical political critiques of inequality and disadvantage. But such critiques generated high expectations of change that clashed with the more limited purposes of government at that time. The configurations of governmental projects and community-based activism in this period, then, predated critiques of the 'governmentalisation' of community (Rose 1999) associated with the New Labour period, which I turn to later. First, however, I want to address the emergence of the more antagonistic climate that emerged from the mid 1970s and continued through the 1980s (and beyond).

Contesting the local

The previous paragraph hinted at the more adversarial political climate that emerged following the oil crisis and subsequent recession of the mid 1970s. This intensified following election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 in the context of the rise of the New Right politics in the US and UK which argued for the 'rolling back' of the state (and local state). The Thatcher governments attempted to reverse the class based social settlement that had enabled the development of the welfare state, a state in which women's employment in the public sector, welfare professions and local government had grown extensively. At the same time the increased visibility of poverty and disadvantage, and of racial discrimination and unrest, produced a flourishing of oppositional spaces of power: law centres, local resource centres, women's employment projects and other local resources, alongside community arts and theatre companies. Many were supported by left leaning local authorities, by some

trades unions, by organisations such as SCAT [Services to Community Action and Trade Unions] and some charities. All formed routes into politics for participants, and all were spaces of power in which the process of ‘making’ the local (generating new resources, new forms of activism, new solidarities and assets) was entangled with ‘contesting’ the local.

Despite the attempt to ‘roll back’ the state, the state bureaucracies of the 1980s which Thatcher attacked continued to offer new sources of power and influence for women. Many of the participants in the research served as ‘radical professionals’ or created and occupied oppositional spaces within local government, often critiquing the traditions of municipal socialism but also working within it to co-opt and reshape its strategies. This was in the tradition of ‘in and against the state’, a practice linked to a particular group of socialist economists (London Edinburgh Weekend return Group 1979) with which some participants were aligned. Many such women took up local government posts in the 1980s concerned with managing Compulsory Competitive Tendering (CCT). In doing so they brought to attention inequities between male and female manual workforces and created new alliances – with councilors, trade unions and the managers of direct labour organisations - to support changes in how the women dominated services of cleaning and catering were organised and managed.

Other participants worked within state programmes set up to ameliorate some of the consequences of Thatcherite policies on local communities. Participant B, cited earlier, later worked on a government programme – Priority Estates Programme (PEP) – that had been developed under the previous Labour administration but then launched in 1979 by the incoming Conservative government to address housing needs on the most deprived estates left behind by the ‘right to buy’ legislation on council housing:

So we were funded by a Tory government, working in mainly Labour authorities, championing the right of tenants and challenging [local authority] housing management services. We developed a cooperative housing model for public sector housing and then, in the 1990s, tried to apply it to other services. We were piloting a form of ‘neighbourhood management’, but struggled because it was before its time (Participant B).

Yet others stayed 'outside' government, working in local areas on issues of poverty and exclusion and promoting new forms of local political activism. Several were involved in the flourishing of local antiracist activity: Asian Resource Centres, Southall Black Sisters, local projects monitoring police harassment. Many supported local community groups in planning and redevelopment initiatives: one woman set up an independent Town Forum (which produced its own transport plan), another worked with community groups, employers, faith groups and trades unions in both opposing and re-inflecting the redevelopment of London Docklands in the 1980s:

We were both opposing some of the planned developments but also trying to work for community gain in the plans that were put forward. We were part funded by the GLC and also worked with a popular planning unit developing a People's Plan for the royal docks as an alternative to the proposed new airport. (Participant E).

As this extract hints, many of the oppositional projects of the 1980s were funded and supported by the GLC and other left leaning local authorities, and many had links to trade unions and radical professional groupings as well as to socialist and anti-racist politics. Some socialist controlled local authorities in this period – including the GLC – became bulwarks of opposition, enabling – through funding and other support mechanisms- the flourishing of local groups who both attempted to contest the politics of the times and to address the poverty and disadvantage experienced by those left behind in the 'property owning democracy' that Thatcher hoped to establish. However overt contestation became more problematic as the GLC was abolished, marking the demise of municipal socialism, and as . At the same time local government became the focus of strategies of reform and modernization. This had paradoxical consequences, as I show below.

Governing the local

During the years of John Major's premiership (1990-1997) local those with activist commitments who had entered local government became increasingly subject to processes of managerialisation that brought new economic and business logics deep inside the local state. Managerialism can be viewed as a strategy for creating self governing state actors who, in order to secure resources and legitimacy, were required to comply with managerial targets, systems and success criteria (Clarke and Newman, 1997). But new spaces of influence inside local systems also emerged.

The period saw the development of new governance configurations – networks and partnerships – that prefigured New Labour, and that offered very different spaces of power for women seeking to influence social, economic and organizational change.

Under New Labour (from 1997-2010) many of the women who had entered local government to work on CCT later became policy officers concerned with ‘joining up’ services and polices to deliver better local outcomes, and some moved into chief executive roles, in each case taking their activist commitments into new spaces of power. Those who had used the oppositional spaces of the GLC, left leaning local authorities, the CDP programmes and so on to full effect often moved into the to new invited spaces of governance under New Labour working in neighbourhood renewal projects, policy action teams, local strategic partnerships, either directly employed or, more usually, as consultants, trainers and development workers on part time /short term contracts. Others created and mobilised new forms of ‘outside’ space – advocacy groups, local audit projects, tenant groups, advice centres, and even local streets - which became the focus of new and creative forms of opposition. But across these categories women were drawn into the wider governance shifts introduced by New Labour, including policy networks and partnership bodies. These were both spaces of influence and spaces in which multiple rationalities and resources could be assembled and recombined. But participants were often sceptical of the potential for change in such spaces:

Partnerships were invited spaces, and therefore the rules of the game were not those of the community, whereas you need popular spaces where people can find their own voice. And that’s what I think has been missing a bit under New Labour. The real change comes about from the dynamics between the popular and the invited spaces (participant A).

This extract sets up an opposition between the idea of community as a ‘popular’ space free from governmental intervention and the ‘invited’ spaces opened up as government projects and programmes invited community actors to participate. My interest is in those actors who brokered between these different spaces, aligning different rationalities to open up new dynamics of change.

These forms of brokering also characterised those working with other features of the New Labour project. The new ideological framings of active citizenship, public participation and neighbourhood governance generated a plethora of local initiatives that were ambiguous in their outcomes: they were both governmentalised spaces, but also spaces that could be appropriated and co-opted by local actors and interests

(Newman and Tonkens 2011). The women participants in my research often spoke of facilitating such initiatives, fostering local empowerment and capacity building projects, evaluating experiments, working on culture change programmes and leading policy developments, in each case in ways that were heavily inflected by their activist commitments. They emphasized mutuality and solidarity rather than the individualism of New Labour's discourses of active citizenships, and they attempted to 'empower' local populations through enhancing their voice rather than through the dominant ideologies of 'choice'. However the transformations of the state under New Labour resulted in increased blurring of the boundary between spaces of governing and spaces of opposition. Voluntary sector and not for profit organisations became increasingly managerialised and subject to contract requirements that limited their capacity to be overtly 'political'. At the same time the dispersal, disaggregation and devolution of some forms of state power created new spaces of inside-outside opposition: spaces of activism *and* containment. Women working in such spaces spoke of both the excitement of new spaces of power that were opened up through the plethora of localism initiatives, but also of the (personal and political) problems associated with allocating scarce resources in a decentralized system and the weakening of democratic systems of control and accountability.

Speaking to the present

The policies of the 2010 UK Coalition government have reemphasized the significance of the local (DCLG 2010) while at the same time reducing the capacity of local governments in England and Wales to effectively support strategies of local empowerment and development. This paradox is not new: it is consistent with more than two decades of government policy, especially under New Labour. However Coalition policies are using the rhetoric of localism to intensify the focus on citizen driven, rather than state driven, governance. Local government is ambiguously positioned in this modality of governance, both symbolizing the local and being apparently sidelined in what is presented as a decentralization of power to 'ordinary' citizens (Clarke 2010). At the same time the politics of cuts and retrenchment reduce the capacity of local governments to offer an alternative base for political action.

How might the account I have offered above help illuminate the present moment? I want to make four rather different sets of points. First, the spaces of power which women of the kind quoted earlier are fast closing, whether in local government itself (subject to cuts and closures that disproportionately affect women employees); in

voluntary and community based organizations (that are having funding cut or withdrawn); and in 'entrepreneurial' spaces as consultants, trainers, advisers and developers (roles associated with a 'new precariat', again disproportionately female: Standing 2011). For those that remain, there are dilemmas about how to engage with the current agenda that resonate with the experience of women living through the economic and political crises of the 1970s and the marketising and modernizing strategies of the 1980s and 1990s. As in those periods, the spaces of power have become much more limited. But as in the past, many of the women interviewed are now adapting their strategies to work with – and try to re-inflect – governmental discourses: for example those of community assets and asset transfer, of cooperative and mutual forms of organisation, and even of the Big Society:

What I'm doing now is trying to see the effects of the Coalition policies on forms of localism on the ground; what's happening to local strategic partnerships, with initiatives set up by the RDA [Regional Development Agency, now abolished] and so on. What's happening to participation and deliberative governance. And where in all this all the things I've been working on for years around communities and neighbourhoods might have a place (participant E).

Another participant (previously aligned to the *In and Against the State* grouping – see above – and now a consultant) was working with an 'assets based' approach to public health in ways that offer an expanded, rather than diminished, role for local government and its partners. Another (now an academic) is working with a local campaign to save public services threatened with cuts. Yet another (now a local authority strategic director of social services and housing) spoke about the possibility of progressive change within current political discourse:

I think there's a vacuum that opens that allows potential . . . I mean all changes are an opportunity, I don't know I'm always the optimist aren't I? I actually think there's a potential here for . . . I'm trying to avoid the rhetoric of the big society rubbish rhetoric, sorry, but there is something about if the state is shrinking then it opens up opportunities to renegotiate the social contract for communities to reclaim some of that, but unfortunately it often comes out of negatives. Resistance movements and activism and politics often is in response to negative stuff isn't it? It comes out of what you can't have or you don't have, or you're prevented from having, but there is an opportunity in that kind of shrinking for a different way of community to develop. The danger is

that it only develops in that kind of space where people are in a manager's positions of privilege and power, and those who are dispossessed and disadvantaged aren't able to, and that's always that risk isn't it? (participant G).

Second, the research on which this paper is based speaks to the entangling of 'inside' and 'outside' spaces of power'. Participants were engaged in various forms of 'border work' that sought to align local community and local state (through, for example, public participation initiatives) as well as the more troubling alignments of politics and work, of activism and governance. The capacity for such border work is being reduced as 'partnerships', associated with the discredited governance style of New Labour, become less evident and as organizations and departments within them tighten their borders, looking inwards as they seek to respond to the politics of austerity and retrenchment. The pattern is, of course, not uniform, but the current processes of realignment and retrenchment changes the relationship between local authorities and other local actors, erasing or weakening spaces of both influence and innovation. Nevertheless many of the women who contributed to the research have shown their capacity to adapt to changing political and governmental contexts. These adaptive qualities are linked to a distinctive array of what are often termed 'transferable' skills. One described her work as follows:

I suppose it was a kind of community entrepreneurialism – and there's a great debate isn't there about whether this was killed off later by getting grants from the GLC etc and whether it will now come back as we are about to lose all those grants. That takes us back to the stuff I'm doing now. But then you just had to run these things. (participant H).

Later in the interview she tries to describe what she brings to the process:

[what I bring is] I think the ability to – I think what I bring is lateral thinking, I am a very good lateral thinker, I like making connections, I think quite a lot of women do that but (laugh) I also think that being a socialist feminist – endlessly having to knit things together, to see how things are connected and to make the connections and to see where to make the connections and how to exploit the connections and work with the contradictions. I am not sure whether you learn those things from being an activist or whether you become an activist because you have got that kind of brain (participant H).

Third, I want to underscore how the three processes – of making, contesting and governing – were entangled within individual working lives. Participant H's entrepreneurialism took different forms in different periods. In the 1970s she had created local resources (playgroups, housing cooperatives and other local projects); in the 1980s she participated in many of the proliferating left groups of the times, and became part of the 'in and against the state' grouping, moving into a left wing local authority to work on CCT; then during the 1990s she took on policy roles within local government and worked as a consultant for government bodies. Participant B, who described herself earlier as a community worker, took her commitments into housing projects under the Conservative government of the 1980s, and then – as a civil servant – worked in the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit, promoting new forms of community engagement and public participation that had been inspired by contacts with those working in Latin America. She is now a consultant working with government, think tanks and NGOs. Another, who has lived in the same place for some forty years, narrated her life through involvement in over twenty different local projects, from a local law centre through urban renewal initiatives and housing associations and currently chairing a local environmental projects as well as contributing to local political institutions following a programme of devolution within the local authority.

Across the research the interviews record women looking back to their experiences under the Thatcher governments of the 1980s and Major administrations of the early 1990s, reflecting on the experiences of new projects and initiatives under New Labour, and translating their accumulated experience to meet the challenges of the Coalition government's policies on the local. In each case their capacity to 'stitch things together' continues to generate new resources, new networks and new interventions that linked community activism to wider (feminist and socialist) political projects. I want to depart from any suggestion that these forms of labour drew on an essentially feminine set of qualities and skills. They are, rather, developed and honed as women sought to bring various forms of activist commitments into their working lives and to generate new ways of 'doing' both politics and work. Such forms of labour are not necessarily confined to women, but are gendered because of the marginal and peripheral spaces many women occupy; because of the fractured nature of women's working lives; because of the importance to many women of connecting personal and public domains of action, and because of the formative place of feminism in formations of the self.

Fourth, the capacity of activists to learn and adapt offers some small optimism for the future. All of the women on whose accounts I have drawn remain active, offering a sense of continuity – of purpose, of commitment, of politics- through profound processes of historical change. However, such continuity is made more difficult as past history is made to change its meaning. Others have shown something of the ideological work taking place as the Coalition government – or rather its conservative leaders – seek to forge a new hegemonic settlement (Massey 2011). The vilification of the state, both local and central, is in part a vilification of the women who worked in the professions and in policy roles within it. Their work is rewritten within the narrative of a discredited past (the nanny state, the failures of New Labour, even the rise of high paid women workers on whom the rise of house prices and growing inequality are blamed (see media furore following the remarks of David Willetts, then Minister of State for Universities and Science: *Minister blames feminism over lack of jobs for working men*, Guardian 1 April 2011). But I also want to draw attention to the ways in which forms of political activism are being rewritten so that they can be inserted – with more or less ease - into the current policy landscape. The Big Society appeared as a new political slogan, but drew on an extensive array of local economic, social and cultural projects generated by women such as those on whose work I have drawn. Indeed the ethical and moral vocabularies currently amplified in pronouncements on responsibility, volunteering and giving can be viewed as co-opted from feminist and other critiques of the technocratic and instrumental approaches to governing under New Labour (see also Jordan 2010)

Even women struggling to sustain key services that emerged out of feminist practice – including provision for victims of domestic violence – are reframed as ‘volunteers’ rather than activists. Indeed Theresa May, at the time Home Secretary and Minister for Women and Equality, expressing her commitment to addressing violence against women at a speech to the 36th Annual Women’s Aid National conference in 2010, spoke of how

The women’s sector is a model of the Big Society we wish to build. That is a society in which we all work together to address problems, conscious that government has a role to play but that it does not have all the answers, and recognising the role played by charities, voluntary groups and others alongside central and local government. *You’re way ahead of us with this’* (www.womensaid.org.uk: my emphasis).

This suggests some of the contradictory politics at stake in the alignments between feminism, activism and new governmentalities. May's expressed commitment to issues of violence against women speaks to feminist agendas and draws on feminist political discourse. But this is then appropriated to fit with the Big Society agenda in ways that both view women's agency as 'models' of voluntary and charitable practice and that reposition activism as volunteering.

The emphasis on volunteering sits uncomfortably with the intensification of the pressures on women to engage in paid work. This, together with the stripping away of services on which women depend, is likely to lead to an intensification of the coordinative labour needed to manage an increasingly fragmented system of care and welfare. I have written about this elsewhere (Newman 2005), but the problems are intensifying as a result of the further marketisation of public services and the development of new commissioning practices. The discursive separation of (Big) State and Big Society also returns us to very traditional conceptions of women's work – conceptions that re-emphasise care work and voluntary labour in community and civil society. Depicting the gendered effects of current political and economic transformations on women's work in local economies, then, is not 'just' a matter of the intensification of care work. Nor is it a matter of responding to the summons of government and of not-for-profit organisations to volunteer their labour as individual active citizens. It concerns the capacity of women to engage in forms of practice out of which new prefigurative pathways might emerge. The resources they generate (should they have time in between the intensification of care work and increasing pressures on paid work) are likely to be significant not only for furnishing the empty space of the Big Society but also for offering ideas and capacities for alternative projects (and possibly future policy agendas).

These shifts suggest the closure of a particularly fertile period of feminist influence on the political culture of Britain. Whether new inspirations from environmental movements, anti-poverty alliances, student protest, and women's movements in the global South can offer different feminist futures and reenergise the polity is uncertain. Certainly there seems to be a revival of feminist-inflected activism. Many of the younger participants in the research were involved in new feminist debates and actions: in local, grassroots forms of feminist politics, in anti-pornography and street harassment campaigns, in protests against the opening of new lap dancing venues, in work on rape and domestic violence, and so on (see Banyard 2010, Redfern and Aune 2010 for fuller discussion). These campaigns resonate with those of the 1970s

in the way they summon a politics of identity, but are now taking place in a landscape in which Kurdish women, Palestinian women, Sikh women, Black women and other groups are shaping and speaking diverse forms of feminist politics, and in which feminism had a much stronger engagement with transnational and global struggles against injustice.

But less certain is how far we might be witnessing a new phase of 'contesting' the local as groups and organizations become less tied to state funding (and all of the managerial and governance constraints this brings). Localisation policies may have paradoxical consequences, offering new resources for local groups and 'entrepreneurial' actors while constraining action both through the squeeze on state funding and through governmental strategies of 'responsibilisation'. My hope is that new generations of activists might draw on some of the lessons to be drawn from the experiences, struggles and labour of the women on whose accounts I have drawn.

Conclusion: gendering the local economy

The research described in this paper different ways of understanding the gendering of local economies. Foremost is the way in which it highlights the local economy as a significant source of women's employment. As Anne Green argues (this issue) general statistics on changing employment rates of men and women tend to mask the particular importance of local labour markets and their gendered impact. For many of the women in my study the expansion of public sector employment, which tended to advantage women, was mediated by local political and economic forces. So the women who brought activist commitments into local government in the 1980s (the era of CCT) did so in part because of the policies and practices of left-leaning local authorities. Similarly emerging forms of occupation in the late 1980s and early 1990s (the partnership worker, the contract manager, the equalities consultant) were generated through, and were conditioned by, local politics and culture. In some areas these opened up the possibility of radical spaces of power; others were more circumscribed.

But the research also draws attention to women as local activists – broadly defined - as well as workers in local labour markets. This reflects other work that has pointed to significance of locality or community as a productive space for women's political agency. Feminist geographers such as Staeheli (1996) and Jupp (2010) show how community occupies a 'liminal space' between public and private realms, and thus

offers a protected space in which women can take action without full engagement with the masculine – and for many of my respondents unattractive - arenas of political party, trade union or local democratic institutions. But the idea of community as a liminal space does not fully capture the different enactments of a politics of ‘community’ in different periods: different relationships between community and state, between governmentalised ‘invited’ spaces of power and more ‘autonomous’ forms of community activism. And the research suggests that the separation of notions of ‘community activism’ from the analysis of local state work does not enable a proper understanding of their relationship. Local systems can be understood as assemblages of actors, discourses, institutions, markets, employers, technologies, policies, places, documents, traditions and multiple arenas of politics and action. The generative labour of women participating in the study involves processes of summoning and mobilizing any or all of these components in order to create new things (a new forum, a new plan, a new policy, a new public: Painter 2006, see also Newman 2011).

Such an approach problematises the notion of distinct ‘sectors’ and challenges any clear distinction between women’s paid and unpaid work. The paper has suggested something of the entanglement of state, market and civil society, and the increasing porosity of the borders between them over time. The work of participants in the research draws attention not only to how the borders are crossed but also how border work is performed. Like participant H, whose ‘community entrepreneurship’ laid the groundwork for her later work in local government and then for ‘think tank’ and research roles, each of the participants fostered networks, produced forms of belonging, and helped reconfigure local spaces and resources. This expands the concept of gendered labour to take account of political work and emotion work. It also highlights some of the skills and capacities that constitute the ‘assets’ vital to local economic, social and political development.

The analysis I have offered also suggests both the possibilities and the problems associated with narratives of change that assume a rupture between ‘old’ and ‘new’ and look back nostalgically to an (often misremembered) past. The research shows how the possibilities of agency were conditioned by shifting technologies and rationalities of governing the local. But it also suggests how forms of local governance associated with different temporal rationalities – old municipalism and new localism, community development and neighbourhood management – can be co-present in particular alignments of power in particular places. And it shows how

the processes of making, contesting and governing the local were combined, sliding into each other across a life-course as participants engaged with different political/governmental configurations of power. Readings of history matter; at a panel on 'Whatever happened to local government' at the RGS/IBG conference in September 2011, the dominant tone was of nostalgia for municipal socialism and an oppositional politics of class. While this is one important reading of history – municipal socialism provided resources on which many of the women quoted here drew – it silences other histories: of community activism, the politics of race, and of women's labour in generating new possibilities. Current narratives of change often seem to flatten the complexity of the past, in the process erasing elements that might prove useful in the present

'Creating new possibilities' takes to my final point. The paper points to the diverse sites and forms of activism enacted through women's working lives, and its capacity to generate new projects, resources, capacities and pathways. This perhaps offers some small hope for the emergence of new models for how we might live and work together in times of austerity, and for developments that prefigure alternative possible futures.

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