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# Neoliberalism, Big Society, and progressive localism

\*Post-print version\*

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## **Abstract.**

In the UK the current Coalition government has introduced an unprecedented set of reforms to welfare, public services, and local governance under the rubric of 'localism'. Conventional analytics of neoliberalism have commonly portrayed the impacts of these changes in the architectures of governance in blanket terms: as an utterly regressive dilution of local democracy; as an extension of conservative political technology by which state welfare is denuded in favour of market-led individualism; and as a further politicised subjectification of the charitable self. Such seemingly hegemonic grammars of critique can ignore or underestimate the progressive possibilities for creating new ethical and political spaces *in amongst* the neoliberal canvas. In this paper we investigate the localism agenda using alternative interpretative grammars that are more open to the recognition of interstitial politics of resistance and experimentation that are springing up within, across, and beyond formations of the neoliberal. We analyse the broad framework of intentional localisms laid down by the Coalition government, and then point to four significant pathways by which more progressive articulations of localism have been emerging in amongst the neoliberal infrastructure. In so doing we seek to endorse and expand imaginations of political activism that accentuate an interstitial political sensibility that works strategically, and even subversively, with the tools at hand.

**Keywords: neoliberalism, localism, Big Society, ethical agency, emergent publics, politics of possibility**

## Introduction

Since 2010, the Coalition government in the UK has embarked on a radical wave of reforms to welfare, local governance, and public services, which cumulatively have had a severe and uneven impact on urban and rural economies, services, and livelihoods (O’ Hara, 2013; Rural Services Network, 2012). Whilst David Cameron’ s somewhat nebulous plans for a ‘Big Society’ have all but disappeared from the political lexicon, the implicit ideals of philanthropy, self-help, and volunteerism through the devolution of power from the state to local communities continue to be rolled out in a number of policy initiatives, not least the Localism Act 2011. According to conventional analytics of neoliberalism, these developments represent an utterly regressive dilution of local democracy and further denudation of state welfare in favour of market-led individualism and politicised subjectification of the charitable self. In this paper we argue that the latest formation of localism, underpinned by the hard metrics of fiscal austerity (Featherstone et al, 2012), has inadvertently opened up a number of ethical and political spaces in which various forms of interstitial politics of resistance and experimentation have sprung up. Following Gibson-Graham’ s (2006, page xxxi) prioritisation of “reading for difference rather than domination” , we therefore join with other authors (Featherstone et al, 2012; Ferguson, 2011; May and Cloke, 2013) in the task of focusing analytical attention on the *actually existing* struggles through which neoliberal processes and techniques are being negotiated and resisted through social agency.

In the paper we highlight four significant pathways by which more progressive articulations of localism have been emerging in amongst the neoliberal infrastructure (Featherstone et al, 2012). In so doing, we seek to challenge seemingly hegemonic grammars of critique that insist on a form of political resistance that rejects current systems of governance and thereby neglects

the political significance of resistance occurring *in the meantime*, in amongst the activities of local governance and third-sector agencies.

This paper offers two key contributions to these debates. First, we provide a conceptual basis for examining the possibilities for local resistance *within* the current restructuring of local governance in the UK. Secondly, we emphasise the importance of alternative analytical grammars that *render visible* the potential for resistance that has been largely overlooked in overly pessimistic narratives of neoliberal governmentality. Here we bring together discussion on ethical agency (Barnes and Prior, 2009), emergent publics (Barnett et al, 2008), and interstitial spaces of resilience, reworking, and resistance (Katz, 2004; see also May and Cloke, 2013) to offer up new grammars that help identify and guide new research agendas attuned to the politics of possibility within the vicissitudes of neoliberal governance.

We wish to make clear from the outset our acknowledgement that the current political trend is indeed marked by a regressive and punitive withdrawal of public sector involvement and a privatisation of the finance and delivery of services. We argue, however, that third-sector involvement in welfare, community building, or advocacy should not automatically be discounted as the activity of little platoons in Cameron's Big Society, essentially co-opted by and attuned to the objectives and values of neoliberal conservatism (Williams et al, 2012). Rather, local third-sector activity can be understood in terms of a capacity to act as a potential site of resistance rather than of acquiescence, and therefore local third-sector partnerships can be reevaluated in terms of their potential for developing progressive collective responses to neoliberal excesses, reflecting renewed forms of democracy, solidarity, and embrace of difference.

### **Localism and the Big Society in context**

‘Big Society’ was a flagship policy in the 2010 Conservative Party general election manifesto, and was subsequently reinforced in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition agreement. Its central idea was that social democratic and Fabian approaches to government had failed to alleviate entrenched multiple deprivation (North, 2011), and that ‘Big Government’ (Cabinet Office, 2010) had promoted selfish individualism and passive dependency, helping to ‘atomise our society’ and perpetuate the ‘social pathologies’ of ‘Broken Britain’ [Cameron (2009); for critical commentary see Slater (2014)]. Big Society, therefore, envisaged devolution of power to enable local communities and individuals to take an active role in their communities. Despite a noticeable reduction in Big Society rhetoric over time (Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012), the core tenets of Big Society—public service reform, decentralisation and community empowerment, and encouragement of coops, mutuals, charities, and social enterprises (Conservative Party, 2010)—have slowly been crystallised in the government’s Localism Act 2011 (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013), its public service reform agenda, the Big Society Network, Free Schools, the Big Society Capital bank, and the National Citizens Service programme (Bulley and Sokhi-Bulley, 2012).

These Big Society ideas are by no means new (Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012). On the one hand, Big Society represents a recalibration of conservative notions of associational life and civil society advanced by Alexis de Tocqueville, Edmund Burke, and Adam Smith (Harris, 2012; Stott, 2011). Equally, early formations of the Big Society were heavily influenced by Anglican-Catholic theologian and conservative communitarian think-tanker, Philip Blond, whose *Red Toryism* (Coombs, 2010) drew extensively on the Radical Orthodoxy school of theology to critique Keynesian welfare society and the late capitalist market-state (Milbank and Oliver, 2009). On the other hand, there are significant continuities from previous New Labour approaches to governance in terms of asset transfer, devolution, and community

representation (Hodkinson and Robbins, 2013), and performance, partnership, and participation (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). However, there are important political and philosophical distinctions between New Labour's civic renewal and Coalition formations of the Big Society and localism, notably in terms of the unprecedented size, speed, and impact of policy reforms and cuts to local governance and welfare (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011). Accordingly, in the first part of our argument we draw on a series of detailed evaluations of the localism programme (see, for example, Bentley et al, 2010; Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Featherstone et al, 2012; Jacobs and Manzi, 2013; Levitas, 2012; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Moir and Leyshon, 2013; Pugalis and Townsend, 2013) in order to identify the formation of rationalities, technologies, and subjectivities that have been mobilised by the Coalition government in pursuit of Big Society localism. These evaluations point to a series of rhetorics relating to localism which, in turn, represent manifestations of complex discourses that, when channelled through technologies of control and agency, help to underpin particular practices and subjectivities.

### **Rationalities**

The Coalition government's decentralisation and localism programme has been underpinned by at least three rationales: efficiency, democracy, and fairness. Previously, New Labour championed partnership and participation, recognising the strengths of the public and third sectors (local knowledge, resources, and sense of ownership), and used the state to catalyse civil society, albeit in tightly controlled frameworks. In contrast, the Coalition, in rhetoric at least, has upheld a zero-sum concept of the relationship between civil society and the state, whereby more 'society' involvement equates to less 'state' activity. Socially responsible Big Society is therefore founded on a particular civic associationalism that posits volunteerism/ civil society as a replacement for, rather than supplement to,

state intervention. To this end, the marshalling of the virtues of mutualism, civic action, and self-reliance seeks to legitimise a particular conservative neocommunitarianism that treats localities as discrete and unitary entities—underplaying their radical plurality in terms of social and cultural difference and failing to recognise the highly uneven geographical impact of public sector cuts and the differential capacities within and between local communities (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013; Featherstone et al, 2012).

These rhetorics take more concrete form in the Localism Act 2011 (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). New Labour’s negotiative approach to local community led to institutional support for collective engagement, particularly in black and minority ethnic neighbourhoods, and, more broadly, extensive multisector partnerships in service delivery and community regeneration (Schmitter and Trechsel, 2004). Coalition localism endorses a more aggregative approach to local democracy and accountability: seeking to establish the ‘public will’ by referendum. However, as Lowndes and Pratchett (2012) point out, without any meaningful space for deliberative approaches to democracy, these localism reforms are likely to privilege self-interest over the collective identities and needs of communities (for instance, in the control of council tax levels or the regulation of housing development).

Localism, therefore, mobilises an explicit antistate ideology twinned with the need to rediscover lost notions of care, mutualism, morality, relationships, and ‘fairness’ (Cabinet Office, 2010). This invocation of ‘fairness’ is a key rhetoric for Coalition public policy. However, it is a fairness that is detached from social democratic notions of equality and redistribution, and reappropriated by the Coalition to “promote the interests of the middle class (‘taxpayer’) and justify the withdrawal of benefits and services to the ‘undeserving’ poor, students, the long-term sick and other groups” (Newman, 2014, page 3301). Feelings of unfairness

and loss, combined with notions of ‘efficiency’ and the ‘difficult choices’ of austerity, have contributed to a ‘politics of *ressentiment*’ (Hoggett et al, 2013, page 567). This has fuelled reactionary populism seen in ‘antiwelfare’ discourses by creating “rivalries rather than building solidarities amongst those who ‘have little’ ” (page 567).

The rationalities of ‘fairness’ and ‘efficiency’ lie at the heart of the Coalition’s programme to ‘diversify public service supply’. Bureaucracy of central government is presented as a “financial drain” that impedes “local solutions to major social problems” (HM Government 2010, page 4; cited in Clarke and Cochrane, 2013, page 12). Accordingly, the Coalition has abolished regional tiers of government, and legislated that public services should be opened up for tender from private, public, and local community organisations. These moves both conceal a partial recentralisation of functions previously vested in regional agencies (Bentley et al, 2010), and steer localities towards long-term privatisation of service provision as larger, more heavily resourced, private sector organisations outbid, or buy out, smaller public and voluntary agencies struggling with severely restricted budgets. The increasing dominance of private corporations such as A4e, G4S, Serco, and others playing more of a commissioning role is evident in the Work Programme<sup>i</sup> where smaller public and voluntary agencies take a greater subcontractor role (DWP, 2013). Even with community right-to-buy, community-owned enterprises can be hoovered up by large private firms, as was the case in the 1980s privatisation of the bus transport providers (North, 2011). In this sense, then, the Localism Act can be regarded as coming into conflict with the supposed rationales of the Big Society.

## **Technologies**

This latest phase of decentralisation and localism has led to a continuation and intensification of technologies of control and agency. The Coalition has



continued with some elements characteristic of New Labour's approach to civic renewal (Business Improvement Districts, neighbourhood planning, asset transfer, public-private partnerships), but abolished national performance targets, Regional Development Agencies, and government-funded regeneration initiatives such as Future Jobs and Working Neighbourhoods Funds (McCabe and Phillimore, 2012). Instead, a new set of technologies designed to provide economic incentives for local development has been established. The localism agenda has been interpreted by some researchers as centralisation in disguise (Bentley et al, 2010; Corry and Stoker, 2002; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012), but Clarke and Cochrane (2013) suggest a more nuanced analysis that tunes into the shifting modalities of governance. Under New Labour, technologies of performance (such as audits, benchmarking, and national targets) were established across local government and community development to ensure equal standards. Under the Coalition, prominence has been given to technologies of agency that regulate actors into rationality and responsibility through manipulating the architecture of choice available to local government and the third sector. New modes of governance are thereby less reliant on direct technologies of control (such as audits and performance targets) for those projects deemed in keeping with intended goals of policy, with nudge mechanisms operating through setting the parameters of funding priorities, best value commissioners, and incentivised development. However, illiberal technologies of inspection will continue to be deployed if and when deemed necessary. Here the politics lies in who decides the content of 'rational' and 'responsible' local action (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013, page 17).

Accordingly, Clarke and Cochrane (2013) argue that the mechanisms underpinning the localism agenda embody a new mode of 'antipolitics' that usurps the depoliticising and technocratic managerialism that characterised, and ultimately undermined, the 'Third Way' (Jordon, 2010). Taking antipolitics as a strategic mechanism rather than a passive condition, they

highlight how Coalition policies deny the *preconditions for politics* by treating localities as autonomous, self-regulating, and internally homogeneous, rather than recognising their radical plurality, and subaltern and contesting political claims. This manoeuvre has been understood as a strategy of ‘spatial liberalism’ (Clarke and Cochrane, 2013), making localities responsible through decentralisation and marketisation of service delivery so that “variation [in service provision] will reflect the conscious choices made by local people” (HM Government, 2010, page 5). The assumption that decentralisation will somehow empower communities to get the services they deserve masks not only a neglect for structural inequalities between and within communities, but also a political strategy that delegates risk, responsibility, and accountability from central government onto new subjects - local government, and private sector and local community organisations. This can be seen in the creation of a new set of elected and unelected ‘experts’ in the form of free schools, Local Enterprise Partnerships, police commissioners, and city mayors, signifying a reassignment of responsibility (and blame) away from national government onto local actors (Kerr et al, 2011).

In areas of local welfare provision, elements that were embryonic under New Labour- the community’s right to challenge, manage, and buy public assets and local authority services-have been intensified under the Localism Act and used for rapid restructuring of public services (McCabe and Phillimore, 2012). At the same time, there has been a much greater use of subcontractors through a regime of payment-by-results, which has, in turn, changed the modus operandi of many local organisations, often relegating previously ‘front-line’ voluntary agencies to the role of subcontractors.

## **Subjectivities**

Big Society and the Localism Act have also been built around a new series of subjectivities in the relationships between central government, local government, and the individual citizen. The Coalition has sought to clarify both the rights and the responsibilities of local communities to participate in local governance, but it has also attempted to redefine broader aspects of citizenship—articulating how people should not only look after themselves but engage in volunteerism, and philanthropic and civic action. Good citizenship in these terms builds on the New Labour legacy of encouraging volunteering, charity, and a culture of active community, albeit with a crucial distinction: the Coalition does not offer sufficient institutional and financial support to ensure democratic and equitable participation. Indeed, it can be argued that four new idealised types of subject-citizen are being constructed under the Localism Act: the charitable self-framed through traditional conservative sentiments of ‘helping those less fortunate’ and called upon to exemplify the virtues of self-help, community resilience, and philanthropy; the entrepreneurial volunteer—calculating and responsible for the quality of services in his or her locality; the entrepreneurial worker—the hardworking responsabilised individual taking the opportunity to rely not on others but “to work hard and get on” (Osborne, 2013); and the citizen-auditor—called upon to hold local government to account for their expenditure through greater financial transparency and through referendums. Beneath each of these idealised types lies a similar discursive manoeuvre that casts into the shadows the state’s responsibility to the local communities and the citizen-subject, obscures systemic inequalities that create privilege, and, importantly, constructs the community and voluntary sector as depoliticised acquiescent actors willing to work alongside Cameron’s vision for the Big Society (Bunyan, 2012).

In addition, there is an elevated espousal of paid work as a moral obligation of citizens. A culture of resentment against any form of ‘dependency’ ,

most visible in discourses of ‘strivers and shirkers’, has led to a politicised mapping of deserving and undeserving citizenry. The worker-citizen is conceived as a determined ‘self-starter’ who takes responsibly to ‘get ahead’ and is rewarded with entitlements. The unemployed subject is stereotyped in terms of deficits in moral capacity, motivational strength, and ability to self-manage. It is on these supposed grounds that unemployed people are deemed to require more punitive or paternalist interventions.

### **Theoretical considerations: neoliberal orthodoxy?**

Localism and the Big Society have been seen as key touchstones for the outworking of neoliberal governance in the contemporary UK, and dominant interpretative narratives of these discourses and practices tend to dismiss them as little more than a smokescreen for radical neoliberal structural adjustment (Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012; Stott, 2011). Thus Hall (2011) argues that localism under the coalition represents “the long march of the neoliberal revolution” (page 705) implemented by “arguably the best prepared, the most wide ranging, radical and ambitious of the three regimes, which, since the 1970s, have been maturing the neoliberal project” (page 718). In this sense, Big Society and localism have been pigeonholed intellectually simply as an aggressive form of roll-back neoliberalism (Coote, 2011; Jacobs and Manzi, 2013; Peck, 2010), where the rhetoric of social enterprise, mutualism, and participation conceals the retreat of the state and a filling of the resultant vacuum with forced volunteerism. Herein lies the *destructive creation* of Big Society: funding cuts to public services such as libraries, schools, and hospitals, and subsequent closures of public amenities, have resulted in volunteers stepping in to keep vital services running. Not only is this a significantly uneven process, geographically and socially, as capacities for volunteer engagement vary (Mohan, 2012), but it comes just at a time when public austerity is resulting in funding cuts to the voluntary sector—a disinvestment that is undermining the capacity of

third-sector organisations to sustain their presence in a landscape of escalating need (Coote, 2011).

Newman (2011) has suggested that the Big Society is an attempt to manufacture a new imagery of the public to replace the extant language of the third sector and state-voluntary sector 'compact'. Successful re-presentation of volunteerism, she argues, lends legitimacy to the neoliberal notion of the failed state and further entrenches the suggestion that political solutions should be found beyond the state in civil society itself. Big Society's localism, however, represents an invidious form of neoliberalism par excellence, fused with a conservative neocommunitarianism that marshals the virtues of volunteerism, entrepreneurialism, and self-reliance to negate the need for collectivism and the public sector.

Seen from this critical perspective, neoliberalism is understood to work through more or less predictable mechanisms, circumscribing and co-opting the capacities of local government and community groups to be active in geographies of care, welfare, and political engagement. As a consequence, voluntary and community groups are cast in the role of the " 'little platoons' ... in service of neoliberal goals" (Peck and Tickell, 2002, page 390), carrying out Coalition orders by stepping into the gaps of public sector discontinuity created by austerity.

This mode of using grammars of neoliberalism to create accounts of voluntary sector co-option runs the risk of glossing over other interpretative perspectives that remain open to a politics of possibility within spaces opened out by the changing architectures of governance (Williams et al, 2012). Increasing numbers of scholars are now voicing dissatisfaction with overly structured accounts of all-embracing neoliberalism. Notably, Gibson-Graham (2006) have attempted to deessentialise political economic concepts

so as to avoid overly totalising accounts of global capitalism and organised resistance. In so doing, their work rethinks the specificities and mundane workings of capitalism, highlighting the diverse economies and possibilities that exist within and against capitalism. They deliberately eschew notions of ‘neoliberal hegemony’, arguing that the performative power of this blanket category conceals the cracks and fissures that create spaces in which various agents can prefigure alternative political and ethical worlds within the dominant. A similar critique can be also levelled at the overly ontologised theorising of the proponents of the ‘postpolitical’ thesis (Rancière, 2010; Žižek, 1999) in which ‘pseudo-activity’, as Žižek terms it, is identified as a threat to progressive political action. Indeed, we want to argue that any dismissal of those grasping the opportunities at hand to work interstitially and symbiotically towards progressive ends (Wright, 2010) is itself a potential undermining of progressive political potential—it is a buying into a false dichotomy in which participation equals accommodative compromise, whilst resistance equals non-involvement with the state.

As a consequence, it is important to note how Gibson-Graham’s arguments have been developed in order to reconceptualise neoliberalism in a way that shifts attention to its fragility, contradictions, and assemblage-opening possibilities for resistance (Larner, 2000; Springer, 2015). Neoliberalism, then, can be understood in terms of a continuous and flexible process of formulation, rather than as a more fixed process that leads inexorably to a final ‘neoliberal’ blueprint (Springer, 2015). A key component in understanding these processes of continual contestation and negotiation has been a development of Katz’s (2004) typology of resistance to include elements of reworking and resilience that take place ‘in the meantime’ of neoliberalism, and to acknowledge the capacity of locally situated agency to circumvent a priori assumptions that assume that neoliberalism somehow works

in programmatic ways. Instead, the intermediary power of institutions and locally situated agency are acknowledged to shape, sometimes radically, the trajectory of governance and action (see Barnes and Prior, 2009; May and Cloke, 2013).

Clearly, the exploration of existing possibilities of resistance in and against dominant structures is not new. As Harvey put it some forty years ago, it is “counterproductive to go on mapping even more evidence of man’s patent inhumanity to man ... the immediate task is nothing more nor less than the self-conscious and aware construction of a new paradigm for social geographic thought’ (1973, pages 144-145). Our argument here is that, while conventional grammars of neoliberalism offer a rigorous analytic for ‘fault-finding’, they do not sufficiently help us to imagine transitions, and they risk the cloaking of alternatives, “some of which exist in embryonic form *within* capitalism” (Watts, 2005, page 652, original emphasis, in Blomley, 2007, page 62). Clearly, the structural crises of neoliberalism exist at a deeper level than can be responded to fully through locally situated actions of subversion, strategic reappropriation, or prefigurative involvement. Nevertheless, the logics and spatialities of neoliberalism cannot be broken down solely through the rupturing events of ‘politics proper’ and can be also resisted through the creation of interstitial spaces of hope that materialise counternarratives and lines of flight. For instance, grand collectivist experiments, such as the National Health Service in the UK, were not envisaged *ex nihilo* but were closely modelled on the everyday practices of guild socialism and trade unionism in Tredegar, South Wales (Featherstone et al, 2012). Equally, the welfare state owes much to the local socialist experiments in early 1920s Poplar, London, and other experiments in developing a left art of government (Branson, 1979; Macintyre, 1980). It is surprising, therefore, that left-leaning analyses of the dismantling of

the welfare state often treat with considerable suspicion the potential represented by these same mundane spaces of care, cooperative, and mutuality.

In this way, then, some elements of the implementation of the Big Society agenda can represent an opportunity for the construction of political alternatives (Levitas, 2012), although the degree to which this potential can be realised depends on whether local government and local communities can carve out political openings within an increasingly austere landscape of governance to develop progressive collective approaches to community solidarity, direct democracy, and translocal struggle (Featherstone et al, 2012). Featherstone et al (2012) therefore address localism as neither a uniformly positive or negative political force but, rather as a contested set of governmentalities that can foster the potential for the development of new ethical and political spaces capable of reworking the Big Society agenda or of presenting alternative modes of action (see also Clarke and Cochrane, 2013). Rather than “ceding the terrain of localism to the political right”, Featherstone et al (2012) argue that “it is necessary to intervene and contest how localism is being articulated” and to examine the “diverse and socially heterogeneous political constituencies that can be active in shaping localisms from below” in order to highlight “how forms of localism can be reworked and extended as part of alternative political projects” (pages 179-180). In the remainder of this paper we use this definition of progressive localism to examine the productive and open relations between places and social groups that can be regarded in terms of emergent politics of progressive possibility.

### **Politics of possibility**

Local governments and community groups have responded to the Coalition’s austerity localism in a number of different ways (McCabe and Phillimore, 2012). For example, some third-sector activity suggests an open celebration



based on broad political affinity or simply an appreciation that voluntary efforts have finally been recognised. Other activity suggests a pragmatic, and sometimes reluctant, acceptance of a changing landscape and the need to adapt. Legislative and financial pressures mean that local government is increasingly compelled to contract out public services to private, public, and voluntary organisations, and to rely on volunteers to fill the gap for public services no longer considered cost-effective (Mohan, 2012). Yet other activity denounces localism as ‘ideological window dressing’ and openly pursues tactics of circumnavigation (McCabe and Phillimore, 2012). Despite these varied responses, we argue that local government and the third sector, whilst undergoing severe strain and financial pressures, can be understood as potential incubators of resistance, capable of mitigating, reworking, and resisting the key tenets of neoliberal governmentalities.

We illustrate this potential in terms of four distinct spaces of possibility that serve to illustrate the variety of ethical and political responses to the changing political economic milieu under localism. Classically, such spaces have been interpreted as arenas of neoliberal co-option and subjectification. Rereading them as interstitial spaces that exist within gradually tightening governmentalities enables us to identify a number of ethical and political openings capable of soliciting new spaces of local resistance, set within an *incomplete* and *uneven* diffusion of neoliberal rationalities, technologies, and subjectivities.

### **Ethical spaces of responsibility**

Changes in welfare eligibility and payment levels have led to a heightened *phenomenology of need* in contemporary society. As existing voluntary and public services are asked to do more with less resources, new ethical responses have emerged to meet the escalating need of people hit by austerity measures. One example of this is the proliferation of the Trussell Trust Foodbank

network, which was established in 2000 and now operates a network of 432 local churches across the country. In 2013-14, the Trussell Trust provided 913 138 people with three days' emergency food, compared with 346 992 in 2012-13 (Trussell Trust, 2014). Of these, 47.9% of Foodbank users in 2013-14 cited benefit delays and changes as the primary reason for using the Foodbank (Trussell Trust, 2014). Other reasons included: low pay, short-term contracts, and unemployment. Seen through the classic lexicon of neoliberal analysis, such spaces of care seemingly represent the 'little platoons' (Peck and Tickell, 2002) or 'translation mechanisms' (Trudeau and Veronis, 2009), which enact macroscale programmes of neoliberal welfare restructuring and governance, either through contracted-out service delivery, or via implicit justification for statutory retrenchment (Riches, 2002). Emergency food aid is at best dismissed as unable to administer anything more than a sticking plaster to the deep-seated ailments of a neoliberalised society that requires major political surgery (Riches, 2002), and, at worst, deemed to reflect the condescending paternal logics of voucher-driven charity that deprives recipients of the capacity to exercise financial autonomy.

However, foodbanks often represent spaces of care that should not be written off as placatory devices or sites of neoliberal responsabilisation of welfare recipients. Indeed, there are at least three important processes emerging in these ethical spaces that seem to us to deserve attention. Firstly, the visible presence of foodbanks has enabled structural critique of the processes underpinning food poverty in the UK. The publicising of usage data and client narratives, detailing the reasons behind visits to foodbanks, has been seen to be a powerful tool that the Trussell Trust, and others, have deployed in order to raise awareness and to campaign for policy change (see Lambie-Mumford, 2013).

Secondly, spaces of care such as foodbanks present a practical device through which citizens from myriad ideological perspectives can potentially experience a more positive identification with, and understanding of, the issues facing people with low incomes (Lawson and Elwood, 2013). As such, foodbanks represent clear examples of the kinds of emerging postsecular spaces of secular/religious partnership (see Cloke and Beaumont, 2012) that have significant progressive potential, for example, in: the recognition and response to local social need as an unacceptable feature of contemporary life; the release of a capacity to set aside moral divisions in order to respond ethically to this social need, thus embodying a politics of overcoming difference in the combating of injustice; the refusal to accept the seeming inevitability of austerity, leading to a sometimes radical provision of caring for others outside of state mechanisms; and the potential for progression from caring activities to a more politicised engagement and advocacy on behalf of particular socially excluded groups.

Thirdly, we argue that these spaces of care can facilitate wider ethical-political alliances across voluntary organisations and protest groups. Whilst we should not ignore articulations of charity that resonate with conservative imaginations of poverty, spaces of care such as foodbanks should be recognised as generating discursive representations and practices of ethical agreement over the issue of food poverty that can foster citywide mobilisations [cf Malpass et al (2007) on the Fairtrade City movement, and Darling (2010) on the Sanctuary Movement]. It is in this sense that foodbanks can also be conceptualised as part of an *emergent public* (Mahony et al, 2010); participants within foodbank networks (staff, volunteers, service users, donors, statutory services), as well as the discursive public that the presence of foodbanks brings into being in political debate (antipoverty campaigners, researchers, journalists, tweeters, and politicians), represent a body able to advocate and represent itself and hold government to account,

challenging dominant imaginaries of neoliberal welfare as well as galvanising collective expressions of tolerance and justice. The publics emerging in these spaces cannot simply be dismissed as the acquiescent model citizenship of neoliberalism.

Such spaces of ethical volunteering should not be seen as a zero-sum game, parasitic upon ‘formalised’ political activity (organising, voting, protesting) (see Barnett et al, 2010). Rather, ethical volunteering has the capacity to feed into more formalised political activity, and foodbanks, despite their limitations, can be understood as part of the wider landscape of how people and activities actualise local politics.

### **Ethics and performativity within incorporated spaces of care**

Our second illustration builds on developing research evidence suggesting that the rationalities and technologies of neoliberal government at work in public, private, and voluntary organisations can be performatively subverted *from within* (Barnes and Prior, 2009; Cloke et al, 2010; Williams et al, 2012). Third-sector organisations that have become drawn into financial and/or regulatory networks of contemporary welfare governance are typically assumed to undergo total ideological, ethical, and institutional isomorphism. In this way their values supposedly become subjugated to the performance of what is expected from them by government. As a result, many voluntary organisations are represented as dupes of neoliberal governmentality, co-opted as inexpensive resource providers (Wolch, 1990), and inextricably connected into and colluding with the wider rolling back of the welfare state. Accordingly, resistance to neoliberalism in these contexts is typically understood only in terms of those individuals and organisations that remain separate from government schemes and funding, and therefore remain at liberty to challenge neoliberal logics *from the outside*.

However, even within the ‘insider’ contractual arena of neoliberal governance, the frontline performance of care can often be understood as a site of subversion (Barnes and Prior, 2009). Evidence of these subversive tactics can be somewhat anecdotal. These activities are by their very nature undertaken in contexts which are against, or beyond, the regulatory rules established for third-sector partnerships with localised governance, and are often thus conducted under the radar. However, recent research involving the provision of hostel services for homeless people within the remit of a locally joined-up, one-stop-shop scheme in a UK city (Cloke et al, 2010) suggests that some of the third-sector agencies involved have been unwilling to restrict their conduct to that dictated by local regulation. This going ‘above and beyond’ represents a small but significant subversion of the regulatory subject formation of the deserving and undeserving poor in localised governance (Cloke et al, 2010). Whereas incursions by the private sector into these networks of service and care seem to have led to a ‘for-profit’ minimalisation of roles, the active presence of charitable and voluntary agencies in localised service provision opens up the reverse tendency of an overspill of care that, when replicated across the sector, adds up to a significant challenge to neoliberal logics.

In coproducing neoliberal structures of welfare governance, the ethical performance of staff and volunteers in public and voluntary organisations can potentially rework and reinterpret the values and judgments supposedly normalised in the regulatory frameworks of government policy, bringing alternative philosophies of care into play. These performances can result in the contextual mutation of neoliberal metrics, creating both local variegation of culture and outcome, and the development of new logics of practice. Through such developments, locally situated subversive practices *can* be interpreted as resistance, potentially enabling new social identities

and practices of welfare in situ that deviate from the neoliberal subjectification of individualised, entrepreneurial, and self-interested citizens. The politics of carescapes, therefore, should not solely be understood as a means of ‘getting by’ or reworking neoliberal formations to maintain distinctive values: they also represent potential spaces of resistance in which particular groups of actors carve out interstitial spaces *within* incorporated spaces of service delivery by countering the identity-informing practices and logics of neoliberal rule.

### **Reappropriation and developing a ‘left art of government’**

Thirdly, the changing architecture of governance brought about through the drive towards localism has opened up opportunities for the direct appropriation of governmental structures by local groups seeking progressive outcomes. Examples of such appropriation include: community takeovers of local facilities and amenities as social enterprises (Wright, 2013); resilience strategies deployed by councils to mediate the effects of cuts (Pennycook and Hurrell, 2013); strategic use of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to direct economic development towards the growth of renewable and sustainable industries (as has been occurring in the Cornwall<sup>ii</sup> and Isles of Scilly LEPs); harnessing the more open and deliberative nature of policy making in devolved nations and localities to reject neoliberal models of individualised commodified care in favour of a more locally coproduced system of care provision (see Hall and McGarrol, 2013); and use of the Sustainable Communities Act 2007 as a springboard for developing the *local works coalitions* of environmental NGOs, charities, and trade associations and unions seeking to focus central government action on issues of local sustainability (Flanagan, 2012). In these examples it is all too easy to dismiss initiatives as straightforward products of neoliberal governance (Corbett and Walker, 2013). However, by relaxing the simplistic state-market dualism that is so characteristic of much scholarship on neoliberalism (Barnett, 2009), greater

credence can be afforded to community ownership and the redirection of public assets as forms of localised resistance and progressive localism (Featherstone et al, 2012). At a time of severe localised austerity, these manoeuvres can be an important means of ‘getting by’, with a greater sense of social, economic, and communal well-being (Rajan and Duncan, 2013), or, more adventurously, a means of nurturing nascent elements of collective mobilisation that can be linked into democratic ‘new publics’ (Mahoney et al, 2010).

These strategies of reappropriation can be further illustrated through the case of community energy initiatives in Cornwall. Although recent government legislation can be regarded as strengthening NIMBYist opposition to onshore wind turbines (BBC News, 2013), government technologies of localism such as Neighbourhood Plans (designed to devolve more power over housing and economic development to the local community) have also opened up opportunities for local groups holding more radical ecological views on ecolocalisation. One such group is Wadebridge Renewable Energy Network (WREN), a not-for-profit community energy cooperative, owned and run by its 800 members, and working to transform energy from an individual cost to a collective asset. Since the introduction of Neighbourhood Planning in 2012 WREN has been active in advising likeminded rural small market towns over the use of Neighbourhood Plans to develop community-owned renewable energy, but to date the achievements of these schemes have been limited (interview with WREN founder, Stephen Frankel, 3 December 2013).

UK energy policy remains focused predominantly on the national and household levels, thereby neglecting community approaches to energy production, which currently face severe challenges, including a lack of capital funding to cover set-up costs (Seyfang et al, 2012). As a result, it is corporate-led developments that have taken advantage of revenue-generating initiatives,

such as the feed-in tariff, that might otherwise have benefited community energy projects (Catney et al, 2013). Recent Coalition proposals to extend financial payments to communities permitting on-shore wind turbines do nothing to address the enduring power dynamics of for-profit corporate energy providers and local consumers (see Devine-Wright and Wiersma, 2013). Yet the roll-out of WREN's model of ecolocalisation (see North, 2010), which specifically exploits particular clauses inherent in Neighbourhood Plans and the Feed-in Tariff, has generated a technique to restructure and reappropriate the political economy of energy production and consumption more broadly. Seen through the grammars of neoliberalism, however, such cooperative models of self-organisation-taking on the 'big six' corporations in energy production-would be seen as an extension of neoliberal metrics. Given their strategic manipulation of market-based approaches to energy, groups such as WREN are typically caught up in the simplistic interpretative dualism of state-market that assumes that market-focused strategies inherently propagate neoliberal logics. The interpretative manoeuvre of 'reading for difference' (outlined above), however, allows the identification of WREN as an embryonic community economy (see Healy and Graham, 2008) whose economic practices and distribution of surplus directly sustain social and environmental wellbeing.

There are a number of important caveats to be recognised here, not least the uneven capacity between and within communities to mobilise existing cultural, political, and economic resources (Clifford et al, 2013). For this reason community energy should not be regarded as a wholesale replacement for state-led legislation and intervention (see Catney et al, 2013). However, our argument here is that framing of ecolocalisation and cooperativism within neoliberal grammars of interpretation can too readily dismiss their significance as a form of localised resistance. These sites represent emergent publics coalescing around shared notions of environmental ethics



and citizenship, and potentially promise to foster alternative economies that can directly counter neoliberal subjectification of the growthbased subject-citizen (North, 2010). The kind of localism constituted here, then, cannot be dismissed as inward looking or a defensive posturing for energy self-sufficiency, fuel poverty, or lower energy bills. Rather, organisations such as WREN create positive affinities between places and social groups negotiating similar local and global processes, as illustrated in their advocacy work and facilitative role in helping other communities across the country to establish neighbourhood plans to develop solar energy and wind energy production. By reconfiguring existing community interests around a political ecological agenda of energy reduction, community participation, and mutualism, a particular environmental citizenship can be nurtured.

### **Localised resistance combining alms/arms**

The fourth space of political possibility emerges from third sector and other groups that elect to distance themselves from regulatory or financial relationships with government in order to pursue prefigurative, oppositional, and confrontational stances towards neoliberal logics. Here, we are not primarily referring to traditional spaces of resistance and protest but, rather, to autonomous spaces; namely, individuals and groups which work within their own boundaries and from there reach out to partner in progressive alliances. Prominent examples include: housing coops (Hodkinson 2010; Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006), social centres (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010), ecovillages (Chatterton, 2013), and food networks (Wilson, 2013) which are in keeping with a wider literature on alternative economic and political spaces (see Fuller et al, 2012).

Our illustration in this case refers to groups which have been established, or have intensified their activity, in direct response to the severe welfare and housing benefit cuts introduced since 2010 as part of the austerity

programme of the Coalition government. One of these is Zacchaeus 2000 (Z2K), a London-based anti-poverty charity which provides free social, economic, and legal assistance for low-income households affected by welfare reform and debt, including those being forced to relocate from their communities to cheaper private and council tenancies on the margins of the city. Z2K was first founded in the early 1990s by faith-motivated individuals who refused to pay the Poll Tax and worked with other Poll Tax defaulters who became entangled in the welfare system. In 1997 funds were raised to set up an office and to employ staff, and Reverend Paul Nicolson started training other volunteers to be 'McKenzie Friends' -providing court-recognised nonlegal support to people without representation-helping support people who, for whatever reason, have got into arrears with rent, council tax, gas, or electricity payments. Since then the charity has run over fifty courses, training over 300 people, as well as other NGOs, to help several hundreds of other clients (interview with Z2K director Joanna Kennedy, 16 December 2013).

Z2K represents a space of advocacy and care, combining individual casework and practical support—for instance, negotiating with the authorities on a person's behalf, or helping relocated families integrate into their new communities and access all their rights—with political campaigning around housing, health, and welfare issues. Z2K has been successful in parliamentary lobbying for improvements to the legal and benefits systems. Locally, Z2K has been at the forefront of organising protests outside magistrate courts in Lambeth, Brent, and Southwark boroughs, advising residents hit by the council tax changes and other benefit cuts. In October 2013 Southwark Council issued no less than 9000 summonses across the borough for council tax arrears. Of those, 5800 people were only made eligible to pay because the council passed on to claimants the 10% cut in council tax funding from central government under the new local system of Council Tax Support (Morgan, 2013). Significantly, Z2K has recently partnered with UNITE Community, the trade

union, to help mobilise anticuts activism in Brent and Southwark—two London communities severely affected by welfare retrenchment (interview with Z2K director Joanna Kennedy, 16 December 2013).

The example of Z2K offers two significant contributions to debates about interpreting contemporary neoliberalism. First, as a registered charity, Z2K cannot be regarded as a strictly autonomous space of horizontal and ‘anticapitalist’ political organising, premised on direct democratic self-management. However, it can be regarded as a weaker autonomous space that operationally deviates from the trappings of government and ventures directly into confrontation with state policy through its marriage of provision and protest. The real and symbolic presence of Z2K represents a significant attempt to mitigate government policy and expose the “unfairness in the law, legal and benefits system”. By appropriating legal technologies usually out of reach of vulnerable groups—a situation exacerbated by recent cuts to the legal aid budget—Z2K’s work embodies a political and politicised space of contention that reclaims notions of ‘fairness’ in judicial proceedings. Second, this space of volunteerism, arguably in a more intense manner than foodbanks, can be regarded as opening out ethical spaces of encounter (Lawson and Elwood 2013), which create possibilities for new identifications that disrupt dominant discourses of poverty.

## **Conclusion**

Our aim in this paper has not been to provide an exhaustive, or definitive, account of the ways in which governmentalities of localism are being challenged and reworked: rather, our argument suggests that the political agenda of austerity localism and the Big Society has opened up cracks in the landscape of local governance for emergent ethical and political spaces that seem to work against the dominant formations of the neoliberal. Such fissures

are not simply a novel permeation in neoliberal extensions of rule, but political openings that progressive actors seem to be using to create interstitial spaces of resistance. As national politics seems to converge on an increasingly narrow set of concerns acquiescent with the continuation of market capitalism, local government is finding its autonomy closely circumscribed by stringent financial and legislative measures aimed to curb its powers, and by incentivised funding mechanisms. Accordingly, the energy that would previously have been channelled into the formal political process is now increasingly being expressed through new spaces of ethical and political mobilisations, which have come to represent a significant means of enacting alternative politics (Jamoul and Wills, 2008). Yet, too often these spaces, actors, and practices that are potentially at odds with neoliberal logics are subsumed within hegemonic accounts of roll-out neoliberalisation that tend both to rehearse stories of accommodative compromise, and to reserve the role of resistance for outsider groups pursuing a confrontational, prefigurative opposition to the state apparatus. Following Ferguson's (2009) suggestion that neoliberal arts of government can be detached from neoliberal ideology, the argument in this paper is that there is a matrix of possibilities for 'progressive' social and political actors to enact new worlds *within* the confines of neoliberal governmentality, in some cases reappropriating technologies and exploiting political openings created by austerity localism. This argument suggests the need for an analysis of resistance beyond the 'authentic noncompliant' spaces, examining instead the incomplete performance and varying degree of inculcation of neoliberal rationalities, technologies, and subjectivity in everyday spaces, actors, and practices. In the examples highlighted above, ethical responses to contemporary injustices of food poverty, welfare retrenchment, and the corporate monopolisation of energy production were shown to be translated into political spaces of contention. We do not want to suggest that ethical agency in local governance and third-sector agencies should always be counted

on to bring about progressive outcomes: rather, we wish to offer an analysis that underlines the politics of possibility within the vicissitudes of neoliberal governance.

In order to elucidate these possibilities, new conceptual grammars are needed to supplement and trouble the current shortcomings of vocabularies of neoliberal governmentality. Furthermore, experimentation in developing a leftist ‘art of government’ (Ferguson 2011) is needed to render visible the other logics and processes at work that cut against neoliberal formations of the subject. If we accept that the excesses of neoliberalism work not primarily on the ‘structural’ level but on the territories of the personal, the affective, the aesthetic (Vrasti, 2009), then the new energies and lines of flight evidenced in public mobilisation will provide vital evidence of how potential spaces of resistance can be fostered. Failure to take seriously the moral and ethical imperative of empirical experimentation as a means of exploring and animating different visions of “what is to be done and why” will inevitably mean that “potential opposition will be forever locked down into a closed circle that frustrates all prospects for constructive change, leaving us vulnerable to perpetual future crises of capitalism with increasingly deadly result” (Harvey, 2013, page 9).

Latent spaces of possibility are being opened up by changing political architectures of localism and the Big Society. Critical geographical work that exposes and denounces the pernicious injustices brought about by neoliberal excess is a clear necessity, but it is not sufficient per se (Levitas, 2012). We therefore suggest a modest corrective to the intellectual energies in human geography so as to focus on identifying and critiquing the contemporary possibilities for developing genuinely progressive arts of government. This paper suggests a number of ways in which actors have experimented within the dynamics of incorporation/ resistance in ways that

do not find themselves encroached by neoliberal rationalities, technologies, and subjectivities. We are no longer content to denounce and wishfully rely on some messianic ‘rupture’ in the political, and we join others (Barnett, 2012; Wright, 2010) to encourage a bolder vision of political activism as a series of interstitial political sensibilities and practices that work strategically, even subversively, with tools that are at hand. Hope for imagining postcapitalist alternatives must start in very mundane, but radical, spaces (Gibson-Graham, 2006). It may well be the case that the very spaces of mutualism, cooperatives, and self-organisation in the UK that have attracted widespread suspicion from the left may actually represent the latest stage in the changing dynamics of public formation and progressive forms of social, economic, and political organisation.

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<sup>i</sup>The Work Programme is the central plank of the Coalition’ s welfare programme, requiring the long-term unemployed to undertake unpaid work experience in return for their benefits.

<sup>ii</sup>Cornwall Council recently announced a £1 million Revolving Loan Fund to enable communities to access capital funds to build renewable energy projects. Once they have repaid their loans, community groups will be required to spend money generated by their schemes on local projects (Cornwall Council, 2012)