

Local Government and the ‘Local State’

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Abstract

The title of Cynthia Cockburn’s 1977 book ‘The Local State’ was indicative of a range of literature from the late 1960’s and 1970’s from a broadly Marxist perspective which sought to place local government within the context of state welfare, capitalist accumulation, and social regulation. The following two decades saw these insights become less popular, giving way to less deterministic understandings which emphasised locality, space, place, and the fragmented nature of ‘the state’. Regulation Theory and ‘post fordism’ became the subject of debate with respect to local government in the 1980’s, and generally the impact of Neo-liberalism on local governance has been recognised. However, there has recently been little attention to macro- level considerations of local government’s role in state restructuring, particularly as a result of the ‘New Labour’ project.

This paper will review the literature and broadly map the development of state theory with respect to local government from approximately 1970 onwards. This is inevitably a somewhat sketchy look, in places, at some broad theoretical developments and does not do full justice to the importance of some. However, the main purpose is provide to an overview of a journey which has taken us from local, to state centred, then towards more nuanced approaches in order to open up questions about where we stand now and what kind of insights appear to have currency.

This paper is very much work in progress and any conclusions are, inevitably, very sketchy.

From ‘local state’ to ‘urban entrepreneurialism’

In the UK, Post war thinking surrounding local government tended to be concerned with central- local relations, and local government’s formal role within a legal framework provided by Whitehall. Otherwise, it was concerned with considerations of local government’s role in the democratic polity, ‘local democracy’, and its role in what had seemingly become a ‘nationalised’ politics. This debate concerned itself with whether ‘local’ democracy added to or detracted from the national interest and the ‘general good’, and with what scale of local government was best suited to meet the seemingly conflicting demands of community representation and efficiency. On the one hand stood concerns that democratic health and traditions of local/ municipal self-government were being eroded, and on the other concerns about the effective and

efficient delivery of a burgeoning welfare state, ensuring minimum standards and oversight from a strong centre. The debate was underpinned by the fact, as WJM MacKenzie noted, that in the UK we 'made do' with no general theory of local government, and a rather vague and imprecise relationship between central and local government which seemed suit to both sides. Academic interest focussed around the relationships between officers and Councillors at local level, and more predominantly the debate around the organisation and scale of local authority areas.

The deliberations and reports of the Redcliffe Maude Commission, 1966-68, and the subsequent, if protracted, local government re-organisation gave a focus for debate about the inter-play between democracy (generally perceived to require smaller units) and efficiency (generally perceived to require larger units). L.J Sharpe, in one of the seminal articles on local government in the UK (1970), drew together a normative role for local government which took into account both its now established role as deliverer of state welfare, and role as elected democratic government, arriving at the conclusion that if local government were not there, it would have to be invented; local democracy was required for collective choice concerning the allocation of scarce resources, and was needed to ensure that services met the specific requirements of differing areas.

In many ways, Sharpe's article attempted to grapple with inroads into traditional defences of local democracy which had been made by the 'nationalisation' thesis. The post war welfare state had been constructed with an overarching concern for universal benefits and minimum standards, and Local Councils were now dominated by national political parties; their role appeared to be more that of administrator of large government programmes; moreover, in the implementation of those programmes it very often appeared to take little account of 'local' opinion (perhaps most notably in issues of slum clearance, housing, and planning). The re-organisation of the mid-1970's saw the creation of larger units which often appeared to have little basis in community sentiment and to be more concerned with securing efficiency and effectiveness. Developments in corporate planning and the adoption of 'modern' management techniques added to the impression that local government was essentially a matter of professional or technical administration, subsumed into national welfare delivery programmes and expected to employ a range of generic management techniques (Deerlove 1973). In this view, Local government took its place as an important deliverer and representative of the post-war, Keynesian welfare consensus.

From this perspective it was inevitable that the 'local' character of local government would be called into question particularly from Marxist perspectives which were more interested in its role in state welfare and in particular securing capitalist accumulation. The 'local welfare state' became an object of attention. Whether or not local councils had lost freedom and some democratic legitimacy, they had also seen a huge increase in budgets (the majority in education and housing) and had taken on new responsibilities in areas of social care. Given this, it appeared that the local government debate had taken place in a structural vacuum, detached from analysis of its role in capitalist development. Broadly Marxist analyses located local government in the wider context of capitalist society as a whole, and in particular the state's attempts at managing a social and economic system in crisis in the early 1970s

(Goodwin, 1989). On the left, attention turned away from 'local' issues to 'urban' issues and collective consumption (Dunleavy 1980: Cawson and Saunders, 1983). Dunleavy (1980) characterised 'urban politics' as the politics of collective consumption, the site in which the inevitable conflicts surrounding issues such as housing were mediated. Marxist interpretations placed local government formally as 'the local state', although the two were by no means co-terminus. Two classic studies best represent this view. Peter Saunders, in 1982 set out his notion of the 'dual polity', where local government is responsible for social consumption policies. Cynthia Cockburn in 'The Local State' (1977) portrayed a scenario of the 'state writ small', the local expression of the welfare state, where local government's role was that of securing collective reproduction- effectively, the management of people.

Just as local government had secured a place at the centre of the welfare state, the more deterministic accounts held that it subsequently had to play its part in managing the crisis of the welfare state which occurred in the mid-1970's and the full consequences of a the 'rolling back of the state' during the Thatcher governments. Focus turned to the role of local government as a site in which new settlements between capital and labour were being played out. Local Government was here seen to be placed in the context of broad ranging economic and social shifts, embodied in the epochal move of capitalism to 'post fordist' styles of production and the associated (assumed) in changes on state and local state format, as Keynesian welfare was transformed into the 'Schumpeterian Workfare State' which stressed flexibility in the workforce, the promotion of international competitiveness, a recasting of social policy in the light of economic competitiveness, the 'hollowing out' of the nation state, and new forms of partnerships and networks (Jessop 2002). For a while, Regulation theory seemed to offer insights into changes in modes of governance which were required by flexible accumulation, giving rise to changes in of modes of regulation which required new forms of multi-level governance. Regulation Theory focussed attention on the allocation of governance functions to different spatial levels, and, within the context of a perceived move to a 'post-fordist' mode of regulation, some saw not threat but opportunity for local government here.

'Local' leeway appeared back on the agenda in new forms and supported by a range of new insights which perceived the relationship between local government and the 'central' state to be more problematic and less instrumental. An increasingly global economy placed emphasis upon geographical specialisation and the particularities of place as sites of inward investment (locality effects), and the central role of decentralised production facilitated by developments in information technology. 'Fordist' styles of welfare delivery needed now to be overtaken by more flexible, tailored approaches, utilising decentralised managerial styles and out-sourcing. It was argued that the focus on the distinctiveness of place for example, giving rise as it did to a new competitiveness between places, gave new scope for a more proactive local politics (Harding, 1990). (Lipietz, 1994, Meyer, 1995) and moved attention away from local government to 'urban governance' and a 'new urban politics' centred around urban entrepreneurialism.

In turn, 'Urban Entrepreneurialism', and the associated local responses to it, was interpreted by many to be a manifestation of a neo-liberal project which was driving the 'neo liberalism of urban space' or a 'neo liberal localisation' involving local modes of social regulation. Indicative of this was the fact that local well-being was

being re-defined in terms of economic success. Earlier Marxist interpretations had seen almost no role for local government in issues of production, being solely concerned with social consumption. A move to a focus on competitiveness was seen to subordinate social welfare/consumption to economic necessity; New Labour in particular sought to marry 'social cohesion' and 'social capital' to economic performance. This neo-liberal agenda was also seen to require 'responsible' political leadership which did not raise resistance in the way that urban local authorities had done in the 1980's (Harding, 2005).

The Regulation approach was critiqued for not being a subtle enough representation of either how 'fordist' local government had worked, or indeed of whether local government had been 'fordist' and was in any way really becoming 'post-fordist'. However qualified, it was still seen by many to be too deterministic in the relationship between local government and wider social change, and the extent to which it downplayed political choice (Hay, 1995). Clarke and Newman (1997) amongst others began to see the styles associated with post-fordism not as a reduction but as a 'decentring' of state power, involving unsettling and destabilising processes which themselves would be the subject of contestation. As Barnes and Prior noted, '...the result may be a greater capacity to act independently within a much more highly circumscribed range of possibilities' (2000, p.111).

It is not the intention here to undertake a critique of post-fordism in its various guises. It did however, serve as a bridge between relatively structural- deterministic, state-centred theorising about local government, indicative of a 'new economic sociology' and approaches which stressed locality and degrees of freedom within a broad contextual change in capitalist state formats.

The local state in this view had to be seen as both object and agent of regulation (Goodwin, Duncan and Halford, 1993). Painter and Goodwin (1995) underlined a similar argument with respect to Regulation Theory, envisaging Regulation as a process rather than a mode and seeing economic regulation as "the product of material and discursive practices that generate and are in turn conditioned by social and political institutions" (p.342)- patterns of regulation are geographically and spatially constituted, temporarily and spatially embedded, and local institutions are sites both of resistance and disruption. This process is incomplete, partial and involves neo-liberal rules interacting with a 'range of other social practices, values and mentalities which provide a basis for contestation and potential resistance' (MacKinnon, 2000). Such an approach is consistent with a Critical Realist stance and a focus on 'contingent necessity'... the 'concrete circumstances in which people and organizations act' (Painter and Goodwin, 1995, p.351).

Later theorising relating to local government's place in state restructuring drew upon these insights and developments in political geography which focus on the geographies of neo-liberalism and the politics of scale. This introduced a much more complex notion of state re-structuring and re-scaling (MacKinnon, p. 2000)... 'contemporary neo-liberal tendencies...have been unfolding at a range of

geographical scales and in a variety of institutional sites'. Scale is a factor in structuring control over and in setting limits to the political debate around services. There is an 'intense and ongoing socio-political struggle in which the reconfiguration of spatial scales of governance takes a central position (Swyngedouw, 2000, p. 63). As different political processes operate at different spatial scales, the ability to shape and influence these processes is also dependent on the capacity to act at different geographic levels' (Whitehead, 2003, p.285). Swyngedouw, 2004, argues that the basis for current contestations over scale are to be found in 'a scalar transformation of the networks of economic organisation' (p.32) as the ordering of the economy has become both more localised and globalised. This requires a set of institutional arrangements which can provide some social coherence... 'the historical geography of capitalism and its restless wrestling with the more enduring characteristics of social and political space' (p.32). Concern for regional, sub-regional scales, place shaping and also the re-focussing of attention on neighbourhood, need then to be seen in this context, and local government's scale and functions are again seen to be contestable and evolving, contingent upon the interplay of the logics of neo-liberalism and local politics.

The critique of regulation theory and the insights from political geography, and the debate surrounding uneven patterns of regulation, are indicative of broader trends which have served to dominate considerations of local government's relationship with the state. In 1990, King and Pierre argued, with respect to Local Government, that "we need a theory bridging the gap between liberal theories of local government as a democratic autonomous political institution on the one hand and (neo-) marxist conceptions of local government as a ruling class instrument at the local level at the other" (King and Pierre, 1990, p.50). This theorising had in fact started already within the fields of political economy and political or social geography, and was being driven by very broad developments which had served to undermine a purely structural, functionalist view. Indeed, the roots of rethinking local government's place within evolving state theory are based on theoretical developments (a range of 'middle range propositions') in sociology and political geography, and secondly attempts at a more sophisticated analysis of capitalist state functioning, based on 'post- Marxist' thinking for 'new times'. Some of these are briefly set out below.

'Middle Range Propositions'

Firstly, we know that Neo-Marxist theories of the state had been criticised for the drive to find more-or-less determining structural logics to crises (Orr, 2009, p. 39). Also, as Cochrane (1993, p. 20) noted, however, 'local government always fitted into the wider state system in more complex ways than suggested by legal formality or the more orthodox analysis of public administration'. Rod Rhodes (1985) provided a more sophisticated picture of central- local relations based upon power dependence, in which the picture of the 'local welfare state' is replaced with one in which actors from central and local government interact, negotiate and bargain in policy networks. Here 'sub-national' government contains in particular groups of professionals who have often complex and complicated webs of relations with the centre. Here the dominance of the centre is not assumed. Generally speaking, the subsequent growing interest in policy networks was representative of a move away from both a focus on formal structures and on 'meta- theories' and towards a more nuanced view of the interplay of agency, structure, political economy, specific histories and cultures, and localities. Several disciplines have 'come to privilege not just the macro-structures of state,

economy and society, but the intricate inter-weaving of macro-structures and micro-structures in complex agent/structure relationships...' (Cerny, 1990,p.196). The attempt to find a way out of the structure/agency dichotomy, serves to reflect broader attempts to find reconciliation between 'competing' or opposing epistemologies and ontologies, and an emphasis upon a post-empiricist, historically grounded conception of theory- 'a sociology of the in-between' (Pieterse, 1995, p.64). Key here was the work of Giddens on Structuration Theory, and postmodern and communicative deconstruction of grand narratives and developments.

Also, 'Post' (new?) Marxist thought moved its analysis from class to the construction of identities (Mouffe, 1992), drawing upon discourse theory, postmodernism and post-structural views of power, to see the state as less unitary and open to contestation (Jessop, 1990, Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). 'The state' was open to deconstruction and revealed itself as a more or less fragmented assembly of agencies and actors. Jessop's 'relational', neo- Gramscian view of the state portrayed it as having no form predetermined by capitalism and no substantive unity. Here, 'the state may be understood as problematic, messy and internally antagonistic' (Orr 2009, p. 44). This left spaces left for contestation (Thomas, Stirling and Razzaque, 1996). Fragmentation of local governance left spaces for the development of alternative public spheres and 'backchannels'.

Of particular importance for the local government debate was a notion of 'uneven development' (Massey, 1984) and the specific local and political characteristics forged in places by the differing geographies of capital accumulation, locality-specific patterns of production, politics and social formation which produced 'locality' effects (Massey, 1995; Goodwin et al 1993). Bagguley (1994), for example, used the metaphor of 'overlapping tiles' to portray a picture of successive welfare reforms, such that we can allow for locality effects and 'uneven development'. Here the 'local state' is seen to be 'simultaneously agent and obstacle for the national state' (Goodwin, 1989, p.153), in which conflict with the centre is inevitable. For Duncan and Goodwin, it was the post-war period of the apparent nationalisation of local government which represented an unusual period in local government history, which, when examined, revealed a degree of autonomy and particular, differing, political cultures and strategies. The ESRC 'Localities' programme of the mid 1980's was influential in producing fine-grained evidence of distinctive social and political arrangements and the relative autonomy of places (Cooke, 1989, Harloe et al. 1990), a more subtle understanding of locality which recognised a 'spatial realism' (Bagguley et. al. 1990). The focus of attention here was not so much local government, as 'locality', and 'place'. Place was portrayed as a mediator of local and non-local forces (Agnew and Duncan, 1989) with the emphasis upon the characteristics of place which 'tie down' movements of global capital (Davoudi, 1995). The spatial differentiation of political and social relations Cochrane, (1993, p.25) was seen to explain variations in local policies (Gyford, 1991 p. 13). Places were not passive but played a part in their own transformation through 'local sociologies of translation' (Jones, 1998) - 'Localities are the products of interaction between people, groups and particular places over time'. A 'new' justification for local government was to represent these contingent local variations (Gyford, 1991 p.24)

Attention was also focussed on networks and embedded economic systems, the value on the value of 'Institutional thickness' (Amin and Thrift, 1995 (a)). The 'New Institutionalism' has drawn from these approaches but also more specifically on organisation theory, and has been applied to local government to provide a less state-centred and more nuanced basis and an additional bridge between structure and agency. Although not specifically related to state theory, the 'new institutionalism' sought to explain how local 'sense making', histories and cultural interpretations interacted with central government reform agendas to produce unique patterns. A broad spectrum of literature is involved here, perhaps drawing most influentially on the work of Giddens (1984) and Structuration theory, embracing the 'new institutionalist' perspectives within Organisation theory, offered by Di Maggio and Powell (1991), Meyer and Rowan (1991), and building on the earlier work of Silverman, and Bernstein, for example. New (or neo-) institutionalism is not of course a single or coherent body of theory (Lowndes, and Wilson, 2001). The new institutionalism 'consists of a diverse cluster of attempts to preserve mid-level analysis by emphasising our social embeddedness and thereby the role of institutional structures and cultural norms' (Bevir, 2003: 458). It is thus broad (Lowndes, 1996) and draws on a range of theory from organisational studies and sociology, including the work of Berger and Luckman, social constructivist, interpretative and phenomenological approaches, and hermeneutics (Tolbert and Zucker 1996, Reed, 1996), blurring the distinction between organisations and their environments and focusing on the ways in which structure and organisational templates are mediated by locality effects (Lowndes, 1997, p.65).

Other theoretical developments helped to provide a link between uneven and contingent development and a renewed defence of local government based on democratic principles. Intersubjective and communicative theory developed understandings of locality as essential as an arena, a site of interaction. Emphasis is placed upon 'local knowledge'; it is held that in the micro politics of everyday life we get the possibility for transformation and mutual understanding. It is in localities where we 'meet with strangers' and where relational encounters between networks of interests intersect. Rather than having 'fixed' meanings, localities are seen to be 'meeting places' or 'nodes' of interaction (Massey, 1992) in which discourse leading to enhanced collective understanding takes place. Thus 'whilst there is no necessary connection between the relational webs which exist in a place there is a need to develop discursive capacities for our 'meetings with strangers' and provide a framework for the relational encounters between them.' (Healey, 1997 p.48). Governance becomes concerned with the facilitation of these interrelationships- there is a need to discursively build the institutional capacity of places. Local arenas become the key to the question posed by Robbins- 'can we sustain mediating institutions that can nurture direct relationships in a world increasingly characterised by indirect ones?' (Robbins, 1991, p.10). Stoker (1996 p. 22) identified that it was 'locality' which was important as a political space and democratic arena, rather than local government per se, but local councils (themselves open to contestation) would be a site where common understandings along deliberative lines could be forged, and where conflicts could find expression.

The present position?

It may seem then, that King and Pierre's request in 1990 for a bridging theory has been well and truly met. There was certainly a burgeoning of such theories generally and they were applied, if not always specifically to local government, then to locality, which in turn had implications for the institutional arrangements for governing at local and regional levels. This was particularly applied to the Thatcherite reform agenda and to economic and a social restructuring brought about by a neoliberalism. Also, attention was moved to the concept of local or urban governance as opposed to government. This has sought to place local government in the context of broad social and economic trends which privilege or call for network organisation. However, in turn, 'a substantial body of work broadly within the governance and institutional approach has avoided relating this to broader social, economic and political processes that affect the local state' (Fuller and Geddes 2006, p). In a reflection of the earlier critique which had come from the left in the early 1970's, a large amount of the literature on governance and local government, in turn, has been critiqued as being too a-political and taking insufficient account of the role of state restructuring and re-scaling. Notable exceptions come from other academic sources, as noted above.

Some of the most recent theorising has been able to draw on several approaches developed and noted above. 'Metagovernance' and 'second generation' theorizing on governance which draws on deliberative and inter-subjective approaches (Sorensen, 2005). Here local politicians have a 'metagovernance' role in constructing and influencing local networks (Sorensen and Torfing, 2009). However, 'Metagovernance' has been defined in various ways, not always relating to changing state forms, but also in a more 'a-political' sense which derives from systems theory (Kooiman and Jentoft, 2009). From a state-centred perspective, it 'involves the organisation of the conditions for governance in its broadest sense' (Jessop, 2003, p. 107). For Jessop and others, it represents the ways in which the state has 'modified and reconfigured its presentation and operation to adapt to changes in the politico-social environment' (Kelly, 2006, p.607), and is essentially concerned with changing 'technologies' of state power. On this basis, it has been argued that a second period of neo-liberalism has occurred, which, after the initial 'rolling back' of the state, has taken the form of a 'rolling out', in which the character of neoliberalism is changed to focus 'on the purposeful construction and consolidation of neoliberal state forms, modes of governance and regulatory relations' (Peck and Tickell 2003:37). This represents a less visible, more surreptitious mode of 'pervasive meta-regulation' which has been obfuscated by the 'centre-left' and the Third Way. Neo-liberal principles, it is argued, have been woven into the fabric of a broad range of policy programmes at the same time as they have subordinated non-market political and cultural forces to the broader requirements of capital accumulation (Fuller and Geddes, 2006). Consistent with such views it became more popular to apply Foucauldian analysis to New Labour's welfare reform programmes, and, if not often to local government as a whole, then to specific programmes in which it was engaged to local government, prompted by a move to an 'active welfare' state, in line with Third Way ideas which stress responsibilities and duty along with rights as key welfare principles.

Recent developments have thus sought to place local government in the context of a New Labour reform programme and the 'Third Way', involving questions about the continuing neo-liberal state reform and the 'active welfare' agenda, seen to require new technologies of government and a the more explicit move towards 'earned autonomy'. Here it is argued that there has been a move towards mobilising local authorities' active engagement with state welfare reforms via a stressing of its self inclusion, self-engineering or self-management. Self- inclusion offers a means by which the advantages of complexity and diversity can be achieved and yet also directed in a 'hands off' fashion, which is consistent with Third Way views of the role of the state. Using the Foucauldian concept of *governmentality*, it can be argued that this governance style can be identified as 'advanced liberal' (Rose, 1993), involving self-discipline, self-responsibilisation and self-inclusion. In turn, focus on governmentality as 'the conduct of conduct' has led to attention being placed on micro-processes of **how** political programmes are undertaken – the techniques employed, the mechanisms, techniques, procedures and technologies of governmentality, as the state is relocated within wider circuits of power. This to some extent explains the 'linguistic turn' and more recent focus on linguistics and narrative approaches. Recent work on narrative 'traditions' has built upon a developing interpretative approach in public administration generally (Bevir and Rhodes; Orr, 2009).

As it stands, then, study of local government is being informed by a wide and diverse range of (sometimes loosely) state –centred perspectives. Very often these are employed and applied not to local government per se, in the sense of seeking a normative or theoretical place for local government, but because local government is often the site via which some interesting programme of reform (for example, involving 'empowerment' or public participation) is being deployed, or the scale at which 'global' and 'local' forces interact. In considering whether recent welfare reform has been neo-liberal in character, Raco (2005) concludes that it is actually characterised by a range of rationalities, drawn from a range of intellectual, political and ethical traditions, to re-iterate the point that there is danger in adopting 'top down' discourses and ideologies as explanations. Perhaps all we can conclude is that we seem to have arrived full circle at the view that local government's role is to manage the interface between conflicting demands, at present best expressed as the need to accommodate both international competitiveness and local well being (Guereros-Meza and Geddes 2010).

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