Subaltern imaginaries of localism: constructions of place, space and democracy in community-led housing organisations

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<u>Abstract</u>

Strategies of localism have constituted the 'community' as a metaphor for democracy and empowerment as part of a wider reordering of state institutions and state power. In conflating the smallest scale with increased participation, localism authorises a performative enactment of democracy, citizenship and the 'public' through the lived experience of place. This paper evidences the strategies by which community organisations apply the regulatory code of localism to imprint its promise of empowerment on space. In research with resident-controlled housing organisations in England it identifies four spatial practices that breach social boundaries to enact place as participative and space as democratic. These practices are theorised as a licensed incursion into the public realm of regulatory norms related to domestic and private spaces. Characterised as subaltern imaginaries of localism, they suggest an evasion of the disciplinary intent of localism and demonstrate a wider desire for a more fundamental change in the political ordering of space.

<u>Introduction</u>

Political strategies of localism that attribute democratic value to scalar constructions have been intrinsic to a geographic reorganisation of state institutions and state relations of governance (Swyngedouw 2005; Allen & Cochrane 2010). A promise to devolve decision-making to local communities has been the constant theme in this wide-ranging transformation of government and its new assemblages of distributed authority. As a technology of spatial governmentality (Gibson 2001), localism hails communities as subjects and agents of governance within reiterative practices intended to produce the embodiment of a new public (Newman & Clarke 2009). In constituting the local as a metaphor for democracy and empowerment, however, localism foregrounds the pivotal role played by place and scale in cementing social differentiation and in naturalising power relations (Marston 2000). A rationality of governance that seeks to construct a new order of political space, provides unbidden a discourse through which socio-spatial positionalities are made vulnerable to reconfiguration (Leitner, Sheppard & Sziarto 2008).

This paper addresses strategies of localism in England, where the Coalition government's Localism Act 2011 exemplifies the conflation of democracy with the local scale and place-based imaginaries (Painter, Orton et al 2011). By popularising a suite of 'rights' made available to community organisations, it is argued that the Localism Act authorises a performative enactment of democracy, citizenship and the 'public' through the lived experience of place

3

(Dikec 2012). This paper identifies four spatial practices through which marginalised communities apply the technology of localism to challenge the limitations of their socio-spatial positioning and imprint promises of empowerment and democracy on space. Theorised as citational practices related to domestic spaces, they breach the gendered division between private and public in a symbolic substitution of regulatory norms that renders space familiar and therefore malleable. Characterised here as subaltern imaginaries of localism, they generate an evasive subjectivity for community groups hailed as subjects and agents of a new spatial order.

The paper presents research with community organisations in England engaged in the local management of public or quasi-public housing services. The research is drawn from focus groups and interviews with 144 community activists in social housing, conducted in four cities across England and at three national conferences undertaken from 2008 to 2011. The data collection thus spans the period of "community localism" (Hildreth 2011) under the UK Labour government and the initial years of the Coalition government which saw the introduction of the Localism Act in England. The focus groups and interviews sought to explore the strategies emerging from the projects of community enabled by localism. The research findings revealed a significant convergence of opinion evidenced across the focus groups and supported in each narrative (Author 2012). This paper presents an in-depth study of four of those focus groups in order to give clear voice to the counter narratives of localism. The selection of groups is made in order to clarify and contextualise assertions common across the research sample, and to provide insightful

analysis of narrative themes. These community groups have exercised the rights of localism to take over the management of social housing estates, or to take ownership of public assets into local trust. They were established to provide democratic representation in the new spatial configurations of local strategic partnerships and regional government. Narratives from these groups are analysed through a dialogue between the work of feminist and queer theorist Judith Butler, Henri Lefebvre's production of space, and the concept of the subaltern from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The paper maintains that the imaginaries that emerge demonstrate a desire for a more radical transformation of power than that legitimised by the rationalities of localism; a desire that might signal a wider challenge to the reordering of political space.

The first section of the paper explores the rationalities of community localism in England and identifies the contradictions and exclusions that constitute its instability, particularly in its address to the communities it renders subaltern and marginalised. The next section extends this theoretical approach to cast localism as the performative construction of subjectivities through the regulation of spatial effects. The paper then applies this analytical framework to case studies through four sections that chart the domestication of public space and the enactment of place as participation, the reversal of hierarchies through familiar interaction and the imagining of governance as a process of neighbourly exchange. The paper concludes with an assessment of the new publics that are enacted through the spatial effects of the state rationality of localism.

Communities and the reordering of public space

Strategies of localism has been central to a political restructuring of state power since the 1970s and have promised "a reordering of public space" (Mohan & Stokke 2000: 250), attributing political content to a particular spatial form in their conflation of the local with better and more democratic governance (Purcell 2006; Painter, Orton *et al* 2011). In Britain a programme of centrally-driven managerial reforms under Labour governments from 1997 to 2010 displaced state functions onto devolved parliaments and regional assemblies, but also onto local strategic partnerships and neighbourhood management boards, ensuring the outsourcing of public delivery to private and community interests through a regulatory matrix of targets and inspections (Newman, Barnes et al 2004). In this strategy of "community localism" (Hildreth 2011), Labour pledged to strengthen local democracy by empowering local communities and provided a limited suite of rights to community groups to exert pressure on local authorities. These fledgling measures were reinvigorated by the Coalition Government as the Localism Act 2011, a more defined package that conflated the enterprising public imagined under Labour's regime with the traditional Conservative subjectivity of the active citizen and a liberal belief in associational democracy (Barnes & Prior 2009). The Localism Act (2011) promised to "shift power away from central government and pass it to local people and community groups" (Pickles 2010), applying assertions of the primacy of local knowledge, the enterprising effect of association and the supposed ethical value of belonging as weapons against collective provision, social insurance and a redistributive

state (Hall & Massey 2010; Featherstone *et al* 2012). To this apparent end the Act introduced to England four new 'community rights' which presented community groups as the principal beneficiaries of devolved governance and handed them the power to initiate neighbourhood plans, trigger consent for new-build projects, be included as potential bidders for the disposal of public assets, and challenge local authorities to take over public services. Minister of State for Decentralisation in 2011, Greg Clark MP claimed these measures would promote "the sense of participation and involvement on which a healthy democracy thrives" (CLG 2011: 1).

Spatial metaphors abound to describe the paradoxical possibilities of community localism but these observations fail to reveal the very specific constructions of place and space that result. The promise to move decision-making closer to the people (Westwood 2011), to "a spatial scale closer to people's felt sense of identity" (Stoker 2004: 125), has provided the rationale for a restructuring of the relationship between the public and public services. Localism appears here as a scalar construction aimed at enacting behavioural change (Delaney & Leitner 1997). The intention is to construct the community and the community organisation as a model for the new subjectivities of an enterprising citizenry to accompany a societal reorientation towards the market as a model for society (Raco 2003). The rights of the Localism Act address community groups as the potential providers and trustees of public services and assets, but the main beneficiaries of these policies are multi-national companies and global finance markets (Fyfe 2005), while the communities most likely to benefit from the rights to plan, build, manage or

take over public assets are those well-resourced groups in affluent areas able to meet the costs associated with these complex projects (CLG 2012a). The central role allotted to community organisations by the Localism Act presents the shift from a redistributive state to one that celebrates market dynamics as a transfer of responsibility from the state and society to individuals and the community (Hall & Massey 2010). The local community has been erected as a reassuringly familiar proxy for a smaller state, cementing definitions of responsible, active citizenship, and by extension the exclusion of those un-deserving of those subjectivities (Painter, Orton *et al* 2011).

While Prime Minister David Cameron gave this interpellation a new gloss in the rhetoric of 'big society', some communities appear relegated instead to the problematic area of a 'broken society' (Hancock, Mooney & Neal 2012). The citizenship awarded under localism is defined by the abjection of marginalised and outcast territories under programmes of austerity; especially those neighbourhoods of social housing stigmatised as "ghettos of dysfunctionality", and made targets for punitive welfare sanctions (Centre for Social Justice 2011). Social housing has become a proxy for poverty and the poor in the rationalities of public service reform and communities of social housing are considered to be "irresponsible, workshy and undeserving" (Card 2006: 54). Hit hard by state retrenchment, their experience is of "austerity localism" (Featherstone et al 2011), where opportunities for community governance emerge in the withdrawal of state services, and are tasked with the management of scarcity. In neighbourhoods where marginalisation is moralised, self-reliance is not an attribute to be learned through localism but a

defensive response to a punishing programme of welfare cuts. The condition of social housing estates under austerity localism is described by Ellie Jupp (2010: 88): "What remains as residual and beyond the reach of the authorities within the neighbourhood is constituted as 'women's' essentially left to local activists to try to hold together."

The ability of community organisations, especially those in deprived neighbourhoods, to slip between spatial boundaries and move fluidly from contesting the local to governing it, and back again (Newman 2012), has been a subject of particular commentary among feminist scholars (Williams 1993; Martin 2002; Staeheli 2002). The apparent ability of women to mobilise political power from an ethic of care accrued in a domestic realm has led to theorisations that the community operates as a liminal space between private and public, an invited space where domestic agency encounters the technologies of government (Jupp 2010). This spatial demarcation of community is the artificial result of the gendered exclusion of domestic and neighbourly care from the dominant narratives of political economy. The segregation of unpaid care work on the other side of "the international division of labour" (Spivak 2010: 41) creates an exclusion zone with a porous boundary; a destination for the outsourcing of welfare services, and a demarcated territory for the governance of behaviour. This artificial containment of the private appears to generate a paradox in community governance where ethics of solidarity and co-operation, or what Raymond Williams (1967: 326) called "'the basic collective idea", are promoted within the regulated practices of localism.

The post-colonial concept of subaltern space may provide a useful framework to evaluate this paradox outside of the usual polarities of resistance or co-option. In the definition applied by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988; 2010) subaltern space refers not to a defined territory but to a lack, or absence in the political geography of governance. In distancing herself from a literature that identifies the subaltern with the resistance of oppressed peoples, Spivak dedicates the term to those classes or communities that are effaced by dominant narratives, who are marginalised and unable to speak for, or represent themselves. The concept of the subaltern is associated with the peasantry of the global south or with "the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat" (Spivak 2010: 37); people outside the norms of society; who are written off, like words vanishing from the pages. The subaltern is unrecognisably Other. Spivak defines subaltern space in similar terms of effacement and self-effacement, as a "silent, silenced centre" (Spivak 1988: 283). It is a space of exclusion but also an unknowable place where agency is impossible to discern and the strategies of governance generate little response. In introducing the concept of subaltern space, the intention here is not to add another spatial metaphor to the study of communities. The subaltern is helpful because it enables the exercise of community governance under localism to be theorised as a practice of breaching and invoking boundaries; of working with the lines of exclusion to evade subjectivity at the same time as embracing it. Localism harnesses the neighbourly connections of community as regulatory practice, and enlists unpaid care services as political subjectivity (Somerville 2011). It gives license to the ability to slip

10

between artificial and imposed boundaries, to enact political relations as private ethics. It also invokes a domestic hinterland where politics can be made familiar, and interpreted through rhythms of daily interaction. In neighbourhoods excluded from the dominant narratives of paid employment and private goods, localism provides a regulatory context for domestic and neighbourly practices that are a response to effacement and a means of evasion (McCulloch 1997). The next section sets out a framework to understand how these subaltern spatial practices might be performed in the regulatory code of localism.

The subjectivities of localism

The spatial practices of localism are theorised here as performative enactments of power relations that produce social identity and social space through the citation of regulatory norms. This theoretical framework develops the application in human geography of Judith Butler's theory of performativity which has been applied to understand how regulatory norms are spatially enacted and to conceptualise space as constructed through reiterative practices (Gregson & Rose 2000; Thrift & Dewsbury 2000; Houston & Pulido 2002; Thomas 2004; Kaiser & Nikiforova 2008). Some challenging parallels have been advanced between Butler's thesis and the work of Henri Lefebvre on the production of space (Conlon 2004; Tyler & Cohen 2010), and, while it is important to clarify the fundamental differences and divergences between

the two theorists, both Butler and Lefebvre understood subjectivity and subject formation as embodied spatial constructions and space as citational. A critical reading of these areas of convergence may help to clarify the processes of socio-spatial positioning under localism and theorise their instability.

In her theory of the performative, Butler argued that socio-spatial positioning (her focus was on the gendered body) is made concrete through the repeated citation of regulatory norms. Drawing on the power of performative speech to bestow identity through such phrases as 'I name this ship' Butler argued that regulatory discourse does not simply describe a situation or an action, it calls into effect the subject relations it names. Subjectivity is constructed as the embodiment of regulated space, as Butler (1997: 10) maintained: "Individuals come to occupy the site of the subject (the subject simultaneously emerges as a 'site')". In *The Production of Space* Lefebvre argued that subjectivity is materialised through the citation of a spatial code or system of space. Subjects accede to "their space and to their status as subjects acting within that space" by means of this code (Lefebvre 1991: 16-17), and, as Lefebvre later explained, "all 'subjects' are situated in a space in which they must either recognise themselves or lose themselves" (Lefebvre 1991: 35). Common to both theorists then is an understanding that the subject is constituted as an embodiment of space, within the specific limitations of that space, as a result of signifying practices that naturalise their effects so that space is seen as empty and external and the subject appears as agent of its own will (McCann 1999).

Socio-spatial positioning is produced and reproduced through "a regularised and constrained repetition of norms" (Butler 1993: 95). The necessity for continual iteration emphasises the instability of subject formation. The opportunity for subverting the meaning of spaces, for occupying them in ways that might challenge their normative use and restrictions, lies in the potential for reiteration to bring change. The accent here is on the active and emergent nature of spaces (Jupp 2008: 334); they are continuously subject to reproduction and reinterpretation that projects "the instability and incompleteness of subject-formation" (Butler 1993: 226). While Butler does not provide a specific source for this instability other than the potential for discourse to have more meanings than intended, Lefebvre's dialectical triad of space as conceived, perceived and lived, can provide a conceptual model for theorising the unstable processes involved (Lefebvre 1991). This triad has been understood as the simplified representation of a complex assemblage of coexisting and overlapping modes of spatial production, but it can usefully be applied to assess the separate processes at play within the citation of spatial norms, and to consider each process as individually subject to reiteration. Every mode of spatial production presents instabilities, its "gaps and fissures" (Butler 1993: 10) that may be opened by reiterative practice. Conceptions, perceptions and practices may be affected by reiteration separately and cumulatively to produce instability and the potential for transgression. In conceptualising his triad Lefebvre located the motor for reiterative change in lived space, or representational space that "the imagination seeks to change and appropriate" (Lefebvre 1991: 39). He recognised that the 'living' of space

13

is coloured by the imagination, and by memories and emotional associations, and that this repeated 'living' has the potential to produce some variance in the process through which space is reproduced. Imaginary associations and interpretations are an outcome of the everyday reiterative practices that make space familiar, and they can change the content and meaning of spaces. Reiteration has been identified as the process whereby space becomes place (Creswell 2004) and for Yi-Fu Tuan, repeated experience, daily routines and established paths transform space so that it "gets under the skin" and becomes a "field of care" (Tuan 1979: 418). This is a practise of domestication, of making space familiar so that symbolic representations are cited to enact wider capabilities and enlarge the range of permitted actions. In the rationalities of community localism, the consequence of this process of domestication has been registered as a breach of spatial boundaries, or the act of jumping scale (Smith 1993; Clark 1994). It can be theorised as a licensed incursion into the public realm of citational practices related to domestic and private spaces, and as a breach in the global gendered division between subaltern space and the dominant political economy (Spivak 2010). Localism extends an invitation to superimpose the ethics of domestic and neighbourly care on the spatial constructions of governance (Staeheli 2002); it suggests that public space can be enacted as domestic and familiar, and that power and decision-making can be brought within reach. In doing so, it locates political space within familiar patterns of social interaction and gives license to a symbolic substitution of regulatory norms. The subjectivities of localism that emerge evidence the "politics of possibility" (Gibson-Graham 2006) where imagined geographies of agency accompany, as unwanted

14

discursive companions, a new territorialisation of state power. The next sections apply this theoretical framework to primary research into the spatial practices of community localism on social housing estates.

Extending domestic space

In a city in the north of England, members of a Tenant Management Organisation, running a social housing estate of 2000 homes on behalf of the local authority, are discussing their plans for the locality. Christine, who is in her early 50s, is very clear about what she wants to do as the new chair of the management board:

> I know where I want to be and what I want to do and I won't be side-tracked. I want to get the community to how I remember the community round here being, not like it is now.

Phil Cohen (1997) has rightly identified the drive to exclude that so often motivates the claims made by community organisations, and Christine, it transpires later in the conversation, has particular views on the behaviour of young people on the estate. The claim Christine makes on space, however, reveals her use of discourses of social order to envisage a process of social change (Clarke 2009). She appears to extend the authority that she might exercise in the family home to a 2000 home estate, and to cast herself as the regulator of conduct in the street and the neighbourhood. Localism provides

the licence for this scalar jump (Smith 1993) from personal ethics into a manifesto for socio-spatial transformation that Christine sets out clearly:

> We should be able to walk out of our front door in comfort and feel safe. We should be able to walk up and down without fear of intimidation, and the elderly should feel safe. And that's what I'm hoping to achieve, to get this community back to how it were where people are not frightened, and I think I might get there eventually.

Tenant management organisations were one of the earliest manifestations of the political strategy of localism applied to restructure the delivery of public housing services and promote market-like disciplines. Tenant management enabled elected community groups to take over the running of council estates, if supported by a ballot of residents, to decentralise the delivery of housing services to the locality and make changes to the public realm (Cairncross, Morrell *et al* 2002). The tenancy agreement signed by local residents provides the management organisation with its legitimacy, and defines its remit to discipline the behaviour of tenants (Flint 2004). Christine, however, configures this remit as the transformation of behaviour in order to recreate the reciprocal networks of community:

> You could at one time rely on your neighbour if you were ill. Um, you can't do that anymore, because they lock themselves in and they don't want to know. And that's not, to me, that's not a community.

While Christine's community organisation cites the regulatory discourse of public housing management and its disciplinary sanctions, her aspirations appear to transcend these normative injunctions to imagine what Mike Davis (2006) has called "democratic public space", where ethics of care and neighbourliness are to be nurtured through the rhythms and routines of familiar interaction. Christine's husband Gary explains the vision that clearly motivates the couple; he uses his hands to express the estate as conceptual space; starting out with a small rectangle, then enlarging it to indicate a breach of boundaries:

Gary: A lot of people now if that's their house [indicates small space on paper] that's their space in'it? [Makes bigger space.] That's not their space anymore, [shrinks the space] that's their space in their house. And that's why you go out here on a night, you'll not see anybody walking around, where years ago

Christine: Yeah

Gary: People used to stand at the gate and talk to other people like,

Christine: 'Course they did

Gary articulates a desire to enlarge domestic space and to dissolve the boundary between public and private, expressing this as a strategy to breach the isolation of the home and extend domestic space and its feelings of safety into the street (Clark 1994). This is a negotiation over the limits of scale and

the socio-spatial positioning it enforces. In Neil Smith's (1993: 105) words this community organisation "refuse to recognise the physical boundaries of the home but instead treat the community as a virtually borderless extension of the home". Their strategy is to appropriate space and with it power; to upscale from home to the estate. This is a transgression of boundaries that widens the agency allotted to them and enables Christine to cast a domesticating gaze over public space and claim it as her field of care:

> Christine: My dad used to stand at the gate, when he retired, and everybody knew him. Didn't they? And when my dad died they all rallied round to help me mum. You don't get that anymore. […]
>
> But I just want everything back to how it were. Not exactly; but to make it better for people.

Christine has mobilised the citational practices of domestic space to reconfigure local management as the promotion of neighbourliness and solidarity. In Butler's terms localism is a power exerted through the formation of subjects; it constitutes the agency of the tenant management organisation and provides and circumscribes its regulatory remit. But it is also a power that is assumed by the subject, a power that becomes "the instrument of that subject's becoming" (Butler 1997:11). Christine's intention to "make it better for people" is a statement of strategy which is licensed by the rationality of localism and yet exceeds its remit. The authority vested in her to manage the housing estate has rendered space familiar and malleable; she has

transposed regulatory norms to envisage a future in which socio-spatial divisions are breached and the public sphere is rendered caring and safe. This extension of domestic agency into the public sphere is essential to the construction of space as both local and democratic, as the next section explores.

Constructing place as "nearness"

The key assumption underpinning the rationality of localism is that the smallest geographical unit of governance provides the greatest opportunities for citizens to participate in decisions (Lowndes & Sullivan 2008). There is nothing intrinsic, however, to local-scale decision-making that guarantees greater popular participation (Purcell 2006). At a conference of social housing tenant activists from around the country, a group of resident directors from community-controlled housing associations were drawn together in discussion. These community companies have applied the rationalities of localism to transfer public housing from local authorities to local trusts, and now manage their estates from neighbourhood housing offices with locally-based staff. The resident directors made clear that collective representation, accountability through election, and a commitment to deepening democracy are all essential to creating the local.

Claire: If you are elected you can honestly say 'I am speaking on behalf of', well I hope they are, whereas you are only speaking on behalf of yourself aren't you?

Yvonne: But you've also got the right then to go out and say 'I am your elected representative, can you tell me what you want?'

Paula: And everybody knows who's on the board and you get stopped, they knock on your door, they stop you in the street. You cannot get away from them.

Paula's rueful comments here about accountability indicate the web of routine interactions, face to face encounters and daily social relations that bring democracy within reach. Community organisations base their claims on democracy not on their location but on their 'nearness' to the direct experience of people (Kearns & Parkinson 2001). This is a spatial construction in which a discourse of neighbourliness is manifested around an invocation of locality. 'Nearness' invests place with familiarity constructed through face-to-face contact, regular encounters, routine interactions, and local knowledge. Although posited as actually-existing conditions integral to neighbourhoods by the rationale of localism, these everyday relationships have to be constructed in material practice, emotional identification and imagination by community groups, who strive to generate collective identities around the spatial practices of place (Martin 2003).

Paula provides an account of how her community board of 12 people tries to ensure that the residents of their high-rise housing estate in a town in southern England are engaged in decision-making. She describes both the active construction of the local scale as democratic and the performative production of local knowledge, of neighbourhood, and therefore of the local scale itself. This is partly a physical transformation; Paula tells how, prior to community control, housing staff from the local authority would never visit the estate, and residents had to make a long and expensive bus journey into the city; now the community organisation has a housing office in the centre of the estate, and:

Now the people don't have to go all the way into S[town], you know, £5 bus ride, to report something. They just walk down the stairs, or across the green, into the office.

A sense that the community-controlled housing organisation is at the heart of the estate is reproduced in Paula's words. The office is pictured at the crossroads of every route across the estate. But the 'nearness' that distinguishes the tenant directors from the previous local authority managers is constructed through participatory decision-making processes, and by encouraging an ethos that every resident matters.

Everything we do we go out to the tenants first and we call them 'You Decides' where we put all our questions round the board room and the

people come in, if they live in a high rise block, if they live in a low rise, they all get different coloured stickers and, um, this is how we, we run it. So it does work, it does work if you give power to the people.

The face to face encounters and social interaction that constitute space as place have to be actively constructed through 'neighbouring' work (Bulmer 1986), but transforming place into nearness means bringing decision-making within reach, and embedding it in the rhythms of everyday life. After describing a contested election to the board, and the creation of a series of sub-committees to involve a wider range of local people in the decisions, Paula explains the principles of participation that have inspired this community organisation.

We have people with special needs and that, two of those go around with one of the, um, Service and Performance [sub-committee] and they do a block inspection, so, it's integrating those people to make them feel 'yes you are valid'. I mean we have a lady who comes to our board meetings, she's in her 50s with, er, learning difficulties but she makes the tea and her highlight last meeting was because we gave her a badge with her name on, you know. So it's trying to accommodate everybody, making everybody feel that yes you have got something to do, you are a valid member of society.

Localism provides this community organisation with the regulatory framework to take decisions on behalf of their housing estate. In delivering its authority, the community organisation makes the subaltern practices of neighbouring and domestic care central to their estate management practice (Jupp 2008). Participation in decision-making appears here as the outcome of neighbouring and as an active process of inclusion in which democracy is an essential component of nearness. The rationality of localism, with its problematic assertion that the local is inherently more democratic, has authorised spatial practices through which space can be constructed as both local and democratic.

The preceding studies have evidenced how the regulatory license of localism enables space to be domesticated and place to be rendered participative. The next sections investigate how these familiarising practices apply to the spatial transformation of power that localism promises but fails to deliver.

Rooting power in place

Localism owes a debt to the tradition of participatory democracy and embeds this uncomfortably within centralised and hierarchical systems of governance (Brownhill 2009). The central direction of localism, and the strengthening of state power it conceals (Fuller & Geddes 2008), ensures that participatory democracy is subordinate to the representative democracy of the scalar state, and more frequently is subsumed by the managerial discourses that have depoliticised the governance of public services, and legitimised their

23

outsourcing and privatisation (Swyngedouw 2004; Wallace 2010). Community localism presents a post-political populism, privileging local knowledge against the politics of local government, and positing a unitary field where dissent and difference disappear (Swyngedouw 2010). The community is construed as a natural territory with a latent capacity for self-government (Durose & Rees 2012), and an innate common sense which enables it to reach consensus without interference from big government. The application of localism in spatial practice however, throws up clear contradictions with the claims made about communities as representations of space. Far from emerging as natural territories, community groups wishing to benefit from the rights of localism are dependent on the local authority for their right to become spaces of governance (CLG 2011). Their boundaries and constitutions must be designated by state power, and their remit is tightly constrained to ensure their subordination to a hierarchy of decision-making (CLG 2012b). Far from being natural entities then, community groups interpellated by the spatial strategies of dispersed governance may be conjured up to parallel the abstract geography of executive power, or slotted into existing state structures without developing lines of accountability or adapting any of the core processes of state power to enable wider participation (Taylor 2007).

In a restructuring which has drawn attention to the role of government at regional and local levels and celebrated the smallest scale as the most democratic, community organisations are encouraged to consider what decisions should be taken locally, and what systems of democracy would deliver the "empowered participatory democracy" (Fung & Wright 2003) that

localism celebrates but fails to implement. London Tenants Federation is a community organisation engaged in the devolved governance arrangements of the English capital. It draws together delegates from formally constituted organisations of social housing tenants in each borough of the city and coordinates resident involvement in the London Mayor's housing strategy. Five of those delegates, all council tenants, were engaged in a discussion about how the Federation can remain accountable to its borough groups while operating at regional scale. In the extract below they sketch out the processes of participatory democracy that ensure the distant power of hierarchies can be rooted in the familiarity of place.

Jane: I also think that, um, there actually has to be a democratic structure

Sanjit: Hmm

Jane: So the people who are speaking know they're accountable to the people they're speaking for. I mean, for example, we, nobody in our borough can get to tenants council without having been elected first from their tenants association, then from there to their area forum, from their area forum they go to, so there's a democratic structure and every year you have an AGM, every year you have to show your accounts, every year you have to, [..] and then, you, you speak, and if you continually speak for yourself you won't get elected next time round, you know, or if you speak for yourself and people quite like you speaking for yourself because they agree with you, well then that's alright, do you know what I

mean? You can't necessarily consult on every question at every moment with the people on the ground but you represent them and you go back to them and say I said that and do you agree, and do you support me?

At the heart of the scalar decision making process outlined by Jane is the local tenants association, an elected body that delegates members through layers of more distant geography to co-ordinate regional decision-making. Tenants' associations have evolved a model of participatory democracy in which constituted local groups, elected at annual meetings open to all residents, assume a mandate to speak on behalf of their defined social housing estate. Although some of these groups may in practice represent only specific constituencies, a reflexive discourse of accountability has attached to the organisational structure of collective action in social housing. Jane continues the discussion:

The thing about a tenants association is that everybody on the estate potentially can come to the tenants association, so potentially you are consulting with all of them and you're their voice and you're answerable to them. Even if we know when we turn up they're probably going to nominate the same old people. If they really disliked what we were doing, they wouldn't. They'd get us out, if we were advocating things that weren't in their interest.

In Jane's interpretation the tenants association brings decision-making into reach, and locates it in the space of 'nearness'. Residents "turn up" routinely, and the familiarity of the "same old people" is rendered democratic by the routine that ensures that "everybody can potentially come" and change it. Jane indicates the opportunity for residents to pack a meeting, express their dissatisfaction and obtain redress. In this model being "answerable" means to be within calling distance, and implies being subject to face to face challenge. The stretching of democratic representation across space and scale puts this core process of participatory democracy in jeopardy; there is danger in being removed from the rhythms and routines of familiar interaction that generate accountability and construct democratic space. The model of participative democracy presented by Jane is one where decisions are made deliberatively at the most local level, and the authority delegated to other scales is limited and subject to recall. Continuing the discussion, London Tenants Federation begin to imagine what multi-scalar decision-making structures might be like if modelled on the principles of participatory democracy:

Najinder: So what I feel is, if there should be a general trend is, the consultation process, or whatever is to be agreed upon, should start at the grass roots and then be taken forward as we go along, then you, you will get effective participation.

Sanjit: The ideal would be that there would be some sort of organisation that was based on delegates from area tenant federations like ours. Everybody here is an elected representative of a residents association,

or a tenants association somewhere. And we come together and we agree things by consensus. I like to use my old, I used to be a shop steward in the film technicians union and I always used to say in meetings: 'I'm sorry, I can't take that back to my members' [laughs]. So whenever I'm in meetings I always try and think like that, okay, can I get, would I, can I get anybody else on my estate to agree to this, no? Well I can't agree to it, even if I think it's a good idea [laughs]. That. That's real democracy.

Jane: It should be a bottom-up process like we are; it should work by consensus rather than um you know; it should recognise regional differences, because there are, you know, the problems of London are unique to London for example.

The spatial discourses of localism do not provide a useful guide to negotiating relations of governance. They make assumptions about democracy and place but are silent on constructing democratic practice across space. In the discussion cited above, members of this community organisation can be seen to seize the space allotted them in the locality, and to reconstruct, from the ground up, a scalar imaginary of democratic governance to achieve popular engagement in decision-making. The spatial configurations of localism have authorised a substitution of citational practices that vests power in domesticity. The active process of investing space with 'nearness' observed among community organisations empowered under localism, is here translated into a spatial structuring of politics imagined to bring supra-local

decision-making into reach, and make power answerable through routine face to face interaction. The final section examines how this spatial reimagining of democracy is applied to debates about governance at national scale.

Bringing democracy back home

Despite the spatial transformations of governance in the UK, and in most Western countries, social movement theorists have emphasised the comparative irrelevance of place-based contentious action and characterised campaigns at national and global scale as best placed to achieve social change. A lively debate on the scalar organisation of protest has ensued, examining how urban movements, campaigns and community groups negotiate space and scale and organise themselves around an awareness of global as well as local influences (see Massey 1994; Routledge 2003; Featherstone 2005; Cumbers, Routledge & Nativel 2008; Leitner, Sheppard & Sziarto 2008; Nicholls 2008).

The community organisations studied in this paper, ones representing social housing tenants, are networked weakly at national level through one of four organisations. None of these national bodies has more than partial support from community organisations whose commitment to a participatory democracy vested in the familiarity of 'nearness' makes it difficult for them to envisage a role for a national organisation that would not be hierarchical and authoritarian. The suspicion that surrounds the role of a national tenants'

organisation, and the transfer of any functions away from the reach of the locality, becomes apparent in revisiting the discussion among members of the northern tenant management organisation featured earlier in this fieldwork. Jean, a member of the tenant management board, is keen to promote the benefits of the National Federation of Tenant Management Organisations to her colleagues.

Jean: I do think national tenants is a very good thing because everyone's telling one another their little tips. It's like you read in newspaper, um, somebody'll tell you tip how to get lipstick out of your thing or some chewing gum off things, it's word of mouth and little tips like that I think help you

Christine: Yeah

Jean: With what you are doing; and I think that is important. And you only get that by meeting other people and hearing what they're doing and things like that. Yeah I'm a big believer in national tenants' movement.

Jean characterises the role of a national organisation as one of providing "little tips" and sharing experience; the symbolic language she uses here will be examined later. Gary, Christine's husband, intervenes at this point to challenge the relevance of a national movement to the locality, saying:

Gary: But should we mirror other tenants associations? You know, should we work same way as them, or should we try and find better ways of working? You know what I mean? If they come out with ideas should we take their ideas, use their ideas?

Jean: Well they come along and use yours as well; it's a movement that's a mixture.

Gary: I, I

Jean: You learn and they learn.

Gary: I don't believe in, er, mirroring other associations, I think we should build us own way, and make us name in it, we should find us own ways.

For Gary, even the idea of networking with other organisations threatens to push decision-making out of reach; as if accountability rooted in 'nearness' necessitated the exclusion of wider mobilisation. Jean counters this challenge by returning to the gendered language of the example she used before, and explicitly appealing to Christine's (Gary's wife's) experience, to explain why a national organisation is beneficial.

Jean: Yeah but, what I'm saying, finding your own way actually, what I'm saying it's, it's like I've just been saying about lipstick and tips, so, you don't, your wife don't want to know how to get lipstick out of her top, she needs to find it out herself, but no, she would be grateful for that little tip

Christine: Yeah I would

Jean: Wouldn't yah? So this is what I'm saying. Tips from other people - you don't have to do what they do. Just like you pass your tips what you found onto other people, you're not mirroring them, because although you've got that tip, you might find a better way round it

Christine: Yeah, yeah.

The example of swapping tips on how to remove lipstick from clothes shifts this debate into a gendered subaltern space, and appeals to the scalar jump that is essential in community organisations: the extension of domestic agency into the public sphere. Jean has moved the space of the discussion, metaphorically, from the board room of the tenant management organisation – a public body operating under delegated powers from the local authority – to a domestic setting, where women exchange tips on household management. The national organisation is transformed accordingly from a distant and potentially intrusive entity into an informal exchange (perhaps over an imagined fence or garden gate) of household news and views. This discussion at the tenant management organisation is concerned with the production of scalar democracy without the reproduction of hierarchical power. It suggests that the construction of a global sense of the local, of solidarities between community organisations, and the mobilisation of a national organisation can be engineered through the performative construction of scale as the parallel connection of domestic space. National or international governance is envisaged as a reciprocal process of local

exchange, an expansion of the face-to-face interactions and familiar practices that bring democracy back home.

These dialogic imaginaries of democracy are authorised by the practices of localism in which place and space are deeded with performative power. The regulatory norms of localism are cited through a web of domestic and neighbourly interactions that render them familiar and routine, and therefore malleable. Spivak's definition of the subaltern is useful here in considering the imaginaries of community groups as an attempt to slip away from the obedient citation of norms and to understand the space of governance they construct as one of self-effacement. Theirs is a performative re-enactment of community localism in which space becomes place, place becomes participation, and familiarity and neighbouring become the drivers for political change.

Conclusion

The rationality of localism authorises the spatial production of a new public as part of a wider geography of restructured state power and the dispersal of government into governance. In England under the Localism Act, this is a process in which community organisations are awarded a disciplinary function in the management of neighbourhoods, and are licensed to make claims on space through the citation of regulatory discourses. In conflating the enforced reiteration of regulatory norms with the widening of democracy and the

transfer of political power, localism unleashes the spatial imagination in an exploration of space, scale and socio-spatial positioning. The rationalities of localism privilege the familiarity of place and the agency of domestic space and provide a reiterative process in which a new public might be enacted in ways that extend or breach socio-spatial positioning and bring power and decision-making into reach. This paper has presented research with community organisations on social housing estates to demonstrate their ability to apply the regulatory norms of localism in ways that exceed, amend or avoid its intentions. Applying Spivak's characterisation of the subaltern, it has argued that social housing estates are effaced from the narratives of citizenship, yet given discursive form by the rationalities of localism. These communities may recognise in localism, and in its address to the subaltern economies of domestic and neighbourly care, the potential to challenge the political construction of space and the spatial construction of politics.

Licensed by the opportunities of localism, community groups make a scalar jump from the private to public realm in an appropriation of space and agency. In this research they are seen to extend their private power into the public sphere to constitute place as nearness, and nearness as participation. In locating accountability in face to face interaction they envisage hierarchies flattened and relations of power brought into reach. By populating abstract space with domestic interactions, they reorder the political direction of localism to enact democracy as a process of neighbourly exchange. It would be foolish to gloss community localism as progressive, and the resident-led housing organisations featured in this research conjecture a new and divided

34

public from a socialised provision of welfare services. But as subjects and agents of governance they construct a space of evasion; they "resist the givenness of place" (Dikec 2012) in a subaltern imaginary that parallels and distances the regulatory subjectivities of localism. This is a retelling of localism which rehearses the spatial practices through which empowered participatory democracy might be realised and demonstrates the desire for a more fundamental reshaping of political space.

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