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The political boundaries of neighbourhood planning in England: post-politics and the return of antagonism to localism

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Abstract

The rise of neighbourhood planning has been characterised as another step in a remorseless de-politicisation of the public sphere. A policy initiated by the Coalition Government in England to create the conditions for local communities to support housing growth, neighbourhood planning appears to evidence a continuing retreat from political debate and contestation. Clear boundaries are established for the holistic integration of participatory democracy into the strategic plan-making of the local authority. These boundaries seek to take politics out of development decisions and exclude all issues of contention from discussion. They achieve this goal at the cost of arming participatory democracy with a collective identity around which new antagonisms may develop. Drawing on the post-political theories of Chantal Mouffe this paper identifies the return of antagonism and conflict to participation in spatial planning. Key to its argument is the concept of the boundary or frontier that in Mouffe's theoretical framework institutionalises conflict between political entities. Drawing on primary research with neighbourhood development plans in England the paper explores how boundary conditions and boundary designations generate antagonism and necessitate political action. The paper charts the development of the collective identities that result from these boundary lines and argues for the potential for neighbourhood planning to restore political conflict to the politics of housing development.

Key words:

Housing development, neighbourhood planning, post-politics

Introduction

Neighbourhood planning in England has been hailed as a strategy to enhance popular participation in the democratic process by bringing decision-making closer to local people. Critics of the policy characterise it as another step in the remorseless de-politicisation of the public sphere as major issues about society are reduced to questions of a minor technical fix (Allmendinger & Haughton 2011, 2012; Haughton & Allmendinger 2013). Certainly the Coalition government intended neighbourhood planning to take the politics and antagonism out of development decisions, and to disarm resistance to new house building by encouraging residents to welcome growth (DCLG 2011). In providing a regulatory process for the removal of politics from spatial planning, however, neighbourhood planning has armed participatory democracy with a collective identity around which new antagonisms can develop.

The aim of this paper is to chart the emergence of these lines of antagonism in neighbourhood planning and examine the sometimes contentious collective identities they constitute and, in doing so, to identify new political conflicts at the interface between participatory and representative democracy. The paper engages critically with the literature of 'anti-politics' and 'post-politics' and applies the concept of the boundary or frontier, key to the work of the post-political theorist Chantal Mouffe (1993; 2005), to identify the return of politics to the institutions of localism. In doing so, it draws on primary research with a sample of neighbourhood plans carried out across England between 2013 and 2014. This research was conducted through a preliminary review of on-line resources for each neighbourhood plan, including constitutions, applications for designation, council decision papers, minutes of meetings, consultation strategies, draft and final plans, followed by interviews with the chairs and secretaries of the neighbourhood planning committee or forum, observation at forum meetings, and separate interviews with the relevant officers from the planning authority. The national sample was composed of both rural and urban neighbourhood plans and was assembled through the recommendations of Planning Aid volunteers who were contracted by government to provide support to local groups. The findings from this research are clearly not representative, since the sample is small, with 30 studied out of a total number of just over 1000 plans at this point, and because the Planning Aid volunteers were aware of our interest in conflict and made their recommendations

accordingly. Our findings make a significant contribution to the understanding of this new initiative in localism and the impact it has on democratic politics since they demonstrate a current of political conflict developing in neighbourhood plans. It is important, however, to acknowledge that there are other stories that could, and will be told about neighbourhood planning. The paper first explores the literature of post and anti-politics as it applies to neighbourhood planning, participatory democracy and the state strategies of localism. It introduces the concept of the frontier that institutionalises antagonism between collectives and then applies this to case studies of neighbourhood plans exploring the political conflict that can result. It identifies the political antagonism that can develop over the demarcation of the boundaries of neighbourhood planning areas and then charts the construction of collective identities enabled by these boundaries and their corresponding impact on the politics of representative democracy. The paper concludes with a discussion on the contribution of neighbourhood planning to the politics of community action and the possibilities of democratic localism.

Participation and the post-politics of planning

The rise of participatory democracy in spatial planning has been identified with a growing democratic deficit in public life associated with the unchallenged hegemony of the global liberal project (Mouffe 2005). The promise to devolve decision-making to local communities is an essential ingredient in a wide-ranging transformation of state institutions and state relations of government under liberalism (Swyngedouw 2005; Allen & Cochrane 2010). These political strategies of localism hail the neighbourhood, or 'community' as the subject and agent of governance to construct a new order of political space in which the functions of elected government are displaced into networks of appointed governance promoting managerial and technocratic models of public service planning and delivery (Newman et al 2004; Leitner, Sheppard & Sziarto 2008). The neighbourhood serves in these strategies as a reassuringly familiar proxy for a residual public sector while multi-national companies and global finance markets become the new trustees of public services and public assets through privatisation and outsourcing (Fyfe 2005; Hall & Massey 2010). Participation appears to legitimise the introduction of a market model of political decision-making where

democracy becomes the simple aggregation of individual preferences (Lowndes & Pratchett 2012). The participating public are marshalled according to their statistical and demographic qualities and the acceptability of their views. The voices of interest groups and service user organisations are excluded as pathological and irrational and conflict is suppressed in the pursuit of a consensus, or unchallenging 'common sense' outcome (Mouffe 1993; Barnes *et al* 2003). This consensus eschews the need for political conflict and decries politics as an obstruction to the technical questions of managing society in the best interests of economic growth and capital accumulation (Brenner & Theodore 2002). It disavows the existence of structural inequalities or class divisions and presents an imaginary of spatial liberalism that is 'continuous and without limit' (Deleuze 1992:6; Clarke & Cochrane 2013). This spatial imaginary appears limitless and without borders because it is characterised by an individualist rationale that recognises no collective challenge to the hegemony of the market and regards with incomprehension the formation of collective identities. The absence of political frontiers is the 'symptom of a void that can endanger democracy', argues Chantal Mouffe (1993: 5) since the absence of real alternatives to the current organisation of society inhibits the constitution of distinctive political identities and political alternatives.

Critics of the practice of participatory democracy in spatial planning have adopted the term 'post-politics' to decry the exclusion of radical alternatives in the liberal spatial imaginary (Swyngedouw 2010; Allmendinger & Haughton 2012, Haughton & Allmendinger 2013). They draw on the theories of Mouffe and her contemporary philosophers Ranciere and Zizek, among others, to contrast the manufacture of consensus with the cut and thrust of antagonistic politics which expresses real alternatives over questions of societal organisation. A parallel literature of 'anti-politics' argues that political practices of debate, negotiation and lobbying are endangered by the rise of participatory democracy in government policies of localism (Clarke 2012; Clarke & Cochrane 2013; drawing on Schedler 1997). The literature of anti-politics points to the displacement of the processes of representative democracy by managerial elites, the prevalence of appointed boards of governance rather than elected committees, the introduction of systems of consumer accountability to replace those of democratic representation, the use of aggregative methods of democracy, such as referenda, where simple majorities can enact decisions

without debate, and a reliance on the market forces of supply and demand to decide priorities for service delivery and resource allocation. The work of Chantal Mouffe does much to bridge the divergence between these two literatures of post and anti-politics. Her interest is in political process, as well as the philosophy of political projects. She opposes the foreclosure of all debate in a borderless and 'uncontested hegemony of liberalism' and holds to a belief in 'agonistic' or adversarial confrontation between 'clearly differentiated' political identities as the condition of existence for democratic pluralism. (Mouffe 2005: 3-10). Mouffe combines the criticism of post-political consensus and exclusion with concern for the anti-political erosion of democratic practices. She champions the institutions of representative democracy and the traditions of pluralist politics as systems for legitimising and 'domesticating' political conflict. An analysis that draws from Mouffe's writings can bring both strands of critical literatures into play to investigate the latest development of participatory planning in England, the initiative of neighbourhood planning.

The introduction of neighbourhood planning in the Localism Act 2011 appeared to provide additional evidence to support the claims of a retreat from the politics of conflict and antagonism. The parameters of what could be conceived and delivered under neighbourhood planning were severely curtailed by the requirement on localities to adopt strategic priorities and embrace the demands of economic growth. Neighbourhood plans that conformed to the decisions of local and national government, and were approved by light-touch inspection and agreed by popular referendum became statutory instruments as part of the local development framework. The use of referenda, and simple majorities to make potentially controversial and divisive planning decisions suggested that neighbourhoods were to be considered as homogenous and harmonious communities of natural consensus (Clarke & Cochrane 2011). Neighbourhood planning appeared to favour those with most resources and to increase their privileged access to decision-making while excluding still further those groups already marginalised by the uneven development of capitalist societies. The uneven spread of plans, and the unequal distribution of the resources needed to help neighbourhoods draw them up, all suggested a direction of policy in which political matters of environmental quality were to be sorted by the self-regulating powers of the market (Farnsworth 2012; Vigar, Brookes & Gunn 2012).

Where neighbourhood planning differed from previous incarnations of community engagement was in establishing clear boundaries for the holistic integration of participatory democracy into the strategic plan-making of the local authority and its systems of representative democracy (Owen, Moseley & Courtney 2007; Brownhill 2009). These boundaries effectively regulated the relationship between the strategic demands of top-down development and the bottom-up planning aspirations of the neighbourhood. Local authorities were empowered to rule on the boundaries of the neighbourhood plan area and to approve, or designate, the constitution of the neighbourhood forum. Boundary conditions were laid down to define the scope of participatory plan-making and to expressly exclude issues deemed strategic and therefore lying wholly in the realm of elected government. These boundary conditions required neighbourhoods to conform to strategic planning policies except where enabling more, but not less, development. They established a statutory consultation process of external examination and formal referendum and the local planning authority was awarded decisive control in adjudicating on boundary conditions and boundary designations. The existence of these boundaries contributed to the expunction of politics from neighbourhood planning, by curtailing the freedom of debate, and removing key matters of environmental quality from the jurisdiction of local decision-making. However, these boundaries also established the neighbourhood as a political entity, or planning polity, and awarded legal recognition to neighbourhood groups and their publics as collective actors.

Under government strategies of localism, practices of participation have been shorn of collective manifestation and therefore of political antagonism. The emancipatory potential of participatory democracy as collective action has received little consideration in spatial planning literature (Williams 2002; Wainwright 2003). In contrast to its stage-managed deployment in state strategies of localism, participatory democracy has been mobilised by social movements and grass-roots community campaigns in the belief that 'the people themselves must assume direct responsibility for intervening in the political decision-making process' (Della Porta & Diani 2006: 240). In the consciousness-raising of the women's movement and in the self-organisation of welfare users in community action, participatory democracy was expressed by 'subaltern counter-publics' or autonomous collectives who could debate questions of needs and resources, and generate their own strategies for

services (Fraser 1997: 81). They challenged the dominant power and knowledge of managerial and professional elites and experimented with new forms of popular participation at a local level 'as a way to achieve change in a society whose problems are endemic in its very structures' (Hague 1990: 244; Pateman 1970). The introduction of neighbourhood planning cited traditions of community action and of autonomous mobilisation in giving legal sanction to participatory democracy as a collective practice. It constituted the neighbourhood as a collective actor and established lines of demarcation between the operations of participatory and representative democracy. Within these boundaries, public participation in planning decisions acquired a political domain where the decisions of professionals and the edicts of representative democracy could be challenged legitimately. The boundaries of neighbourhood planning thus become political frontiers where competing and co-operating models of democracy confronted each other on unequal terms.

One of Mouffe's major contributions to political philosophy has been in recognising the work done by boundaries in establishing the grounds for political debate (Biesta 2011). Mouffe argues that an absence of boundaries is a threat to democratic politics. The apparent consensus over the global liberal project creates the semblance of a seamless world order that negates the possibility of difference and makes dissent unintelligible. In contrast, the establishment of boundaries signals the recognition of dissent and the explicit demarcation of the political community into a confrontation between adversaries. The boundary acknowledges the existence of opposition and the irreconcilability of alternative beliefs. The effect of boundaries is to establish a 'we/they' distinction between conflicting collective identities 'around clearly differentiated positions' (Mouffe 1993: 4). The constitution of collectives is, for Mouffe, the foundation of political practice; it was the dissolution of collective identities that enable the post-political hegemony of liberal individualism. Antagonism between opposed camps is the condition of possibility for democratic politics. The boundary becomes the locus of political conflict since it marks the end of a particular political order and the beginning of a new collective. It is a threat to the existence of that order and a reminder of the temporary and precarious nature of its hegemony. It marks a symbolic line across which collectives can recognise each other as legitimate opponents and around which they can develop the political institutions and

political practices that will express their collective opposition in adversarial form (Mouffe 2005).

In Mouffe's theoretical framework the boundaries of neighbourhood planning can be expected to do political work. These frontiers are lines of antagonism between participatory and representative democracy. They have the potential to generate conflict between collectives and to return, just as quickly as they remove, the stuff of democratic politics to spatial planning. The paper now turns to its primary research to explore the effect of these boundaries.

The political boundaries of neighbourhood plans

The first line of political antagonism encountered in neighbourhood planning is the requirement on town and parish councils or neighbourhood forums to submit a proposed boundary for the neighbourhood plan to the local planning authority for approval and designation. While the concept of community has been a strategic tool of government for decades the geography of the neighbourhood, or the community has been poorly defined (Natarajan 2012). The question of boundaries is essentially a political one – not only because it requires political approval through the local authority – but because it defines the spatial limits of 'people's felt sense of identity' (Stoker 2004: 125) and therefore establishes the range within which political decisions feel open to direct participation. The neighbourhood plan boundary also clarifies the limits of 'nearness' (Kearns & Parkinson 2001), or the parameters of familiarity and trust, and boundary determination is a declaration of territoriality defined through exclusion. While town and parish councils may use the traditional boundary of their political constituency the contemporary neighbourhood is by no means easy to map. Commuting, shopping and other patterns of social interaction transgress historic frontiers and definitions of the neighbourhood among individual residents may differ markedly from the spatial unit imagined by institutional and corporate actors (Bishop 2011). Neighbourhood forums in our research sample negotiated between themselves and neighbouring groups to establish a frontier and assemble a collective identity of place. Agreement over the boundary of a neighbourhood plan can heal old divisions and create new unities, as in Upper Eden where a consortium of parishes was

formed for planning purposes. It can generate an exchange of territory between neighbourhoods as in the London borough of Highgate where the regulatory requirement to establish boundaries engendered an exercise in elective belonging.

The collective identities inherent in the neighbourhood planning regulations are boosted by the lines of antagonism implicit in the boundary designation process. The judicial review brought in 2013 by Daws Hill neighbourhood forum after Wycombe District Council redrew their planning boundary is indicative of the conflict that can arise. Parish councils with boundaries already established under local government legislation might not expect the question of the plan boundary to be problematic but the case study of the village of Aberford outside Leeds suggests otherwise. When Aberford parish council submitted an application for boundary designation, Leeds planning authority argued that the traditional boundary of the parish, established on the basis of feudal landholdings, was now bisected by a motorway and included, on the southern side of this man-made barrier, territory belonging to a different council ward, and more importantly located in a different housing market area as set out in the local development framework. The chair of the parish neighbourhood planning group explained:

'The boundary was set up as the parish boundary, made up of three more historic boundaries, which is why it's such a funny shape, and obviously prior to the motorway being built, and there was historic reasons for it to do with the Gascoigne family that owned the land.'

Refusing to designate the neighbourhood planning area, Leeds council called on Aberford parish council to redraw the ancient boundary so that its southern limit was the new motorway. A confrontation developed as Conservative ward councillors came to the support of Aberford parish while Labour ward councillors whose constituency was in the area of the parish south of the motorway took the opposing side. Underlying this boundary confrontation were housing allocation plans for the southern area that would earmark land for a 4000 home development. As feelings ran high Aberford parish council was accused of seeking to claim the financial benefits of this development, or conversely, of deflecting any housing allocations intended for the village across the motorway. A high level meeting convened by the Executive Member for Housing & Neighbourhoods failed to resolve the

impasse and the council continued to withhold designation. In the end the parish backed down and redrew its planning boundary. The Neighbourhood Planning team leader for Leeds City Council, acknowledged the bitterness this conflict created:

'It got very political. It was difficult, and it took a long time, and it has meant that building up trust and good working relationships in those areas have been an uphill struggle.'

The neighbourhood planning designation now leaves a question mark over the long term future of the Aberford parish council boundary itself. Some city councillors now argue that a parish boundary change would make sense and it seems likely that the conflict over designation will fuel further antagonism as the jurisdiction of the parish itself is challenged. As the neighbourhood planning chair admitted:

'That brings up a raft of questions over whether the parish should now be withdrawn, because, you know, historically, well things have changed. And this may be the starting point, and part of the concern in our group was this might be the thin edge of the wedge.'

In this case the requirement for boundary designation in neighbourhood planning regulations has generated 'frontier effects' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 134) by expanding the negativity beyond the initial point of antagonism. The designation of a boundary has both practical and symbolic importance in not only setting the limit of a neighbourhood plan but in drawing a line between the planning authority and the neighbourhood, a line of power and therefore a political divide that contains the ever-present possibility of conflict.

Collective identities as boundary effects

While neighbourhood planning builds on the collaborative and communicative practices that have dominated the planning profession since the 1990s, its distinction is in forging a collective public rather than the individual residents or consumers imagined in previous systems of consultation in spatial planning (Allmendinger & Haughton 2012). This innovation in neighbourhood planning applies specifically to urban areas where community groups can

establish a neighbourhood forum and apply for designation as a legal plan-making institution. In place of the 'tyranny of participation' (Cooke & Kothari 2001) where residents' organisations are caricatured as NIMBYs or as selfish interest groups disrupting the free exchange of information between professionals and consumers (Barnes 1999), the neighbourhood planning regulations vest plan-making in a notionally autonomous locally constituted body, in charge of its own consultation processes. It is as a political entity rather than as an amorphous and individually imagined public that participatory democracy enters the neighbourhood plan-making process. Autonomous and self-determined organisations can 'formulate oppositional interpretations' (Fraser 1997: 81) and devise 'different norms and alternative values' (Barnes et al 2003: 383). While in practice the planning authority continues to control the realisation of these interpretations and values, the potential for residents groups to convene a neighbourhood forum, determine its membership, agree a constitution and submit an application for designation to the local planning authority ensures 'the constitution of collective identities around clearly differentiated positions' (Mouffe 1993: 4).

The opportunity to develop an autonomous vision makes neighbourhood planning appealing to residents who have experienced a sense of powerlessness and marginalisation in the wake of previous planning consultations. Neighbourhood planning becomes the focus for a generalised dissatisfaction with hierarchical decision-making and articulates a wider desire for involvement in decision-making, as the secretary of Fishwick & St Matthews neighbourhood forum in inner-city Preston explains:

'I guess this was the reason I got involved, I just realised how much contempt there is, overt contempt, shown to people from deprived neighbourhoods. And I guess the planning process in that particular instance, as far as I'm concerned, confirmed everything that I thought... and I was just absolutely enraged...and I just felt that it's the general attitude of public servants towards people in deprived neighbourhoods, the way that they, they just don't count, and that's how it feels.'

Planning was not always the main concern for some of the groups in our research sample; instead planning served as a proxy for all government systems from which local people felt excluded. In the Manchester suburb of Northenden the decision of the city council to close

the local library spurred the conservation group, the Civic Trust to set up a forum and begin a neighbourhood plan, buoyed up by their sit-in protest over the closure of the facility. It was an opportunity to move beyond being 'informed, not consulted', as the secretary of the Northenden forum said:

'The council conflate the two ideas, they think informing is consulting and so, there was a lot of frustration on many issues all over...because I just think this community's been treated so unfairly actually, it's just not right and that's it, yeah.'

Neighbourhood planning provides a statutory framework for the incorporation of community action within the 'hard spaces' of government, if only in reference to the local plan (Haughton, Allmendinger & Oosterlunck 2013). The establishment of neighbourhood forums has unifying effect, bringing different residents' and community groups together to agree a joint vision for their area. In Exeter St. James, where the plan went to referendum in May 2013, the chair of one local Residents' Association approached the other seven groups in the area to join together in a neighbourhood forum and the impetus behind the plan came from there. In Holbeck in Leeds three separate residents groups came together to create the neighbourhood forum and this has spurred them to work together on unrelated community projects as they develop a more defined sense of place. The chair of the forum reported:

'We have realised that we need to do things community wise, I mean the other week we had a bonfire, we've got the Christmas light switch on, which again is another community thing, so we are doing bits and pieces under the umbrella of the neighbourhood plan.'

Despite the huge demands that a neighbourhood plan puts on communities in terms of volunteer time and energy, and the commitment to study policy documents and acquire the skills to write plans, the collectivising effect of boundary designation and the statutory nature of the plan can strengthen the dedication of community groups. The secretary of Fishwick & St. Matthews forum in the inner city area of Preston is keenly aware of these obstacles but feels that the neighbourhood plan has mobilised those already active in the community and given them a shared and collectively expressed goal.

Well it's funny because when we got together we've got a very simple and overarching mission statement and a vision. We all live in and around the area and we kept our mission statement as wanting Fishwick and St Matthew's to be a better, cleaner, safer place to work and live in... And I really, really am optimistic because I look down New Hall Lane [the main road through the area] and I don't see what you see. I see a pretty town, nice firms and shops, nice pretty painted houses, people that are happy and, you know, not that sort of atmosphere of just tough life. So I can't not be optimistic, surely. I think it's getting interest and support. I do think it's possible, neighbourhoods do improve.

As neighbourhoods assume collective identities around the right to plan, boundaries of political conflict are established on the foundations of earlier grievances and on the claims of competing systems of democracy. On the one side of the boundary is the representative democracy of local authorities with their elected members, and on the other, the participatory democracy of local people taking direct action in their local area. The boundary is evident in claims that neighbourhood plans promote a model of self-selection, privilege, and self-interest, with their proponents typically denigrated as the 'usual suspects' (Millward 2005). In contrast some post-political theorists represent local authorities as egalitarian and even-handed, with their democratic mandate securely evidenced through the ballot box (Allmendinger & Haughton 2011; Ellis 2011). In doing so, they ignore the well-documented democratic deficit of representative democracy that is most apparent in parish councils, with their frequently uncontested elections, and co-opted rather than elected members, and that increasingly overshadows the accountability of local authorities themselves (Bishop 2011).

A revitalisation of democracy in town and parish councils has been identified as one of the consequences of their engagement in neighbourhood planning (Brownhill & Downing 2013). In Thame, the Oxfordshire market town whose plan went to successful referendum in May 2013, the extensive consultation carried out by the town council over a controversial housing allocation, gave the councillors a much stronger awareness of their relationship with their constituents and helped develop a more pronounced sense of spatial identity. The demonstration of support received by the town council in the referendum has led to an interest in exploring neighbourhood budgets, in taking over the management of car parking

from the county council, and establishing a planning agreement with the county that would enable them to determine some local planning applications. The town clerk summed up the renaissance in local democracy the neighbourhood plan had brought about:

The whole process has increased and strengthened the role of the Town Council in the local community. This has resulted in many new contacts approaching the Town Council to facilitate or assist in new areas of activity including economic development. It feels, to me as the Town Clerk having worked at all 3 levels of local government that the role of the Town council has / is changing significantly. I was involved in a unitary change where responsibilities changed and what is happening with the neighbourhood planning feels similar.

Within the boundaries of neighbourhood planning, the locality is defined as a political entity and existing political identities acquire greater definition. The bounded space allotted to participatory democracy mobilises a politics of community action that can rejuvenate the representative systems of elected government.

The political impact of boundary conditions

Neighbourhood plans are pre-determined by the requirement to support sustainable development, and they can plan only for more, not less, growth than that set out in the council's strategic plan. This boundary condition appears to enforce compliance to a pro-growth agenda, especially in house building, and to expressly exclude any political discussion of market-led development. However, the boundary condition explicitly recognises the intelligibility of opposition to house building, and addresses residents as rational collective actors, rather than selfish interest groups, or irrational NIMBYs (Allmendinger & Haughton 2012). It provides a set of market incentives that orientate neighbourhoods towards the market, requiring them to factor land values and business demand into their plans. This orientation towards the private market is initiated in the boundary designation process as the regulations require that representatives of local businesses are engaged in the neighbourhood forum and the planning process. Leeds city council held back the designation of a neighbourhood forum in the inner city area of

Holbeck until it was satisfied that sufficient engagement with local businesses had taken place. The local residents leading Holbeck's neighbourhood plan have experience of campaigning around public services but the requirement to visit and engage with local businesses meant that they began to engage with the private sector and they became more strongly aware of the market forces shaping their locality. As the chair of Holbeck neighbourhood forum, a council tenant and veteran community activist said:

I think it has made us more commercially aware, and made us realise that we do have to take on board the fact that these are private companies and need to make money. And if we need them to do it in our area then we have got to help them, give what they want to make them happy and secure here. Which is something I don't think we had ever thought about to be quite honest.

Holbeck neighbourhood forum understands that they need to balance the requirement to attract private investment to their area with the risk that more harmful impacts of gentrification may follow, especially the displacement of low-income residents. In mapping these development opportunities, the community activists identified that large areas of derelict land within their boundary were owned by the elusive multi-millionaire Barclay Brothers. They attempted to negotiate the future of the land with the remote multi-national whose headquarters is located off the coast of the Channel Island of Sark. The requirement in the neighbourhood planning regulations for local people to engage with the private market has in this example encouraged the forum members to look outside their locality, to see it as a place of global connections. The politics of community action, focused for so long only on the local authority as the arbiter of decisions, is forced by the boundary conditions of neighbourhood planning to become strongly aware of the role of multi-national markets, and, with a firm grasp on the challenges, engage for the first time with a politics 'of place beyond place' (Massey 1994).

At the far end of the neighbourhood planning process another boundary condition, the requirement to hold a referendum, looms over the process of participatory democracy. 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). As 'aggregative democracy' the referendum allows a simple majority to approve the neighbourhood plan and suggests the possibility that minority views can be simply overruled and ignored (Allmendinger & Haughton 2011). In our sample the claims on democracy made by neighbourhood plans were based not on the final ballot but on the 'nearness' of the plan and its planners to the direct experience of local people (Kearns & Parkinson 2001). This 'nearness' is a spatial construction in which a discourse of neighbourliness is manifested 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 reiterative practice and emotional identification to generate collective identities around the practices of place (Martin 2003). The boundary condition of the referendum spurs on the construction of this 'nearness' through the participatory democracy of community engagement. The results of referendum to date suggest the impact of the participation that precedes the direct democracy of the ballot box. The lowest majority in a referendum achieved so far has been 74 per cent, with an average turnout of just under 33 per cent (DCLG 2013).

'Nearness' conveys both the process of constructing the sense of neighbourhood and the resulting network of face to face interactions that sustains the process of participatory democracy. In the residential community of Coton Park, an estate of 1000 homes near Rugby, a residents group established a neighbourhood forum and began the process of community engagement in developing a neighbourhood plan. Their priorities were around parking and traffic and planning for children's play and community facilities. The residents group was already very active in organising community events but only 'half a dozen' people did the work. The launch of the neighbourhood forum drew in people who had not been previously involved, and easily reached its statutory minimum of 21, but there were never enough active members to hold contested elections. Consultation on the plan has been conducted using monthly newsletters, displays at community events, drop-in sessions, youth groups, 'street chats', social media and on-line surveys and going door to door with simple questionnaires. The chair of the neighbourhood forum explained how 'nearness' enables participation:

If you're putting yourself forward for consultation events and all and sundry are coming to meet you then you become a more known face. I run the baby group so I know loads of mums, we've got a dog so you're out bumping into dog walkers who know you. So the number of people that I recognise on the estate is quite large and so at that point they know that you're the person to talk to about neighbourhood planning. Yes, so it's like your identity becomes defined on the estate by what you do. Which is quite nice but equally sometimes you think, "I just want to go for a walk." And I want to take my daughter to go and play on the swings and not have to answer lots of questions about it.

Statutory consultation periods are built into the neighbourhood planning process so that the local authority can monitor public responses to the designation of the planning boundaries and the constitution of a neighbourhood forum, as well as the publication of the draft plan. There were two objections during the initial consultation in Coton Park; those objectors live on the estate and have maintained their criticisms throughout the planning process. The secretary of the neighbourhood forum has visited them on several occasions and has talked through, but not resolved, their complaints.

The people that are against us keep complaining that we are undemocratic. I say, "but in your world I would take your one viewpoint and change everything, so how is that democratic?"

Following consultation on the draft neighbourhood plan, the question of opposition becomes a political factor, since the impact of individual voices on the outcome of the referendum must be assessed. The chair of Coton neighbourhood forum adds:

It does become representative when we have the referendum and you have to always work on the 'yes' vote. It starts to become a more political animal now because we'll go through the responses [to the questionnaire on the draft plan] with an eye to how they are going to vote. So you then weigh that up. If they say they object to this policy and we don't take it out, they're going to vote 'no'.

A process of democratic engagement that is far more intimate and politically complex than a simple aggregation of preferences (Clarke & Cochrane 2013) appears to take place in this

neighbourhood plan. Participation in decision-making is here an active process of negotiation in which democracy is an essential component of nearness. The rationality of localism, with its problematic assertion that the neighbourhood is inherently democratic, has authorised political practices through which space can be constructed as both local and democratic.

The return of politics to localism

The policy of neighbourhood planning has explicitly anti-political aims in seeking to defuse opposition to housing growth and economic development. Within a rationality that seeks to exclude contention and deny all difference, neighbourhood planning, nevertheless, emerges as a political process. This paper has identified the boundaries that constitute the neighbourhood as a collective identity and that establish lines of potential antagonism between participatory and representative democracy. These boundaries are the conditions of possibility for democratic politics, as Mouffe argues. The case studies featured in this paper suggest the manifestation of this antagonism where neighbourhood planning gives voice to anger and frustration at exclusion from political decision-making. The collectivising effects of neighbourhood planning appear to confer a defined spatial identity on the locality that enables the enhancement of community action. While boundary conditions constrain the growth of oppositional identities in neighbourhood planning they open new political directions for community action. The political practices of negotiation and bargaining, and the recognition of difference, are necessitated by these boundaries. Participatory democracy is collectivised and awarded a defined jurisdiction and the processes of representative democracy may be deepened as a consequence. It is true that no clearly differentiated alternatives emerge from the participation of neighbourhoods in spatial planning. The adversarial relationship between the locality and the local state is too tightly constrained for conflict to erupt over boundaries or boundary conditions. However, neighbourhoods in our study appeared to view plan making as a stepping stone for the development of more local governance. The rationale of state strategies of localism at least notionally opposes the neighbourhood to the local state, and promotes a discourse of 'community' rather than 'public' services. As neighbourhoods are addressed as political identities in spatial planning so the community rights of localism, such as asset transfer or the right of bid for public service contracts, appear more feasible.

In doing so it has applied the philosophical outlook of Chantal Mouffe to argue for a more careful application of the literature of post-politics and anti-politics to the practices of participatory democracy in spatial planning. Neighbourhood planning has established the political boundaries of a new planning polity and the attempt to exclude conflict from spatial planning has opened a new frontier for political antagonism.

Conclusion

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