

A Theoretical and Methodological Approach to the Politics of Community: the Application of “Political Ethnography”.

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Abstract

This article describes and evaluates the application of a research methodology based on political ethnography to a PhD project on the politics of community participation in the UK, specifically in the East Midlands, in areas of inner city and post-coalfield reconstruction. It sets out the challenges of connecting political theory to political practice. It then recounts the adoption of political ethnography by a group of researchers at the University of Nottingham as a way of bridging that gap, while incorporating into our work an awareness of the subjectivity of the researcher, and the dynamics of knowledge construction. The subsequent application of the methodology to this project is then described. It is argued that political ethnography allowed the drawing of continuities between a Gramscian theoretical framework, and Bourdieu’s methodological focus on the way that social institutions reproduce relationships of power. Gramsci, however, allows greater space for agency and the importance of local forms of knowledge, and alternative narratives and values, theorised as “good sense,” a resource which is best identified and accessed through a political and ethnographic framework.

Connecting Theory and Practice

At the time I was developing my PhD research proposal into the shifting politics of community participation in the UK (and beyond), much of the current research shared a particular focus. Its emphasis was on improving policy for the top-down delivery of participation within the framework of a “social economy”, and it shared certain normative assumptions that increased participation in local markets for services and products leads to greater social inclusion and higher levels of the contested concept of “social capital”, reducing the costs to the state in terms of welfare provision and policing, and facilitating the wider economy. However, the very concept of a social economy had already come under scrutiny (see Amin et al., 2002; Amin, 2005), by researchers who were interested in unpacking these universal assumptions, and exploring social economy instead as a set of differentiated practices in particular places. This included whether and how local community enterprises develop a capacity to renegotiate their relationships with local

authorities and other powerful local agents in order to achieve their own aims. From this perspective, dominant ideas such as “capacity-building” and “empowerment” are understood not as the integration of individuals into a Third Way¹ political economy, but as a political process - a learned ability to ‘question ... the individual’s perception of her or his own life and its possibilities’ (Amin et al., 2002, p. 47).

Clearly, these two different constructions of local participation occupy different theoretical spaces, with their own normative assumptions. My own research was designed to contribute to this debate by exploring the value and meaning of participation, not for policy-makers, but for participants themselves. This included questions about the kind of subjects produced by the process, whether politicised or depoliticised, collective or individualised, with social or economic motivations. In my mind was the question; where might the new urban social movements which Castells (1983) theorized come from? And was that even still a relevant question, when participation was so tightly framed by one dominant understanding? However, working on the understanding that agency is practiced, not given, and by turning attention back onto the significance of structural context, I wondered if it was possible to reconceive participation and its attendant theoretical outcome, “social capital”, as part of a process which was not tied to one particular form of hegemonic political subjectivity. But how could I make theory useful, and demonstrate its connection to what appears to be a set of differentiated, everyday practices?

In developing a theoretical framework for the project, I considered three key challenges, which are largely met with silence in the mainstream policy-driven literature: (i) the role of place in shaping collective action and identity; (ii) the effects of participating in new forms of governance; and (iii) the alternative values and narratives of citizenship that grassroots communities deploy to assert their own subjectivity and redefine the terms of engagement with the state. The first of these involved exploring theoretical approaches to the local, its potential and limitations, at a time when the deregulation of financial markets, and the vast increase in informatics (the exploitation of data in pursuit of profit), have raised questions about the possible ‘end of geography’ (Cox, 1997, p. 12), and the forms of politics connected to it. Harvey (1996; 2000), as a political geographer, has continued to assert that the construction of place is part of a process in which dominant discourses,

¹A “Third Way” approach to community policy was understood throughout the project as a set of political policies and practices which draw their validation from the concept of “social capital”. In particular, they include nominal decentralisation, the extension of the market into social provision, and the increasing role of community groups in the development and running of public services.

values and desires, institutionalisations, material practices and social relations, are either internalized and reproduced, or challenged and transformed. It is the site at which capital, often global, find its “spatial fix” (Harvey, 2000), facilitated by the local and national state, and can therefore be visibly seen, and concretely experienced:

Transformations of space, place, and environment are neither neutral nor innocent with respect to domination and control. Indeed, they are fundamental framing decisions - replete with multiple possibilities - that govern the conditions (often oppressive) over how lives can be lived (Harvey, 1996, p. 44).

However, he is notoriously sceptical of the idea that agency at local community level can in and of itself deliver economic regeneration or address social injustice (Harvey, 1996, p. 437). He has always stressed the need for movements for social justice to connect their own “militant particularisms” to struggles at other multiple spatio-temporal scales (Harvey, 1996, p. 353). He later theorises this universalisation as exercising “the right to the city” (Harvey, 2008; 2012), democratising control of the distribution of surpluses within cities, and reclaiming the concept of the commons. Meanwhile, a geographer such as Massey (1994; 1995) offers more hope for connecting places and people by outlining a more fluid understanding of the processes through which specific places are made, identifying geometries of power, inclusion and exclusion. This is then connected to the similarly fluid processes through which political identity is constructed. While an emphasis on the local offers a number of theoretical benefits in understanding democratic practice and identity formation, there are a number of material and theoretical questions about what it means to operate (and study) at this level, and whether it can be meaningfully connected to wider struggles over social justice.

Therefore, the second key theoretical challenge was finding an appropriate approach to community practice within and beyond those places, and in particular, what happens when it comes into contact with power. The main attempt so far to attach a theoretical framework to the ideas that are behind the “Big Society” comes from social network theory (Granovetter and Swedberg, 2001; Castells, 1989; 2010; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000; see also Davies, 2011 for a critical neo-Gramscian account). Social network theory also has an implicit normative dimension, seeking to understand how new forms of “productive” social behaviour might be encouraged, and specifically those productive of social capital: ‘social capital is the currency of the Big Society and social networks hold the reserves of that

currency' (Rowson et al., 2010, p. III). Attention is therefore shifted away from structural issues and towards an almost purely behavioural and relational approach; it is a form of systems engineering which seeks to generate new forms of identification and physical movement across space, in the hope that these will produce new emergent communities with increased resilience to structural issues. Its aim is to create 'radical, "second-order change" – a shift in the frame of meaning' (Rowson et al., 2010, p. 12). Although network theory acknowledges that much social behaviour has its roots in existing forms of solidarity based mainly on class identity, ideology, and culture, many of these are rendered 'problematic', 'lacking in diversity', forms of 'homophily', genetic dead ends that need to be broken down (Rowson et al., 2010, pp. 27-28).

This emphasis on engineering new synergies through behaviour change has led community participation to be considered instead by Newman (2005) and others (Barnes et al, 2007; Lowndes and Sullivan, 2008) as part of a new configuration of the state as a system of governance, in which power has become obscured, but is still operating. Newman has noted critically that: 'networks obscure issues of equality and inequality; formal power and the clarity of position, status and rights that this bestows becomes less significant than flows of influence in interpersonal and inter-organisational relationships' (Newman, 2005, p. 89). However, governance does not represent a reduction in government, as sometimes appears, but 'the dispersal of governmental power across new sites of action' (2005, p. 12), including a cultural shift in the expectations of citizenship, which is achieved not through disciplinary action (although there are elements of this), but largely through particular framings of participation, using what she calls "technologies of power":

Steering or coercive strategies may fail to bring about the cultural shifts that governments desire: that is, the shifts in who people think they are, how they should relate to each other, what they can legitimately expect from the state and what the state can legitimately expect from them in return. The fostering of new identities, relationships, expectations and aspirations is accomplished – with more or less success – through new technologies of power (Newman, 2005, pp. 11-12).

This analysis draws on Foucault's (1983) more all-encompassing concept of "governmentality", to explain how the abandonment of historical forms of affiliation, in favour of new behaviours and a sense of self, is achieved. Governmentality does not discount people's agency; rather, it is a system of

control which attempts to redefine the way that they understand opportunity, action, and even the very nature of self-interest, so that it is aligned with a particular political outcome: the production of “governable subjects” (Foucault, 1983, p. 220).

This approach is exemplified by the work of Rose (1999) on the use by Giddens and the Third Way of the idea of community as a new form of identity and subjectivity that meets particular political needs. Rose welcomes the incorporation of community as part of a new “ethico-politics” which opens up new possible valuations of life and conduct to contestation (Rose, 1999, p. 192). However:

One also needs to try to identify the switch points where an opening turns into a closure. That is to say, when the vocabulary of ethics actually operates to impose a different but no less motivated and directive politics of conduct ... (Rose, 1999, p. 192).

The challenge of the Foucauldian approach is that, although it sheds considerable light on processes by which amenable subjects are constructed, it also suggests a powerful sense of closure of meaning and action through the use of discursive categories which leaves little space to evaluate the practice of agency. It has been argued that Foucault saw these prescriptions as “strategically reversible” (Lacombe, 1996, p. 343), and that strong alternative narratives persist (such as the public and the social, the authenticity of the local and particular, “moral” economic rights over property, or the universality of rights, and specifically the right to life and freedom, “biopower”) that can be brought into play to challenge the received wisdoms of neoliberalism (Clarke 2004, p. 41). As Clarke (2004) notes:

Both corporate and state processes aim to ‘liberate’ the private – but expect the liberated subjects to behave responsibly (as consumers, as parents, as citizen-consumers). Whether such subjects come when they are called is a different matter (Clarke, 2004, p. 33).

As my aim was to explore agency as a negotiation actively undertaken by intentional groups in specific places, rather than assume that it is something which can and should be engineered, this meant finding a way to theorise the source and nature of these alternative local discourses. Ideological frameworks, specifically the revisionist neoliberal position of the Third Way and the more socially conservative New Right, were therefore approached not as monolithic political structures, but, rather, as complex contestable narratives in which particular meanings and values are available for

redefinition and reframing, based on diverse local understandings of their particular historical conjunctures. In my research, these alternative narratives included the rejection of a particularly brutal privatisation of social services in favour of more humanistic and mutual practices; disillusionment with a transition to an insecure low wage economy and an increasingly remote local state, expressed as a reassertion of class solidarity; and a rejection of a centralised managerial and technocratic local state in favour of autonomous, horizontal community action. Bourdieu sees particular historical moments, such the overarching financial crisis which broke in 2008 at the very start of my project, as key opportunities for these other values to emerge. These moments reveal what he calls doxa, a representation of the world which is taken for granted, as part of discourse, essentially contestable, although he notes that: 'Crisis is a necessary condition for a questioning of the doxa but is not in itself a sufficient condition for the production of a critical discourse' (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 164-5). For Bourdieu, the real challenge can only come from an alternative habitus, a set of practices within space and time, which is consciously systematised. It is this which Barnes et al. (2007) see as the true meaning of "political renewal":

Not only the capacity to challenge "old" institutions, but also ... to foster the new linguistic and symbolic resources from which such challenges might flow ... This is a different formulation of the policy discourse 'creating social capital'; indeed it turns the whole idea of social capital on its head, referring to resources that enable those within alternative discursive spaces to challenge dominant representations and images (Barnes, Newman and Sullivan, 2007, p. 201).

It was this, the issue of practice and its relationship to the possible formation of an alternative habitus, which presented the third theoretical challenge. Scott (1998; 1999), as a theorist of "subaltern" political practice, has emphasised the value of informal non-compliance in this respect, which he argues can form the basis of resistance to dominant forms of development - an 'improvised "order"' which is a necessary by-product of all top-down development, and which exists outside of any specified political parameters. Scott describes this informal organisation as 'no name, no office-bearers, no meetings, no table of organization, no banners; yet they do palpable social work' (Scott, 1999, p. 277). Within the study of local social economies, in spite of their more institutionalised nature, some have placed them into the same theoretical sphere, seeing them as putative social movements. For example, for Arthur et al. (2004), the autonomous practice of "doing-it-ourselves" is a source of potential challenge to the existing values and institutions of the state and the private sector, and the possible production of

new meanings. They cite Crossley's (1999, cited in Arthur et al., 2004, p. 8) concept of "Working Utopias" as the source of new organisational practices of ownership and control which clearly reflect their social aims: 'The key message is that bottom up ownership and control enables a discourse to start about the relationship between means and ends – even in a coalmine' (Arthur et al., 2004, p. 12). The challenge comes from establishing 'socially and economically effective spaces', which, 'by becoming grounded in the everyday experience of work, may also gradually force a wider social adjustment, while gaining legitimacy through demonstrating success and survival' (Arthur et al., 2004, p. 13).

Autonomist Marxists such as Holloway (2010) argue that attempting to be "in-and-against" capitalism, by transforming labour's relation with it, is futile. Focussing research on working practice, and its relation with the production of alternative narratives, subjectivities and forms of collective identity, goes some way towards addressing that challenge. However, as can be seen from the example used by Arthur et al., Tower Colliery in the Cynon Valley², such openings hardly develop from practice alone. Just as the explicitly politicised solidarity economy of Latin America (see Quijano, 2006) was formed in response to the democratisation process, a rejection both of authoritarianism and of neoliberal forms of capitalism, the collective aspirations and practices of agents within any community need to be set into a relationship with their political economy. It is this relationship which reveals how they come to understand their agency as "different" to the dominant frameworks of meaning that set the terms for their inclusion. And for an understanding of this relationship, to provide a theoretical framework for understanding how the discursive capture of agency in the service of particular narratives remains incomplete and is subject to reversal, I turned to Gramsci.

A Gramscian Framework: Combining Place, Discourse, and Political Practice

The neo-Gramscian framework I eventually adopted was one which gave equal significance to the power relationships which constrain and intersect the local - most notably the presence of global political economy, constantly pushing local alternatives to the margins - but also to the potential value of grassroots action, local forms of knowledge, and everyday practices, as

²Tower Colliery in the Cynon Valley, South Wales, was the subject of an employee buy-out to avoid closure, and ran as a worker-owned company from 1995 until 2008. The buy-out of Tower Colliery had a political and symbolic significance for the mining communities of South Wales, in the aftermath of the 1984/85 Miners' Strike, which transcended its economic significance.

important sites of struggle. This approach, combining explorations of place, institutions, ideas and practices, has been modelled by critical development theorists such as Hart (2002), Mohan and Stokke (2000), and Moore (1993). For example, Hart (2002), in her study of political, land and resource conflicts in post-apartheid South Africa, uses Gramsci's concept of the "terrain of the conjunctural" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 178, cited in Hart, 2002, p. 305; p. 311) to conceptualise the local state as a site in which dominant political imperatives fight for legitimacy with everyday practices. She therefore sets out to identify and map the multiple institutional and ideational structures which are put in place to ensure the perpetuation of, and acceptance of, a particular set of material and social relationships, and the way that local understandings may challenge these. Moore's (1993; 1998) approach places an additional significance on bringing in an exploration of cultural discourses, in order to understand how hegemonic forms of understanding are formed and mediated. In doing so, he uses the Gramscian metaphor which casts ideas and cultural formations as material forces in their own right (Moore, 1993, p. 383), subject to cultural struggle and oppositional practices which form the basis of a more conscious sense of agency (Moore, 1998, pp. 352-353). He writes of how our belief in a right to resources is often inherent in remembered relationships with landscapes and forms of production, and this becomes key at times of rupture, when political and economic relationships are being renegotiated, under the direction of the state (Moore, 1993, p. 393). Local histories and understandings of community and property can provide a permissive discourse that can be brought into play by local communities attempting to turn these negotiations to their advantage³. What a Gramscian framework also provides, however, is a theoretical understanding of where these permissive discourses come from.

For Gramsci, the dominance of elite political and economic groups over all social institutions is reinforced by control over the meaning of particular concepts of political identity and action. This control, however, is subject to material and ideological challenge on the basis of "good sense." Gramsci's concept of "good sense" signifies the practical, empirical understanding which forms an implicit critique of both "common sense" (incoherent sets of assumptions and common beliefs which characterise any society) and what he

³The importance of these ruptures in providing an opening for alternative local narratives is seen, for example, in Arce and Fisher's (2003) study of the closure of a major oil refinery in South Wales, in which the initial consensus between corporation, workforce and community over the inevitability of the closure on economic grounds was ruptured by the everyday conflicts which emerged locally over the closure: "Our research ... revealed that people's agency and negotiation practices were much more complex than was represented by a global policy language, and than those funding the research wished to acknowledge ..." (Arce & Fisher, 2003, pp. 94-95)

calls 'the philosophy of the intellectuals' (Gramsci 1971, p. 331) – the systematised ideas which shape the limits of what we consider to be possible. The relationship between the two is the arena of politics – in which the systematic is either rendered common, or is challenged through a developing critical awareness that is rooted in practical activity. Gramsci describes this as a historical process of developing a consciousness of our own role in either reproducing or challenging a hegemonic way of thinking:

The unity of theory and practice is not just a matter of mechanical fact, but a part of the historical process, whose elementary and primitive phase is to be found in the sense of being “different” and “apart”, in an instinctive feeling of independence, and which progresses to the level of real possession of a single and coherent conception of the world (Gramsci 1971, p. 333).

Because it has its roots in the practical, contestation always remains an immanent possibility.

It was the Gramscian framework which allowed me also to develop a methodological approach to the questions thrown up by the silences of mainstream social capital theory. In this, I drew on Morton (2007), who suggests a number of points of focus for attempting to understand how agents within civil society come to either embody or challenge “hegemonic” thinking, a sense of unchallenged intellectual and moral leadership which underpins material dominance (Gramsci, 1971, p. 57): (i) linking the origins of existing and emerging forms of affiliation and organisation to their subsequent conscious development of an identity; (ii) exploring how these affiliations conserve or control dissent, and the mentalities and ideologies enshrined in them; and (iii) demonstrating how this may lead to assertions of autonomy and material transformation under conditions of “passive revolution”, the reassertion of a political equilibrium by dominant forces (Morton, 2007, p. 175; Gramsci, 1971, p. 107).

These areas for research then informed my own research questions, which focussed on three key areas: (i) how did community action groups engage with, and understand the political and economic conditions which have shaped their localities? How does this help to motivate and their agency?; (ii) what did it mean for communities to participate, specifically within the framework of the Third Way, and its understanding of social capital?; and (iii) was there any way in which community agency could be understood as political? If so, what alternative discourses of citizenship might they be drawing on to retain or develop a sense of independent agency? By combining these three elements, I hoped to contribute to a

theoretical discussion by combining an exploration of political economy and subjectivity, to bring in an assessment of the space for agency, what people are actually doing, and how they understand this. At the same time, I hoped to contribute to a political discussion by exploring participation as it is constructed on the ground, problematising dominant understandings of participation based on certain understandings of “social capital”.

The approach allowed me to explore and understand the dynamics of communities engaging at multiple levels with dominant political institutions and strategies that constantly frame and close down the possibilities for alternative practices. However, it also allowed me to focus on the strategies communities adopt in these unequal struggles: the importance of everyday practices, local history and culture, institutional structures and ideas, and the discursive construction of the local, all of which open up possibilities for the development of alternative practices, and a more conscious sense of their capacity for agency. For example, one of the key points of methodological contention in my own research was around the issue of “trust” between partners in governance. Mainstream social capital theorists work on the assumption that this is a universal social good; Putnam (1995) defines social capital as ‘features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam 1995, p. 67). Evidence of mistrust and tension is therefore “bad” and subject to elimination. An official of one community alliance in a coalfield regeneration area spoke explicitly of changing the relationship between residents and the local authority from one which was “untrusting”, “blaming” and “adversarial”, into one which built “trust”, “consensus” and “local consent” (Daniel, 16/4/10). A Gramscian approach, however, sees state-civil society relations as part of a historical process which produces inequality; agency, meanwhile, is seen as being driven by a conscious understanding of this process (“good sense”), not by a forgetting of it. As Scott (1999) has argued, when the state and market take authoritarian forms, ‘there is something to be said for certain forms of healthy mistrust’ (Scott 1999, p. 276).

This reading sees mistrust of other agencies as driving, defining and strengthening local agency. In my research with grassroots community organisations in three different locations in the East Midlands, the sources of this varied: in one community, it was primarily their “bodged up” physical environment, the result of optimistic 1960s social planning which was then neglected, with low income and middle class communities separated by an “almost impregnable wall” (David, 28/7/10). In another location, it was rooted in the sense of abandonment produced by the active dismantling of the mining industry, including the overt conflict of the strike of 1984/85. In the final case,

a traumatic 1960s state-led reconstruction of housing which had steamrollered community concerns along with their homes was seen as a historical moment which marked an end locally to a respect for authority and a trust in state-led development, as also reflected in the findings of Johns (2002, p. 225): 'There was no utopia.' One vernacular expression of this mistrust was the concept of "sweat equity" (Bill, 10/9/09) – a suspicion that participation was part of an increasing privatisation of public services, exploiting volunteer and low-paid labour to replace publicly-funded provision, compromising both their advocacy role in the community and the direct relationship between community and local authority, working to "undermine the whole issue of people in the area fighting for Council services" (Jim, 1/9/10):

An area that looks after itself, and provides for itself, and kind of, you know, you can cut the funding to [laughs]... and I find it slightly uncomfortable, that the similarity between social enterprise and Big Society, it's things that could possibly be done by the state, being done by private initiative; ... I'm worried about it being more exploitative of people, actually (Rob, 17/1/11).

The concept of "sweat equity" therefore provides a mirror image of the dominant social capital narrative, showing local agents' consciousness that this form of participation can perpetuate and even deepen inequalities, while weakening democratic accountability – effectively a process of "adverse incorporation" (Hickey and du Toit, 2007), accepting short term practical gains from contractual partners at the expense of developing a longer-term sense of progressive shared interest within the wider community.

Clarke (2004) argues that we should take these everyday contestations and struggles as our starting point for understanding how a political strategy, whether neoliberalism or its Third Way variants, becomes dominant in the first place:

Dominant strategies do not occupy an empty landscape. They have to overcome resistances, refusals, and blockages ... It makes a difference to our view of the world if we start by looking for the grit – taking notice of the recalcitrance, resistance, obstruction, and incomplete rule – rather than throwing them in as a gestural last paragraph after the 'big story' has been told (Clarke, 2004, p. 45).

My study therefore set out to look for this "grit" in particular practices, places and histories, even while practice is seen as inscribed within

discourse. Negotiations over meaning and material practice became the focus of my empirical work with communities attempting to run relatively autonomous services on the basis of enterprise, in specific local political economies, and in the process redefining their understanding of themselves as political subjects. The methodological framework I eventually settled on to combine this focus on political economy, discourses of governance, subjectivity, and political practice, was ethnographic, comparative, and specifically political.

Methodology: Plural Political Ethnographies

“Political ethnography” is not a sociological ethnography based on deep immersion, seeking an “authentic” understanding of social organisation through long term participation, but one which seeks to identify the political horizons of particular communities through their key internal and external transactions, how they discursively construct their objectives, and how they understand their own agency and subjectivity. The development and application of political ethnography in the early years of the 21st century has been well-documented (see Joseph et al. 2007; Schatz 2009). At the University of Nottingham, it had its roots in a collective of researchers, later known as the Nottingham Political Ethnography Group, working with Dr Sara Motta (see Motta, 2009), and affiliated to the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice in the School of Politics and International Relations. We were brought together by a common interest in a number of issues: (i) methodological concerns about connections between political theory and lived practice; (ii) the construction of knowledge and understanding through collaborative research with those outside the university space; and (iii) the possibility of making the observations drawn out through research relevant and useful to our collaborators. Individually we worked with a diverse range of groups – land movements in Latin America, political parties in Chile, youth groups in Nottingham, and refugee communities, as well as community organisations in the UK East Midlands, and our theoretical frameworks were diverse. However all of our work was underlined by a recognition of the symbiotic relationship between social, cultural, historical and political constructs and how knowledge is expressed and is interpreted. Most importantly, we wanted our research to embody what James Scott has called ‘practical demonstrations of the value of a social science not conducted entirely behind people’s backs’ (cited in Schatz, 2009, p. 4). In each case, therefore, we engaged critically with the way that knowledge was created within social movements, rather than imposing an understanding of individual and collective agency on them.

This work culminated in a workshop in 2010, hosted collaboratively with the Participant Action Research Group in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, led by Dr. Laurence Cox, seeking to explore the research process in its intellectual, political, subjective, and affective elements. This included discussions of the strengths and weaknesses of social movement theory in explaining trajectories of collective action, both development and decline (see Cox and Flescher Fominaya, 2009), and how this creates a legacy of understanding, while also exploring the relationships between academic research, political activism and grassroots community action, and between activism and the political mainstream – the state, the media, and established political parties. The workshop run by the Nottingham group encouraged participants to explore some of these key questions in more depth, in particular, the nature of the political subject, and our understanding of where and how ‘politics’ takes place, seeking to break down established dualisms of public/private, subjective/objective, insider/outsider by considering how we as researchers are implicated in our own research. Ultimately, political ethnography suggested itself because it allowed me to focus, as Bourdieu (1986, 1994) did, on processes of social reproduction, and to follow his directive that any study of ideological discourse should be grounded in an examination of the social institutions which spring from it, or risk becoming ‘no more than a contribution to the efficacy of those ideologies’ (Bourdieu, 1994, pp. 182-3). However, it also provided a way of drilling down beyond the behaviours and roles of institutions. It expands our understanding of politics to bring in people and their everyday practice, their historical identities, ethical choices and locally-acquired knowledge. It is “political” ethnography because it does not just record and describe. It combines thick description with political theory. It explores theory as something which is lived rather than abstract. It looks for linkages between everyday practices and wider processes.

Burawoy (2000) argues that this methodology can reveal alternative narratives and values which may not be accessible in other ways. He suggests that when identifying and analysing the spaces where global forces may be mediated locally, ethnographic fieldwork should give attention to ‘practices as well as norms, to actual behaviour as well as to the rules they instantiated’ (Burawoy, 2000, p. 17), which echoes both Thompson’s (2002) understanding of the autonomous formation of social groups at particular points in history, and Scott’s (1992) idea of “hidden transcripts” – the idea that actual practice may not wholly reflect the norms which seek to circumscribe it. This focus on practice in certain places allowed me to explore how processes of attrition and conflict between scales, as well as synergies, work to challenge or legitimate a dominant discourse. Burawoy (2000, p. 339)

describes his approach as seeking to capture ‘the ways globalization attaches itself to everyday life, the way neoliberalism becomes “common sense.”’ These ‘grounded globalizations’ are explored through a situated engagement with actual social relations, and emerging forms of agency in specific historical contexts. Specifically, this involves making connections between changes in economic forms (from Fordism to a flexible service economy), changes in our understanding of politics and the role of the state (from social democracy, to the market-driven “enabling state”, to the relatively recent idea of “co-production”), and changes in the way we identify ourselves culturally (from class, gender, race, and nationality/locality to complex hybrid identities and affiliations), as well as a complex understanding of the forms taken by ideology:

We have to attend to the manifold and complex ways ideologies are produced, proliferated, transformed, combined, disseminated, appropriated, and mobilized to change the world but also to arrest such change. They are not simply tool kits adopted by different groups, but they become the terrain, the coordinates of struggles (Burawoy, 2000, p. 343).

Another key factor in my own particular adoption of political ethnography was its combination with a comparative method, focused around three case studies within Nottinghamshire⁴. The comparative method was chosen in order to allow me an evaluation of the differences between degrees of critical engagement in these emerging organisations, which were at different points in the process of developing both their internal collective practices, and their relations with the local state, market, and other agencies. This had drawbacks, in that inevitably it allows less depth of analysis than into one study alone. However, as was appropriate for a Gramscian theoretical framework, it allowed me to explore these different community struggles as not wholly determined by their conditions. What duly emerged during this process therefore was an understanding of the relationship between historical

⁴Nottinghamshire is a prime site of contested deindustrialization, and transition to a service and knowledge-based economy. As the New Economics Foundation had already identified (North *et al.*, 2007; NEF, 2008), the area was also particularly advanced in exploring the potential of a social economy, actively facilitated by the local state. This marked a shift from large-scale state-led community investment (City Challenge, New Deal for Communities) towards the establishment of Community Development Trusts (CDTs), defined by the Development Trusts Association (later reconstituted as Locality) as representing an area of no larger than 10,000 population, being ‘community-owned and led,’ and using ‘self-help, trading for social purpose, and ownership of buildings and land, to bring about long-term social, economic and environmental benefits in their community.’ *Development Trusts Association: transforming communities for good*. Leaflet, September 2008.

forms of identity, experiences of political economy, and the resulting political practices and subjectivities, which could be applied elsewhere to explore the political potential of local agency.

The choice to undertake plural political ethnographies, involving periodic visits over an 18-month period (mainly from 2009-2010), was another key element which defined ethnography in a political rather than anthropological form. Instead of using full immersion and thick description, it incorporated elements of immersion to capture informal daily interactions, plus more traditional participant observation to capture other, more formal decision-making processes. However, I would argue that retaining some degree of what Angrosino (2007, p. 54) calls “peripheral membership” within these communities reflects the transient experience of many who move in and out of particular localities and engage temporarily with their local economies. As Hannerz (2003, p. 210) has said: ‘there are no real natives, or at any rate, fewer of them, sharing a life time’s localized experience and collectivized understandings.’ This is a Marxist approach to ethnography, looking not for the distinctive structures of a relatively static social formation, but for connections, conflicts and contradictions between apparently separate communities which are operating under a common set of structural conditions: “Such ethnographic studies are designed to demonstrate not the autonomy and near uniqueness of those communities, but their linkages to other communities that ultimately form global systems” (Angrosino, 2007, p. 9).

Inevitably, much of the data gathered during the course of this research was in the form of narrative. This does not mean that I romanticise personal narrative and voice as in some way “authentic”; instead, I approach it as the articulation of particular situated constructions, by particularly constructed subjects (Barbour, 1998, p. 124). By recording fieldwork notes in this way, I was able to draw out evidence to answer questions on the nature of the key negotiations both within community groups, between them and the communities they aspire to represent, and between them and their institutional partners, identifying key battlegrounds, the way that political histories influence their negotiations, the language and narratives invoked during these negotiations, and whether they understood this as political. The trust and rapport developed during the early stages of the ethnographic fieldwork also considerably facilitated the conduct of supplementary semi-structured interviews with twenty-one members of the boards, staff, volunteers and users of community enterprises (and one focus group in each case). These were instigated to probe issues of history, motivation, language, and local identity, the situational factors which might encourage different responses, and to allow participants to explore further some of the contradictions they experience.

To help with the analysis of the data, findings in the three key areas (the effects of political economy, relations of governance, and the construction of political subjectivities) were mapped against the “norms” constructed by particular political models in relation to my key themes. This synthesised in tabular form some of the frameworks that have emerged from those governance theories which specifically connect the study of new institutions of governance to the construction of new forms of legitimate (and non-legitimate) political subject within civil society, particularly on the work of Barnes et al. (2007) on the emergence of new forms of political discourse which frame our understanding of where power and expertise lies; Newman (2005, pp. 107-117) on the dynamics of particular forms of citizenship under different forms of governance; and finally Lowndes and Sullivan (2008) on the rationales that lie behind specific approaches to governing, managing, and “empowering” local neighbourhoods. This tabulation was not intended to simplify strands of political practice, discourse, and identity, or to imply that they are mutually exclusive; in fact the contrary appeared to be the case. Those “Third Way” discourses which attempt to marketise social provision were primarily articulated in UK politics during the 1990s, particularly under the Labour Governments from 1997; however they operate on a continuum with the “Big Society” or New Localism discourses of the Coalition administration which took power in 2010, with a similar expectation of citizen participation, but a greater shift away from state promotion of social inclusion through targeted investment and monitoring of impact. In evaluating the data thematically, my intention was to generate an account of community action which has some internal narrative coherence, and which allows me to draw conclusions based on what King, Keohane and Verba (1994, p. 8) would recognise as “descriptive inference”. In other words, from a description and interpretation of the particular, the specific, the local, in terms of community practices, I hoped to draw an explanation of a more general unobserved phenomenon, a changing understanding of the ideal political subject, or citizen, understood as a generator of social capital, and whether and how this is contested.

Conclusion: The Uses of Political Ethnography

In this article, I have outlined the development of a theoretical and methodological framework which allowed me to integrate an analysis of the development of collective practices in civil society with a number of other key factors: the specifics of engagement with the political economy, at multiple spatial levels; the political shaping of civil society as part of a new system of governance; and the significance of the development and deployment of new values and meanings which suggest what kind of political subjects we might

become. In doing so, I was placing intentional collective or networked activity at the heart of my analysis. However, my intention was neither to romanticise agency itself, nor to mystify locality and “community” as a natural site for the production of alternative values, meanings, and practices. Adopting a neo-Gramscian theoretical framework allowed me to place an emphasis on the historical development of new forms of associated identification, ideas, and practices, while placing this in the context of a battle between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic understandings, and the pressures from powerful interests to shape and contain emerging forms of political subjectivity. New forms of agency are made central, but their trajectories are seen as contingent on their relationship with their structural context.

My conclusion was that the local is both the site where these forces become evident to many of us in material form (Harvey’s “spatial fix”), but is also a source of the “good sense” that Gramsci sees as coming from historical lived experience, and the development of alternative values and practices which potentially shift our understanding of what is political possible, and the formation of social movements. A political ethnographic approach, based on limited time-specific immersion, participant observation, and interview data, allowed me to make connections, as Burawoy does, between changing forms of the state and market, and the way we identify as collective actors and political subjects, but without claiming that the former is necessarily the determinant of the latter. The local, even in times of the rapid movement of capital and people, was concluded to be a surprisingly enduring source of identification, in the face of historic shifts in formations of state and economic production, and the way we operate within it offered a distinct way of “grounding globalisation”, understanding and mediating it as part of a process. Although clearly constrained and intersected by powerful extra-local forces, our localities were revealed as a strong potential source of alternative values, meanings, and practices that might form the basis of a new civic politics.

In doing this I was able to stay close to Bourdieu’s suggested methodology, which focuses on institutional formations and practices, how they promulgate particular ideas, and reproduce existing social relationships and power differentials. Bourdieu argues that it is when we become aware of the contradictions in this process, and the tension between the reproduction of inequality, and the desire to meaningfully change it, that we can start to develop an alternative habitus, a set of lived ideas and practices which might represent a more systematic challenge to a dominant discourse which constrains our sense of what we can achieve politically. However it is our places and spaces of engagement, as Harvey suggests, and our relationship with political economy, as Burawoy argues, which are significant factors in

both making local participants aware of these contradictions, and giving them a base from which to mount a challenge to these constraints, and to develop new practices and meanings. The analysis I was able to undertake therefore identified where these fracturings occur, and how they might contribute to a Gramscian “good sense” which challenges the Third Way doxa concerning civil society agency.

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