

## LOCALISM, GLOBALISM, AND THE SPACES IN BETWEEN

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### ABSTRACT

There is a growing discourse about 'localism' in the European polity which has been particularly advanced in the United Kingdom where it is dominant in political ideologies. Although superficially attractive, 'localism' is a fuzzy concept which can lead to discordant views about what constitutes 'the local'. It also evades the reality of the importance of spatial connectivity. The paper suggests that a politics of scale, which celebrates the local, yet recognises that resource allocation and spatial planning need to take place at the appropriate scale, is preferred to a politics that privileges one scale.

KEY WORDS: localism, politics of scale, globalism

### RESUMEN

Actualmente, en la política europea, se ha incrementado el discurso sobre el localismo, especialmente en el Reino Unido dónde se ha convertido en un concepto dominante en las ideologías políticas. Aunque resulta superficialmente atractivo, "localismo" es un concepto difuso que puede dar lugar a puntos de vista discordantes sobre lo que constituye "lo local". Elude también la realidad de la importancia de la conectividad espacial. El artículo, que elogia "lo local", sin embargo, defiende que es preferible la asignación de recursos y ordenamiento espacial en una escala adecuada a una política que privilegia una sola escala.

PALABRAS CLAVE: localismo, políticas de escala, globalización

### RESUM

Actualment, a la política europea, s'ha incrementat el discurs sobre el 'localisme', especialment en el Regne Unit on s'ha convertit en concepte dominant de les ideologies polítiques. Encara que resulta superficialment atractiu, "localisme" és un concepte difús que pot generar mirades discordants sobre allò que constitueix "el local", i pot invisibilitzar la importància de la connectivitat espacial. L'article suggereix la política d'escala, que reconeix "el local", i defensa que és preferible dur a terme una assignació de recursos i un ordenament espacial en una escala adequada abans que privilegiar políticament a una sola escala.

KEY WORDS: localisme, Polítiques d'escala, globalització.

The idea of the 'new localism' has infected and colonised British political discourse and is widespread in Europe (Tibbitt, 2011). Its strength as an idea comes from the connotations of 'localism' with a comfort zone, a space of familiarity, and empowerment of ordinary people. It has recently become enshrined in the British legal system through the passing of the Localism Act 2011 – a document of nearly 500 pages which includes everything from granting local authorities a power of general competence to providing for specific regeneration schemes in London. Like all attractively simple ideas it is both an over-simplification and a deception. And therein lie the dangers of disillusion and discord. It is an over-simplification because it seeks to privilege and prioritise a space called 'the local'. Yet that space has no universal definition nor is it clear why it should always be prioritised. It is deceptive because it assumes that the spaces of 'the local' are somehow disconnected from other spaces and are therefore capable of an autonomy which does not impinge on elsewhere nor is constrained by elsewhere.

This discussion begs two questions: what is the local and why is it so privileged? It will be useful to address the second of those questions first. In times of uncertainty people are said to cling on to the familiar for a sense of identity and self-worth. The urbanist Richard Sennett has suggested that during rapid economic change, when individuals are buffeted by the impersonal forces of globalisation, the locality where we have our home takes on a new significance.: "personal standing locally...a sense of cohesion, and stability which is absent in corporations which are continually repackaged and re-sold" (Sennett, 1995, cited in McDowell, 1999, p114-5). The strengthened attachment to place may be reinforced by the apparent helplessness of governments in the face of the economic crisis. Other writers (Spours, 2011) identify a crisis of governance and democracy, a moment of 'democratic hesitancy', characterised by a breakdown of trust between the people and government. This is traced in the United Kingdom to disillusion with Blairism: "The popular hope invested in New Labour in May 1997 was squandered" (Spours, 2011, p33). Another view is that decades of neoliberal dominance have rid citizenship of its deference to authority and invokes a desire for greater local self-governance. These factors have given rise in the

United Kingdom to the 'New Localism' – a conscious movement to decentralise power from the state to localities and communities.

This privileging of the local, however, raises a more fundamental issue: what is the local? It is tied up with the politics of identity. For some, the local has a definite spatial presence. It may be a small group of neighbours who literally *see the local* through their domestic windows. It may be a residential district – a housing estate – which is clearly bounded and probably named. Or it may be a wider imagined community - an ancient village which is now a city district, an old town or some other municipal entity. There is a multiplicity of 'the local' at varying scales. The elusive 'local' is therefore a contested notion: different individuals and groups will lay claim to different visions of 'the local'. Let me illustrate by reference to my own city of Salford in the North West of England. It is a unitary authority and thus holds all the powers of local government. From one perspective, the city of Salford is, therefore, 'the local' vis-à-vis the national, regional and sub-regional organs of governance. The Localism Act should, from this perspective, devolve power and responsibility to the city council. And, indeed, some parts of the Act appear to do that by granting local authorities a power of general competence (although it is not clear how different this is from existing powers to do anything which is in the social, economic or environmental interests of the city).

But the city of Salford is the product of an amalgamation in 1974 of five separate municipalities. One of those was Swinton and Pendlebury. Many people in Swinton and Pendlebury think of 'the local' in terms of the devolution of power from Salford City Council. The Localism Act seeks to give more power to such neighbourhoods through the planning system – any group of 21 persons may establish a 'neighbourhood forum' which has the power to develop a plan for a neighbourhood. So the people of Swinton and Pendlebury may establish a plan for their part of the city. But Swinton and Pendlebury is composed of many discrete communities – who decides the scale of the neighbourhood? There is the possibility of discord over what, precisely, is 'the local'. And there is the possibility of disillusion: there is a requirement that all neighbourhood plans are consistent with the overarching city plan known as the Core

Strategy. Many communities become involved in planning issues because they wish to oppose proposals by a developer. Instead, the Act encourages them (somewhat naively I feel) to collaborate with developers. There is even a provision to allow a referendum on new development – but only to approve new plans without them having to go through the normal procedure.

Spatial politics has been a process of pragmatic negotiation – sometimes successful, sometimes not – of agreeing the right scale for decision-making. Localism privileges one scale: the very local. There has been concern that this threatens a civic culture and an accountable local democracy (Daniel, 2011) by allowing the “pursuit of parochial self-interest at the expense of wider community needs”. The fear is that the very local will be all that matters. But a crucial lesson is that the local must be more than local. Localities are not disconnected, bounded spaces. Localities exist and their configuration is determined by relations to other places. A residential area exists because it is well connected to areas of employment. An employment area exists because it is connected to regional and global markets. And so there is also a politics of scale: we must decide what the appropriate scale is for participation. A danger of the current vogue for localism is that it ignores the politics of scale. It privileges one scale above others: the very local. In so doing, it may give rise to the ‘tyranny of small decisions’ – where decisions by the locality to act rationally in its own interest (eg to oppose further residential development) injures the interests of another locality (eg by perpetuating overcrowding, encouraging outmigration and thus more commuting) .

We often think of cities as places around which you can draw a line, a boundary. We think of them as places made up of smaller places, neighbourhoods, which are similarly bounded. And we imagine those places can be governed legitimately and effectively by having the right kinds of participatory processes literally *in place*. But that is not what cities are like. Cities are characterised less by bounded places than by connected spaces. The very existence of highways suggests relationships across spaces: within and beyond the city. There are many environmental connections such as rivers which run within and between cities. There are connections between the places that produce waste and those where waste is processed. There are

resource connections: where does our energy come from and how can cities sustain those flows? And there are social relations: how does a decision by one neighbourhood to protect 'its' open space mean that another neighbourhood experiences overcrowding?

Some of the ideas behind 'localism' are less about increasing democracy than handing over power to the market. I have already referred to sections of the Localism Act that encourage collaboration with developers. A section of the Act abolishes regional plans which particularly determined the scale of residential development with each authority. In doing so, it renders every Core Strategy out-of-date. But the Act says that where local plans are out-of-date, then there will be a presumption in favour of development. There is anecdotal evidence of developers about to submit planning applications to exploit this period between the abolition of regional plans and the updating of Core Strategies. Another part of the Act deals with the 'Community Right to Challenge' – basically social enterprises or existing staff can offer to run a service of the local authority and the authority must then open up a competitive procurement exercise. 'Localism' in the hands of the Coalition Government is in danger of becoming a charter for privatisation and weakening local communities against the interests of private developers.

How do we ensure that we celebrate localism and its undoubted benefits, but at the same time ensure that localism does not lead to fragmentation, disconnection and exclusion? If localism is to succeed, there needs to be a better understanding of the politics of scale: the right scale matters – small is not necessarily beautiful. To truly empower citizens, their voices need to be heard and to be effective within existing power structures. Fragmenting communities weakens their ability to resist the market and raises the prospect of discord between neighbourhoods and different scales. The way to empower individuals against the global is to focus not on local but on the spaces in between.

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