The Power of Now. Reimagining the Future of Local Government Through Studies of 'Actually Existing' Practice

Abstract

This article contends that the study of UK local government, its institutions and actors, is an increasingly 'niche' pursuit. We argue that the field is caught in a common sense narrative that plays off local government institutional decline against widespread belief in the future democratic and progressive value of the council-to-come. Identifying persistent appeals to such deficiency narratives, we thus suggest that 'actually existing' local government is reduced to the site of critical shortcomings in the present, while its agency is deferred to a future when the council has become what it is not. Such logics, we conclude, reach their height in recent studies of local austerity governance. In response, we call for a turn to an ethos of municipal pragmatism that grounds inquiry in 'real world' problems, while developing richer or thicker understandings of the agency of local government that can generate alternative visions grounded in its everyday work.

Over twenty-five years ago, Allan Cochrane (1993) asked 'whatever happened to local government?' The question is ever more salient in the aftermath of a decade of austerity in the United Kingdom (UK) and in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. But, importantly for us, this critical assessment of local government begs the question of whatever happened to the field of local government studies in the UK. Indeed, the two questions are difficult to disconnect. The study of local government, its shifting problematisations and strategies of inquiry, has waxed and waned in tandem with the shifting localism, organisational restructurings, and regulatory interventions of successive national governments.

At first glance, any questioning of a mature and dynamic field of political studies may seem misguided, particularly given the range of important work being published. This includes investigations into the local as a space for progressive politics and the new municipalism (see for example Penny, 2017; Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2020), studies of the local governance of austerity (see Bello *et al.*, 2018; Davies *et al.*, 2020; Fuller and West, 2017; Gray and Barford, 2018; Hastings *et al.*, 2015; Lowndes and McCaughie, 2013) , of devolution and the hybridisation of local political landscapes (see Berry and Giovannini, 2018; Lowndes and Gardner, 2016; Lorne *et al.*, 2019), as well as critical explorations of community empowerment and new spaces of democracy within local civil societies (see Richardson et al., 2019; Willett and Cruxon, 2019; Wills, 2016, 2020). Such dialogues have further 'softened' the disciplinary boundaries of local government studies, attracting contributions from disciplines such as critical theory, political geography, and urban studies.

This article acknowledges the flourishing and expansion of the field of local government studies in the UK. However, we also raise a word of caution, in order, we hope to engender a broader dialogue over future directions in the study of local government in the UK and beyond. We contend that the increasing porosity of the boundaries of the field of local government studies has led to the study of local government institutions, its actors, and roles in transformative change becoming something of a 'niche' pursuit or academic practice, thus limiting critical examination of what we might call 'actually existing' local government. We then make the paradoxical call to bring local government 'back in' to local government studies. In doing so we advocate the turn to what we describe as 'municipal pragmatism', setting out an ethos of engagement with local government which we hope resonates with scholars of local government everywhere.

Our argument unfolds in four steps. First, we construct a short history of the field of local government studies in the UK. Of course, this 'history' is not without its caveats: the positions of authors shift over time, while characterisations of complex positions have their own challenges. We aim to discern the broad 'defining moments' or turning points in the field, recognising that these 'moments' have somewhat fuzzy starting-, and indeed, end-points. We conclude that interest in local government or 'actually existing' local government was waning, if not extinguished, by the mid-late 2000s.

Second, we propose that the revitalisation of the study of local government rests on the recognition and sidestepping of what we call the logics of the council-to-come (Norval, 2007). In evoking such logics, we argue that the field is caught in a contradiction that plays off a 'common sense' narrative of local government institutional decline and acquiescence against the widespread belief or attachment to the democratic and progressive value of the local. This contradiction foregrounds the critical deficits of local government while investing in fantasmatic or ideological narratives that 'grip' the field by projecting an alternative future for local government if only current deficits can be overcome (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Consequently 'actually existing' local government 'goes missing' as it is reduced to the site of critical shortcomings in the present, while the 'grip' of alternative local futures defers the agency of local government into a future where it must become what it is not.

Third, we argue that the waning of interest in local government and pervasiveness of appeals to the council-to-come, combine to underplay the potential agency of local government. This, we suggest, reaches its height in studies on local austerity governance. We problematise existing studies on austerity and local government to demonstrate how dominant narratives either deny or severely limit the agency of local government in responding to austerity. Instead, we seek to build upon accounts that recognise the potential of bottom-up practices of bricolage and resistance by local officers and councillors.

The final step of our argument calls for a turn to what we term an ethos of municipal pragmatism which provides a flexible approach, or mode of inquiry, for bringing local government 'back in'. Municipal pragmatism centres on a specific ethos of engagement with the policies and practices of local government. It grounds inquiry firmly in the soil of 'real world' problems confronting local government, while seeking to develop richer or thicker understandings of the agency of local government and its potentialities. As such, it privileges the generation of alternative visions that are grounded in everyday work of local government, starting from what Barnett (in this volume) calls the 'local government we have'.

A short history of local government studies in the UK

By the end of the 1960s, the study of local government was held within the confines of public administration. The core focus of attention was the institutions of local government, namely, council size and type, extent of responsibilities, role of politicians and so on. One exception was the emergence of in-depth single local authority studies which arguably related the work of local councils through a sociological lens (Lee, 1963; Clements, 1969). Indeed, the predominant institutional orientation came under increasing attack or challenge in the 1970s. Typically, Stanyer (1976) and later Rhodes (1981) called respectively for organisation theory and power dependence theory to be applied to local government. For Stoker (2000), this introduction into the field of insights from behavioural political science heralded a 'radical shake up' of the 'dry study of institutions'. This was aided and abetted by the

launch in 1975 of *Local Government Studies,* the 'in house' journal of the University of Birmingham's Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV), which provided a forum for the growing application of new theoretical perspectives emanating from organisation, management, and systems theory (for example, see Baker, 1975).

These developments were also 'helped along' by the community power debate, which led to studies of interest group activity in and around local government (see Newton, 1976; Dearlove, 1973), and by Marxist-inspired analysis (Cockburn, 1977; Castells, 1977). This latter field incorporated a wider critical edge which challenged the managerially-focussed, 'cosy' and 'apolitical' stance of INLOGOV (Cockburn, 1977) to place local government in the context of wider capitalist economic and social relations. It continued into the 1980s and 1990s with the application of Regulation Theory and more nuanced concerns for uneven development and locality effects (Duncan and Goodwin, 1988). However, even during this period, radical Marxist-inspired scholars in various guises tended to leave local government behind, having briefly engaged with it. In addition, the macro-structural focus of Marxist views of the 1970s and early 1980s, even allowing for different degrees of autonomy from the demands of the capitalist economy and class, did not explore local government *per se*, as an institution, in which it did not particularly invest.

Nonetheless, the 1980s were something of a heady period for local government studies, as practitioners and academics grappled with the

implications of Thatcherite reforms including contracting-out, legal

constraints, reductions in powers, and control of local finance. Resistance by

'New Urban Left' councils also ensured that local government studies

remained connected to critical political and economic perspectives (Boddy and

Fudge, 1984). This focus on the macro or structural context arguably persisted,

feeding into an emergent and then dominant interest in local *governance*,

insofar as it connected to the demands of marketisation and globalisation and

the failings of hierarchy (Stoker, 1999).

However, through the late 1980s and 1990s, this macro-structural perspective

ceded ground as local government became a site or case study for the

exploration of strategic leadership, performance management, contracting and

partnership working. Interest in local government remained high, evidenced

by a major ESRC project on local governance (1992-1997). It was given

added impetus by the New Labour Government's modernisation agenda,

which generated a swathe of studies on elected mayors, executives, and

scrutiny functions, alongside national evaluations of neighbourhood working,

regeneration, local strategic partnerships, and the power of well-being (Laffin,

2008).

Yet, this return to the study of the workings of local government was relatively

short-lived, fuelled as it was by the funding by New Labour of a national

programme of evaluation (Sullivan, 2011). After the mid-2000s, this renewed

interest in local government tended to fizzle out, leaving a diminishing number

of scholars writing about local government. And, as other disciplines engaged

in the field, the focus of attention shifted more to the local, community, neighbourhood, state rescaling and city regions. As such, the study of local government institutions and actors narrowed over time, while the field of local government studies arguably flourished.

Of course, this paradox can in part be explained by the rise and fall of academic fashions and interests, as well as generational change, not to mention the altering level of investment in the local from central governments of different hues. However, whilst acknowledging such claims, we argue that behind this decline of the study of local government in the UK to something of a niche interest in academia sits the reproduction of a common sense narrative that accepts that local government is in some way 'lacking' (Barnett, Griggs and Howarth, 2019). This dominant framing cannot, we suggest, be divorced from the move away from the study of 'actually existing' local government. Indeed, it is a framing that needs to be problematised if we are to revitalise the study of local government actors and institutions in the UK.

The appeal of 'local government-to-come' or 'if only local government was more…'

The common sense narrative that local government is in some way 'lacking' rests on the appeal of the council-to-come, such that studies, even by those scholars known for their support of localism, reproduce a predominant narrative in which local government has always been found wanting, in need of a necessary revitalisation, reform or reorganisation. Appeals to local

government, whatever their multiple understandings and associations, are typically couched in strident critiques of the present and positive visions of alternative futures, visions that will only come to be *if* the local is truly given its head. Drawing upon the work of Aletta Norval (2007, 145-151) and her reading of Derrida's conceptualisation of democracy-to-come, we thus argue that the 'talk' of local government is characterised by the repeated conjuring up of the council-to-come, the constitution and re-constitution of an '(impossible) future [for localism], a future that never arrives' (Norval, 2007, 145). As such, the appeal of the local lies in its promise of an alternative imagined future, one that is within our reach if only the contradictions of the present can be overcome. Such appeals, as Norval (145) argues, conjure up an urgency to act, offering 'the means by which an imagined future can intervene in and act upon the present'.

In this section we identify and assess three such contradictions of local government in the present. These contradictions take, we argue, the form of deficits or deficiencies reproduced and normalised within the field of local government studies (Barnett, Griggs and Howarth, 2019). The appeal of these deficiencies persists as policy preoccupations with local government reform wax and wane and academic inquiry takes on different modes of explanation and inquiry.

If only local government was managed 'correctly'

This deficiency is identifiable in unfavourable comparisons of the 'local government present' with a better managed/organised one 'to come', and with narratives which describe local government as consistently 'behind the times' in adopting appropriate managerial/ organisational techniques. This theme has persisted since the 1930s and the advent of the 'administrative efficiency' movement with calls for more efficient application of scientific management principles (Stewart, 1985) and associated precision in demarcating the roles of (increasingly professionalised) officers and 'lay' councillors. Across the decades, local government has thus been seen to be insufficiently strategic to provide effective leadership, or too professionalised, remote, out of touch, and even paternalistic. Indeed, the consolidation of the study of local government into what could be called a 'field', evidenced in the publication of *Local Government Studies* in 1975, derived from concerns about how newly created, larger, councils could learn from new management techniques and theories.

The ways in which councils fell short organisationally have been perceived differently over time. For example, in the late 1960s and 1970s, local government scholars became strong advocates of corporate planning, coordination, planning and strategy (Glennerster, 1981), with associated skills pioneered in certain councils but missing or inadequately applied elsewhere. Notably, scholars from a broadly Marxist perspective rejected the adoption of corporate planning and the reorganisation into larger councils, associating it with a different organisational deficiency, that of technocratisation and depoliticisation (Cockburn, 1977).

However, as the market-oriented New Public Management became dominant in the 1980s, the 'council-to-come' became crystallised in alternative, more proactive 'enabling' roles articulated in, for example, the role of the 'community orientated enabler' (Leach, Stewart and Game, 1994). Then, as attention turned to councils' changing position in systems of local governance, the 'council-to-come' was reimagined as community governance, responsible for securing the well- being of its area, with capacity to 'steer' the increasingly complex cross-sector array of partnerships and alternative service providers (Stoker, 1999). By the late 1990s and 2000s, new ideas about leadership ultimately proffered 'metagovernance' as a new future for 'councils-to-come', requiring the acquisition of new skills, including facilitation, diplomacy, distributed leadership and so on. (Mangan *et al*., 2016; Sullivan, 2007).

The 'managerial' deficiency can also be detected in a persistent frustration with political decision-making structures across councils and with the forms of politics they practice (Barnett, Griggs and Howarth, 2019). Councillors are regularly accused of lacking the skills or dispositions to deal with changing societal and environmental pressures (Jones, 1969; Copus, 2014). Demands are made for councils to practice a more appropriate division of responsibilities between officers and councillors, and between policy making/ strategic decision making and 'operational' matters. Over time reform has tackled these concerns, with proposals for greater clarity of roles, including the separation of Executive and Scrutiny roles. Most recently, council leaders

have been encouraged to be place shapers, with 'backbenchers' taking on new roles as 'community champions'.

If only local government was democratic

This deficiency has been expressed over the decades in the form of a frustration that local government, whilst full of democratic potential, has been unable to realise it. The 'council-to-come' here is one which can address the democratic deficit as perceived from a variety of positions across the political spectrum. A key theme is council size. Local government units are considered too large, or 'artificial' to be democratic in the sense of connecting to 'meaningful' communities of interest or facilitating participation, accountability, and responsiveness in liberal democratic or communitarian terms (Wilson and Game, 2011). Conversely, at other times, larger 'future' councils are advocated on the grounds of democratic efficacy and collective decision-making (Robson 1954; Sharpe, 1970).

This deficiency narrative has become associated with the shortcomings of local representative democracy, with the council-to-come required to offer other forms of democratic engagement. Again, prescriptions vary across the political spectrum from participatory initiatives to more radical 'empowerment' devolution and decentralisation (variously to communities, civil society, service user groups, wards, areas etc) and on to mixtures of 'direct', participatory and representative democracy (Barnes, Newman and Sullivan, 2007). And again, perceived deficiencies have changed over time.

When thoughts turned to the democratic implications of more complex local governance arrangements, councils were increasingly seen to be clinging to 'outdated' forms of representative democracy and, in particular, to practices of party politics (Copus, 2004). Various democratic practices, more suited to this complex and networked reality, were, in turn, projected onto the council-to-come addressing, for example, the need to maximise learning, knowledge sharing and exchange in the light of 'wicked issues' (Stoker, 2005), and the need to assume 'metagovernor' roles to provide 'democratic anchorage' in congested local governance environments (Skelcher *et al.*, 2011). Others identified the radical prefigurative potential of 'councils-to-come' in facilitating and orchestrating extra-state organisation (Gyford, 1991; Burns et al, 1994) and self-management (Cooper 2017). Increasingly, 'councils-to-come' were thus ones which recognised, adjusted to, and were capable of 'overseeing', a range of 'post representative' democratic forms, particularly deliberative ones, and which responded to citizen desires for more direct engagement and co-production.

If only local government was local

UK local government's lack of status vis- a -vis central government is a key source of 'deficit' narratives, reflected in frequent centrally-directed restructurings, loss of powers (both to central government and to other agencies) and increasing central constraints, particularly concerning finance. This deficiency has its roots in local government's lack of a formal place in the constitution (Bogdanor, 2006), the principles of parliamentary sovereignty

and *ultra vires* (King, 1993), and, in some cases, an historical 'usurping' of local government's roots in pre-nation-state common law (Copus, 2019). The 'council-to-come' simply has more autonomy, is freer from central financial oversight, has more powers to raise and spend money from its own sources and is supported, often, by constitutional guarantees. If it is not always identified as being pre-eminent, then it enjoys a more elevated status within a more balanced set of central-local relations.

These themes of autonomy, financial control and encroaching centralisation have persisted over the decades with some variety in how more independent local government might realise them. Thus the 'council-to-come' in the 1980s was imagined in the light of the Thatcherite agenda; the lack of a written constitution facilitated governance from the centre via an 'operating code' which previously tolerated some degree of local government independence (Bulpitt, 1983) but which now pursued a 'juridification' (Loughlin, 1996) of the relationship. The desired response was either to re-balance the relationship (Jones and Stewart, 1983) or to offer a more radical, independent, alternative (Blunkett and Jackson, 1987). With the encroachment of theorising about local governance into the field, later concerns incorporated the need for councils to assert a position of *primus inter pares* amongst local networks, and, in recognition of an increasingly complex variety of institutional scales and boundaries in an evolving system of multi-level governance, a position as leader of place.

We argue that these three deficiency narratives have structured inquiry into local government, both across the different perspectives of the field and over

time. They overlap and interweave as they are articulated in different combinations and mixes by scholars, which accounts in part for their resilience. But such narratives ultimately rest on the promise of the future, of the council-to-come, predicated on the belief that there is, to paraphrase Norval (2007, 147), 'more to [the local] than what we call [the local] today.' Indeed, as Dilys Hill concluded in her 1974 review of the field, 'this is not nostalgia for what has been but, as it were, nostalgia for what could be' (1974, 226-227). But what does this appeal of the council-to-come mean for how we engage with the study of local government?

Importantly, we suggest here that the logic of the council-to-come translates in practice into the risk that 'actually existing' local government 'goes missing' from the field of local government studies. We use this term metaphorically to capture how appeals to the council-to-come push to the margins the potential agency of local government. First, 'actually existing' local government, the inquiry of the present, becomes the site of critical shortcomings. Second, the projection of an alternative future for the local pushes any agency or opportunity for local government into a future where it has to become what it is currently not. As such, it 'goes missing' in the critique of the present and the projection of future alternatives, for in the present it is evaluated against a set of criteria of the council-to-come, and in future projection its agency is only possible if local government becomes what it is not. In short, the appeal of the council-to-come militates paradoxically against the study and valuing of 'actually existing' local government, positing the projection of alternatives that are cut off from the existing practices of local government, downplaying

its agency in the everyday while constructing local civil society as the primary site for the generation of new municipalism or progressive alternatives that challenge and resist the central state and the hegemonic practices of neoliberalization (Russell, 2019).

Austerity governance or local government 'goes missing'

The narrowing of interest in local government *per se* has taken place alongside a burgeoning of interest in areas in and around local government, and, we argue this has reached new heights in accounts of local government from 2010. A prime example is the understandable focus on the uneven impacts of austerity on local services across the UK (see for example Hastings *et al.*, 2015), and the agency of actors acting in and around local government. Similarly, interest in 'the local' burgeoned alongside the Coalition government's 'localism' agenda. However, so far as local government *per se*, as an institution and actors in and of itself is concerned, the predominant narratives of austerity governance have foregrounded how it either lacks agency or exercises the 'wrong type' of agency, and that consequently, it is not 'somewhere' we should be looking for potential progressive alternatives.

Broadly speaking, we argue, such narratives have indeed fallen into two categories, which portray local government as either constrained by coercive market logics and governmentalities or ensnared by path dependencies. On the one hand, narratives we label 'austerian realist' are rooted in neoliberal

problematisations and assign little, if any, agency to local government, which is financially emasculated and dominated by coercive market logics, imposed either via technologies of governmentality (Penny, 2017) or outright coercion, (with the balance likely to tip inexorably to the latter). Davies and Thompson (2016) see councils complying with austerity via a 'trope of agency denial' (156), with local state actors complicit in the acceptance of a justificatory narrative which 'contributes to the sedimentation of state power and the subordination of alternative beliefs, desires and traditions' (159). Blanco and Davies (2017) allow that 'variegated neoliberalism' allows for variety of local state contestation, depending on particular governance traditions and histories of past struggles, but identify these to be absent in UK local government given 'the country's centralised political tradition, local culture of dependency' (1532). Whilst recognising some room for manoeuvre by local state actors in certain contexts, austerian realism views nonetheless local government in the UK as having little or no agency.

On the other hand, 'path dependent' narratives portray local government to be exercising the 'wrong type' of agency. Characterising local government as the 'great survivor'. John (2014) recognises agency in the continuing, historic, adaptability and pragmatism of local government, underlining how under austerity this organisational culture has led to it 'seeking a best possible outcome for the organisation whilst protecting as much as is possible' (698), such that it is 'rarely willing or even able to put up a fight against central government' (700). Such claims recognise the efficacy of local government, and constraints of path dependency and centralisation, but John nonetheless

argues that senior local politicians and officers 'pass on these [pragmatic] values', 'shutting out' as a result 'more exciting and energetic' alternatives from within local government, communities and citizens.

This lack of attention to, or limited readings of, the agency of local government leaves us in a position of regarding local government as increasingly irrelevant as a material source of progressive futures. Ironically, as we suggest above, such agency is associated with a variety of sites and scales historically associated with social progress through local government, in particular the 'local', the urban and the municipal, which have been adopted and valorised as offering social, economic and democratic alternatives through initiatives outside, and sometimes in opposition to, local government. Such 'self-organising' perspectives foreground local agency in self-management, the commons and 'DIY urbanism' (Talen, 2014). Indeed, a 'progressive municipalism', inspired by the 'Fearless Cities' movement, promotes alternative ownership and service delivery models which offer new democratic potentials (Russell, 2019) and dismisses local government as at worst repressive, or, simply by virtue of it being a state institution, incapable of offering any alternative. Mirroring the 'austerian realist' and 'path dependent' narratives above, councils here are either assumed to have no agency, or, to use what little they do possess towards non-progressive ends.

Inserting local government back into this picture, we argue, requires more nuanced attention to the institutional responses of local government to austerity, and to the agency of local government actors. Firstly, it involves

taking up and moving on the work of Wills (2020), who notes the 'institutional switching' of powers from the county council to parish councils in Cornwall, which has served to mediate the trajectory and effects of austerity by building on historical institutional legacies to produce a 'new geography of local government' (12). She therefore re-focuses our attention on 'actually existing' local government and a pragmatic response to austerity, via the use of the 'legacy' institutional framework available to local actors, which is seen to offer opportunities rather than be lamented for its critical shortcomings. Secondly, we need to build on insights offered by the work of Lowndes and McHauhgie (2013), which stress the agency of local actors, and follow up the potentials for pragmatic resilience which are offered by such approaches. They identify 'institutional bricoleurs' working amidst distinctive, path dependent contextual constraints found in local government and focus on the agency available to local actors via everyday practices and institutional bricolage, noting an 'ideational continuity rather than bold new visions' in response to austerity (533), with the agency here evidenced through daily creativity which is 'not transformation, but not inertia either' (546). This perspective foregrounds agency, leading to a call for a materialist focus on 'the politics of the present' (545), and actions which they tentatively suggest may cumulatively offer a pragmatic route to a 'Plan B'.

Such studies have illuminated, and added greater sensitivity to, the potentials in the existing structural arrangements of local government, and to the agency of local government actors. To build on such insights requires an engagement with local authorities in ways that privilege understandings of the 'geo-

historical context of the actors, institutions and cultures' across authorities and recognise the dialogues 'already underway' (Wills and Lake, 2020, 28). It also leads us to address how the everyday practices of individuals may 'scale up' to broader institutional responses; how, or why, they would inevitably 'add up' to progressive alternatives; and what alternative motives might bring these practices into being (Fuller, 2018). Both of these challenges can, we argue, be met by further engaging with a pragmatic stance, which we label here 'municipal pragmatism'.

A turn to municipal pragmatism

How do we challenge the logic of the council-to-come and advance the re-engagement with 'actually existing' local government, its actors, and institutions? We first caution against the value of simply re-asserting either the continuing appeal of the local, or the strategic capabilities of local government to bring about progressive changes across communities. We do not necessarily refute such claims, but any reiteration of the 'value' of the local risks falling once again into the logic of the council-to-come (simply shouting louder established appeals as to what local government might become). At the same time, such appeals risk being misconstrued as a call for a return to the institutionalism that has become increasingly associated with the traditional study of local government. As Lowndes and Roberts (2013, 24-25) argue, the bias within institutionalism towards stability and regularity of rules and procedures, as well as its foregrounding of the formal, are ill-suited to the

analysis of networks and the hybridity of the spaces of contemporary governance. In fact, institutionalist accounts tend to remain atheoretical and overly normative, often reduced to little more than 'intelligent observation' (to paraphrase Peters, 1999, cited in Lowndes and Roberts, 24). Such critiques were indeed launched against the field of local government studies in the 1970s, and in our view, the purchase of these attacks remains salient.

Seeking to avoid such risks and navigate a new path of engagement with local government, we call for a turn to what we name 'municipal pragmatism' and a practical orientation within studies of local government. Of course, pragmatism brings together a family of approaches, but these approaches are, as Wood and Smith (2008, 1527) underline, grounded in the critical questioning of taken-for-granted 'meta-narratives, objective fixed truths and unifying theories.' Indeed, pragmatic approaches embrace an ethos of critical openness towards all forms of knowledge, contesting the drawing of over-narrow dualisms, while recognising the relational dynamics of meaning and action, and foregrounding the contingent and dynamic nature of action (Ansell, 2011; Wills and Lake, 2020; Wood and Smith, 2008). But, importantly for our engagement with the study of local government, pragmatism is best seen as 'an ethos which acknowledges that the search for Platonic ideals, which can engender universal agreement, is not only impossible, but that its very impossibility requires citizens to accept and consider a plurality of possible solutions, and to work towards constructing the best possible way forward in the circumstances' (Griggs, Hall, Howarth and Seigneuret, 2017, 44).

We call for a specific ethos of engagement with the policies and practices of local government. First, we call for a rebalancing of the operationalisation of the logic of local government-to-come, one which grounds inquiry firmly in the soil of 'real world' problems confronting local government. We neither abandon the demand for a critical investigation of current practices nor downplay the necessary projection of alternative futures or visions for local government. Rather, we call for problem-driven research which guards against normative or theoretical driven inquiries that reduce local government to an empirical testing ground for different assumptions, hypotheses, or principles (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). As Ansell (2011, 187) argues, 'public debates, political conflicts, and institutions [and we would add the predominant culture of academia] tend to structure political life in a way that removes us from a shared focus on problems and problem solving'. A pragmatist turn, it follows, adopts a retroductive approach to interventions in local contexts (see Glynos and Howarth, 2007, 18-48). It thus draws on experience and practical wisdom or phronesis to move back and forth between the identification of 'puzzles' or anomalies in practice; the proposal of solutions; and the experimentation and testing of solutions in the 'real world' problems. Put alternatively, it moves 'between general values and ideas and concrete problem-solving' (Ansell, 2011, 187).

But, what of the municipal? In calling for a turn towards municipal pragmatism, we foreground the demand for approaches that develop richer or thicker understandings of the agency of local government and its potentialities.

It follows that a practical orientation advances a critical inquiry with the everyday 'work' of local officers, politicians, citizens, and activists (Wagenaar, 2004). Local agency, we suggest, comes into being through practices, practices which are in turn constituted and re-constituted through agency. In fact, practices should not be interpreted as little more than a straightjacket imposed on local actors, for each reiteration of a practice opens up a novel space of agency, with each practice capable of being recognised but equally being different, performed as it is as 'if for the first time' (Freeman *et al.*, 2011).

This practical orientation challenges top-down macro-explanations of policy that privilege grand narratives of change and lock local officers and politicians into path dependencies or economic and social determinism. It draws attention to the bottom-up politics of local actors, allowing for diversity of responses and spaces of resistance across and within different localities (Geddes and Sullivan, 2011). Equally, as we suggest above, it draws our attention towards the subjective experiences, values and learning of actors on the ground when they 'do' the work of local government (Wagenaar, 2004). But, privileging such practical wisdom, the capturing of past successes and failures of local actors, has to be accompanied by the moment of critique and challenge to existing values and beliefs and how these link to actions. As Glynos and Howarth (2007) suggest, the move towards pragmatism cannot be reduced to the capturing and reproduction of the self-interpretations of actors.

Finally, this challenge of critique cannot be divorced from the generation of critical alternatives (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Indeed, the turn to municipal pragmatism welcomes, as we see it, the generation of alternative visions that are grounded in everyday work or 'the realities' of local government. On the one hand, it recognises the importance of local contextually dependent solutions, solutions that 'work here' (to paraphrase Coaffee and Headlam's (2008, 1587) reading of Shields). 'Working here' is in many ways an empirical, dare we say, pragmatic, judgement, resting on how any solution enables communities to 'cope with the messiness of everyday life' (Wood and Smith, 2008, 1527).

On the other hand, this call for municipal pragmatism advocates the articulation of alternative visions that start from what Barnett (in this volume) calls the 'local government we have'. Of course, starting with what we have is in itself a pragmatic decision. Yet, it also an acceptance of the need for a counterbalance to the fluidity of action in a world that is in the making and that is increasingly seen as precarious and uncertain (Wood and Smith, 2008). Ansell argues that such fluidity requires elements of 'scaffolding' in order that 'the world which is dynamic and emergent is nonetheless not in pure flux (2011, 191). In our view, local government can contribute to such processes of scaffolding, providing elements of fixity for what Ansell calls experiential learning processes, as well as a 'focal point' for forms of collaboration that deliver what Ansell (2011) calls 'problem-solving democracy' built on consent with publics engaged in finding solutions for specific problems. Indeed, local government can arguably generate the spaces for the pragmatic

adversarialism advocated by Griggs, Hall, Howarth and Seigneuret (2017). Such pragmatic adversarialism recognises the productive and necessary conflict around real world problems suggesting that 'deep disagreement about outcomes is both inevitable and in many instances desirable in terms of the elaboration, consideration and testing of the greatest range of possible 'experiments of living' (Mill, 2003, 144) and because 'it is essential for any durable settlements to be accepted and instituted by citizens' (Griggs, Hall, Howarth and Seigneuret, 2017, 44).

Against this background, this symposium seeks to act as a catalyst for a critical engagement with 'actually existing' local government and potential forms of municipal pragmatism. Allan Cochrane explores how under austerity the established territories and boundaries of local government are being reworked and questioned. His study of the practices of spatialized politics challenges institutional fixity, underlining the active and malleable reproduction of spaces of governance or what we might call 'actually existing' local government. Cochrane demonstrates how recourse to the practice of governing through projects comes to facilitate the everyday moulding of spaces of governance. Drawing attention to how the shifting political and economic priorities of the state and geography actively shape the reproduction of such practices of moulding spaces of governance, Cochrane thus identifies a logic of territorial promiscuity rather than any commitment to fixed territories of government.

Madeleine Pill and Valeria Guarneros-Meza turn to practice to explore local agency under austerity. Investigating top-down and bottom-up understandings of informality, they contest the drawing of narrow binary oppositions which view the local state as a source of formality, while locating informal practices in civil society. Accordingly, their analysis brings informal, Do-It-Yourself, temporary urbanisms into the realm of the local state, privileging the role of both the council and third sector organisations in articulating new ways of coping, doing and working together and apart. As such, Pill and Guarneros-Meza emphasise the mutual constitution of everyday state-civil society relations, whilst identifying moments of potential resistance and opportunities to forge alternative pathways that further problematise and challenge totalising claims about neoliberalism and local agency.

Richard Freeman offers a different way of looking at the practices of Councillors, taking us beyond typical categorisations of their roles to focus attention on their 'political work', focussing on the place of meetings in the day and the 'work' that meetings do. Drawing on Arendt, he identifies various forms of meeting as 'the practice of 'plurality' institutionalised in different ways', addressing a lack of attention to the meeting, ubiquitous in the work of councillors, in institutionalist political science. In their everyday practices, Councillors articulate and translate between different kinds of meeting, which constitute an 'in between' space by which different 'worlds' of local politics are connected.

Racheal Dobson draws our attention to the messiness and complexity of everyday practices and offers a re-thinking of the spaces of resistance open to, created by and worked in by local government workers in the field of homelessness. She challenges existing accounts of actors being either in 'positions of vulnerable subordination or destructive domination', using relational, psychosocial and ontological accounts to give a more expansive focus on the 'potential for action and social change in an everyday, lived and felt sense'. She uses the concept of 'Sector Speaks' to capture 'a more rounded and sentient sense of both human agency and institutional structures' at the governance/action interface, which is 'lived' through everyday relational, performative, material, socio-cultural, symbolic and affective practices'.

Finally, Neil Barnett argues that the dominant narratives of English local government have left the field of study in a 'local trap' fixed on inherent qualities of the local and premised on a 'local to come', which, by its very nature, is ever elusive. He argues that not only has this meant that valuable insights from local government studies have been sidelined in more critical debates which have shaken traditional defences of local government, but has also led a lack of focus on the practices and potentialities of *actually existing* local government. He posits potential ways out of the trap by 'starting from where we are' rather than from normative or ideological narratives, and by taking a grounded approach which sees local government as an 'institutionalised, material site which matters as a site of resonance, performativity, engagement and agency'.

Of course, this call to advance the perspective of municipal pragmatism is not without caveats. In keeping with the underlying assumptions and perspectives of any turn to pragmatism, we do not advance a prescriptive framework for change, but an ethos of engagement with the institutions and actors of local government. At the same time, we do not seek to reify the local, for we acknowledge that under certain circumstances and across different spatio-temporal contexts, actually existing' local government can take on different forms and roles, with more or less positive impacts for local democratic communities. We also recognise that it is important to avoid narrow binaries, defining for example the local simply in opposition to the centre or juxtaposing the state and civil society. At the very least, we acknowledge the tension of managing the particularity of the local and moves towards more universal demands, a tension that is investigated by Barnett (in this volume) in exploring how we escape the local trap. As befits a call for municipal pragmatism, we thus conclude by underlining the need for an engagement with 'actually existing' local government, while opening up a critical discussion of the limits of such a call. We hope thereby to trigger a broad dialogue on the study of local government in the UK and across other economic, political and social systems.

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