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Thinking about the 'local' of local government: a brief history of invention and reinvention

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I should probably start with a confession that may seem alien to dedicated readers of this journal – I feel as if I have spent a lot of my academic life trying to escape from the stranglehold of local government as a focus of research attention. And yet, however hard I try to move on, I keep coming back to the same questions, the same interest in trying to understand the rather peculiar phenomenon of English local government (see, e.g., Ward et al 2014).

I think there are three reasons for this: first, elected local councils remain the focus around which a great deal of practical politics continues to be mobilised, even as there have been attempts to reframe those practices through terms like community, neighbourhood and localism; second it has been (in England at least) the arena in which some of the most significant state restructuring has taken place – now austerity, then new Labour; and third, it opens up the issue of spatial politics (implicitly raising the possibly unanswerable question I was asked in my PhD viva, why, and maybe how, does the 'local' of local government matter?). Despite all the various attempts to undermine local government, as Peter John has noted, it has turned out to be remarkably resilient as an institutional form (John 2014), but, equally important, many of the debates clustered around it have been central to developing an understanding processes of social and political change in Britain since the early 1970s.

In 2004 I wrote a piece for *Local Government Studies* which sought to capture some of the ways in which local government was being incorporated into the new Labour project (Cochrane 2004). There I argued that what was then labelled the 'modernisation' agenda – promising cultural change – combined a rhetoric of decentralisation and empowerment with an increasingly direct involvement by the institutions of central government and a range of other state agencies in the practice of 'local' governance. I noted that the emergent arrangements were increasingly characterised by forms of self-regulation as well as more differentiated forms of management from above. Here I revisit some of those concerns in the rather different context of austerity (and maybe even whatever comes next), and with a specific focus on the local of local government.

Generally the focus of research attention has been on how 'government' is changing – reflected in words like governance, state, networks, central-local relations and so on. Yet somehow the local remains unquestioned, even as in practice it is imagined differently across time and place (see, however, Blanco et al 2014, who also call for a more thorough interrogation of the local in the context of urban governance). So I want to focus on the ways in which geographies (imagined and real) are and have been mobilised in making up the contemporary politics of the local. First, I step back to reflect on a (slightly) longer history of the mobilisation of the 'local' in political practice, to consider the strange dance of the 'local' as it is and has been actively positioned and repositioned as an element in Britain's and England's wider polity. Following that review I turn to reflect on the ambiguous and uncertain politics

associated with 'localism' and other recently proposed forms of devolution in England.

The shifting meanings of the local in local government

I have identified six sometimes overlapping and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the local of local government since 1945, each of which is familiar from policy as well as academic discussions, and I am sure there are (many) more. As I have argued elsewhere in a paper written with Nick Clarke (Clarke and Cochrane 2013, p. 16), 'Localism is a fuzzy, political concept with many uses and meanings', and that is one of the things that makes it such an attractive concept for political actors of one sort and another, whether because it seems to offer an escape from the stranglehold of traditional politics and appeals to the common-sense of 'ordinary' people, or simply to offer mechanisms through which policy initiatives can be realised and owned by professionals and service users.

The six I have identified are:

Local as a level of government within a state hierarchy This is the typical expression of local government within the post 1945 welfare state, often reflected in debates about central-local relations and the role of policy networks stretching across the hierarchies, as service professionals move between local authorities while relating to their own central government departments, as well as Council committees. Although this was not by any means a top down hierarchy, since it involved negotiation across levels as well as decision-making by street level bureaucrats on a range of issues, it

was a national (in those days pretty much, although not in all respects, UK wide) system (Rhodes 1988). In this context, the local of local government was not necessarily very important, and those setting forward radical alternatives, saw themselves as working 'in and against the state' or moving 'beyond the fragments' rather than offering some alternative local vision.

Local as a geographic scale Although this too implies a hierarchical framework, it starts from a framing in which governments are associated with identifiable geographic scales, from local to regional to national and beyond. In such a framing, the local does matter – and it is often assumed that particular activities and sets of social relations are relevant to different scales. So, for example, in the most developed version of this approach (sometimes identified as the dual state thesis) the scalar division of labour is located within structures of uneven development, within which national government is involved in strategic planning and embedded in corporatist networks, while local government (or local state) is responsive to the pluralist pressures associated with local social relations (Duncan and Goodwin 1988). It is not necessary fully to accept the logic of this position to recognise the extent to which it underpins some of the strongest arguments in support of local government as particular sort of democratic institution.

Local as a policy target If both of the previous interpretations more or less directly engage with local government as institution or state form, others are more ambivalent. There is, for example, a long tradition in which particular local areas or localities become policy targets, as well as spaces for institutional experiment. Identifying such localities becomes a means of distributing resource – of focusing

attention not on individuals but on areas. Problems of multiple deprivation, economic decline or even crime are imagined through a spatial lens. And policy responses are focused on particular areas, for example through community projects, regeneration initiatives or anti-social behaviour orders, with (local) institutional structures being developed to underpin such initiatives, in the form of partnerships, development corporations and task forces (Cochrane 2007). In some respects this is a fundamentally top down version of the local, but it also has the potential to generate its own local institutions sometimes capable of questioning the agendas of those who launched the initiatives in the first place.

Local as a place where people come together more or less naturally Underlying much other discussion that is framed through appeals to the local is an assumption that people identify with their local places. There are often overtones of romanticism in such approaches, particularly in more traditionalist or conservative interpretations, raising the possibility that place identity becomes more important than other forms of political identity and capable of overcoming them. But it may also be acknowledged that places are complex and contested. Doreen Massey stresses the importance of understanding how “different stories meet up” in place (Massey 1999, 134), which raises the possibility not only of conflict over space between groups but also community activism bringing them together.

Local as an anti-bureaucratic metaphor The local has frequently been imagined as an alternative to centralised bureaucracy of one sort or another (although, of course, local government itself has equally frequently been described as bureaucratic). In this context, the local is generally seen as somehow separate from the institutions of

local government capable of generating different ways of working, of community based initiative (the Big Society, perhaps). It points towards the break-up of existing sets of power relations, potentially enabling forms of direct commissioning of services but perhaps also allowing more challenging forms of politics, for example like those associated with the new urban left or community activism. The local may offer a space within which experiments in ways of organising social life can be undertaken, capable of being generalised if the experiments work and discarded if they do not.

Local as a competitive space. The move away from more or less homogeneous national economic spaces towards more differentiated (and localised or regionalised) ones connected into global networks has not only found a reflection in academic discussion but also in the discourses of public policy. The rise of what has been called the entrepreneurial city and the focus on competition between cities as a means of achieving economic advantage and delivering welfare benefit has opened up quite different interpretations of the local and even the possibility of different institutional forms. From this perspective, local politics is focused on the provision of strategic infrastructure to underpin economic development, which contrasts sharply with visions that focus on the dynamics of neighbourhood planning.

Within these framings and in different contexts, it will be apparent that the local or localism, can have distinctively different implications, some of which may be unexpected. Historically particular visions of the local have underpinned very different politics. It has, for example, been imagined as: a bulwark against an overreaching state (for example in the form of old style shire Toryism); the best

institutional location for the delivery of personal welfare services (as part of Keynesian welfare state); a radical base (in the form of little Moscovs in the 1930s, and the new urban left in the 1980s); the best space for managing austerity (big Society and the new localism); a space of potential economic dynamism (through city deals and combined authorities).

The politics of localism and devolution

In some respects there were strong continuities between new Labour's emphasis on community and neighbourhood, and the Conservative-led Coalition government's approach to localism (given statutory expression in the Localism Act 2011). For new Labour, drawing in community or neighbourhood interests was already understood as a form of responsabilisation, involving local actors in making decisions about the places in which they lived and the ways in which they lived in them. As well as building on these approaches, however, the new centrally sponsored localism took the logics further in significant ways. It sought actively to reimagine the 'local' beyond local government and as a governing practice in various forms (including neighbourhood planning), particularly calling on the combination of local as place and local as metaphor. In this context, it became a means of tackling the fiscal deficit (increased efficiency, shifting responsibility and incorporating non-state actors); the democratic deficit (moving away from simply elections for councillors on a low turn out to mayors and active communities); and the moral deficit (reducing dependency, increasing responsabilisation for communities and individuals).

All of this was linked back into the austerity mantra of the need to tackle the fiscal deficit (increased efficiency and the incorporation of non-state actors, who it was assumed would do things better). In practice this implied that private agencies were well-placed to compete for local government contracts in a context of fiscal tightening. While some may be small and medium-sized enterprises based in local neighbourhoods (or management buy outs), most (including SERCO, Veolia, Capita, G4S) are parts of national and transnational parent companies, which are more than local and generally operate on a scale significantly bigger than the (local) agencies that commission them.

There has been a parallel rise in the involvement of charities and faith organisations. For example, increasingly academies and free schools are linked into Academy chains (such as E-ACT, the Ark Trust, Oasis Community Learning, the Harris Foundation, the United Learning Trust) or embedded in faith-based organisations (including the Church of England, the i-Foundation). If localism appeared to promise some sort of post bureaucratic world, it has also been accompanied by the emergence of an increasingly bureaucratized (and less localised) third sector.

One paradox of the emergent arrangements (already apparent when I wrote the earlier paper) is that it has been accompanied by the rise of an apparently endless series of regulatory agencies is instituted to provide frameworks (such as OFSTED and the CQC) within which new and old local agencies are expected to operate. While many schools have moved out of any close relationship with local authorities and become more formally independent (albeit often within the chains identified above), they have also become more dependent on the decision-making of and

funding by central government, which is creating its own regional agencies to oversee schools.

This is a localism that questions existing forms of local government, moving both below and above. The old administrative regional structures were abolished, apparently to enable more localist voices to be heard, but the institutional space created was filled by a series of new agencies/structures beyond local government. If the neighbourhood and community has been identified as one 'good' local, another has increasingly been imagined as the most appropriate space for achieving competitive mobilisation. Here the focus is on building city regional competitiveness in ways that cut across existing local government boundaries.

One aspect of this found an expression in the creation of a network of Local Enterprise Partnerships across England. These were set up to provide business leadership and promote sub-regional growth, recently being identified as the agencies managing individual Growth Deals, even if in practice, according to a report prepared by the National Audit Office, they often remain reliant 'on local authority partners for staff and expertise' (Comptroller and Auditor General 2016, p. 32). Perhaps of greater institutional significance, has been the formation of combined authorities for a range of city regions (building on the experience of Greater Manchester) each with an elected mayor and with responsibility for the delivery of transport and business infrastructure. In London, the Mayor has been enabled to create development corporations with planning powers over development that supersede those of the boroughs across whose boundaries they stretch. A series of different imaginaries – from Northern Powerhouse to Midlands Engine and Oxford–

Milton Keynes–Cambridge Corridor have been mobilised as part of a wider devolution agenda, each implying slightly different governance arrangements, without it ever being clear whether and how they might be realised.

Little about the new initiatives may be radically new. The direction of change seems to involve moves begun in the 1980s and continued, sometimes hesitantly, over the last three decades: from local government to local governance; from local authorities to local partnerships; from representative democracy to the promise of participation; from public authority to private delivery; from collective provision to individual and local responsibility. But, equally significant from my point of view, has been the way in which it seemed that while the local seemed to be a fixed point, in practice it has proved malleable and uncertain. So, for example, the invention of Local Enterprise Partnerships was presented as an alternative to distant regional structures, and combined authorities under forms of mayoral leadership were presented as the most appropriate form for building entrepreneurial cities – all some way away from the ‘folks’ that Eric Pickles (then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government) trusted in 2010 ‘to know what’s best for them’.

And yet, the local also somehow survives as point around which alternative political imaginaries may be mobilised. The local remains a significant site of contestation. There is a certain thickness to the local of local government which means that the politics of welfare remains a focus of political action (for example, around threatened closures of libraries, urban policing, the provision of social and affordable housing or the politics of planning). And there is – as Ines Newman (2014) highlights – continuing evidence of the ways in which councillors and professional as well as

community actors seek to respond creatively to the challenges they face (see also Lowndes and McCaughie 2013). Local campaigns may not always be focused directly on local government provision, but they do draw on local imaginaries and often involve councillors and other professionals. It is also (as Jane Wills powerfully reminds us) important not to dismiss the ways in which the various institutional promises of localism have been taken up by neighbourhood and community groups to generate new political possibilities. Too narrow a focus on elected local government may make it more difficult to grasp the significance of more nuanced governance and state practices. But there can be no doubt that the politics of English local government remain and will continue to be more than local.

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