

Paper for the Panel *Austerity, the Local State and Public Services*

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Local Government and the local state; from crisis to crisis

Introduction

'We have no choice but to make more very painful cuts. These cuts will affect every single service the council provides....we do not want to make these cuts, but we have to. This is, without doubt, the most difficult time I have ever seen since becoming a Councillor' – Councillor Kate Hollern, Leader of Blackburn with Darwen Council, The Guardian, 5th March, 2013

'Almost without exception, any political opposition within Town Halls is ineffective, compromised or actively supportive of austerity. The only opposition has been on the streets....our elected city bosses... offer nothing but placid acquiescence. They are... doing the Tories' dirty work for them' Ally Fogg, The Guardian, 11th March, 2013

'This is the point at which Labour Councils should be saying no....We won't make your cuts... they can either lead a struggle against a vicious government or stand aside for those who will' Ted Knight, The Guardian, 30th December, 2012

'They NEVER Surrendered' – Heading of the election leaflet of Labour Party candidates for local elections, Clay Cross, 1973

It is perhaps no surprise that for those on the left, the combination of austerity, Councils making cuts, and the potential for resistance evokes images of past battles, and to some extent, myth. Whilst there have been dire warnings of civil unrest from the leaders of Newcastle, Liverpool and Sheffield Councils, and rumblings concerning the 'death' of local government, the unanimous response of Councils of all political complexions has been to comply and implement the cuts required by the Coalition Government's 'austerity' programme. From the perspective of Labour authorities, this is a replay of the 'dented shield' approach invoked by Neil Kinnock as Labour Party leader during the 1980's, when 'resistance' by Councils took place within a different political climate. The question might be asked; why do Councils appear to be so reluctant to organise resistance to austerity and cuts now? The answer may be simple; Councils are less powerful than they were in the early 1980's; they have less room for manoeuvre in just about every aspect of finance and service delivery. We might go on to recognise that they now are but one player in a system of local governance. Alternatively, we might find the reason in the transformation of the Labour Party, the 'defeat' of the left and the subsequent return to the more normal pragmatism/reformism following a brief interlude and dalliance with 'Local Socialism'. 'New

Labour' may have used some 'localist' language, and as such invoked the spirit of GDH Cole, but in practice this was a managerialist, de-politicised project of 'modernisation'. In short, in this view, those likely to lead dissent have long departed.

Both perspectives are worthy of consideration in their own right and will be touched upon in this paper. However, the main focus of the paper is to examine the issue of local government resistance to central government economic and social reforms by using as a starting point and touchstone the case of the rent rebellion in the former Clay Cross Urban District Council, between 1967- 1974 (it is difficult to pin-point the exact point at which the stance of the Councillors became a 'rebellion', and the point at which the associated events came to an 'end'). In order to examine what happened and what may have happened since, theories of 'the local state' will be used to consider how these events may shed light on practice. At the time of the rebellion, broadly Marxist analyses of local government had moved to the centre of academic discourse, in a field of study which had previously been dominated by central-local relations, historical development, and the efficient and effective allocation of services. LJ Sharpe's classic 1970 article setting out normative defences for local government within a state welfare system dealt with classical dilemmas, including how to reconcile democratic legitimacy with efficiency and how to adjust local government to the realities of 'modern' living. However, it did not set local government with a broader context nor consider its role and relationship with capitalism. Classically, Cynthia Cockburn's *The Local State* (1977) represented the extent to which Marxist urban sociology had moved, by the mid 1970's, into the field of local government studies.

Using this time period as a starting point is useful for us in looking into the question 'Can local government offer resistance to state-led austerity?', for what is clear that since that time the meaning of each of the key words in the question has become highly contested- 'local', 'state' 'government' (now 'governance?') and 'resistance' are all terms whose meanings have become contested as Marxist analyses have given way to broadly post-structural approaches. In one light, Clay Cross represents a class-based struggle which may or may not tell us something about the autonomy/ radical potential of the 'local state'. In another, it is a highly contextualised conflagration of cultural, social and political factors. The questions are, not only can Local Government provide a focus for resistance, but whether it should- why would we expect it to and why would we turn to it?

The Clay Cross Story (Briefly!)

The small town setting and dominant working-class characteristics of Clay Cross rebellion and the town meant that it was associated by many with the law-breaking stance of the Poplar councillors in the 1920's, jailed for refusing to cut Poor Law payments within the London Borough. However, the time within which each was set has meant that each has been treated differently by historians of the left. Clay Cross was initially a source of inspiration to the left of the Labour Party, and had support from the NEC, in the early 1970's, and parallels were drawn with the 'New Urban Left' who practiced 'Local Socialism' in the larger urban centres of London, Liverpool, Camden and Lambeth in the 1980's (Jacobs, 1984). However, by the late 1970's the Councillors who had led the rent rebellion deemed themselves betrayed by

the Labour party nationally and locally. The rent rebellion gets mention in most comprehensive studies of local government history, but is surprisingly little written about, almost a footnote. As Duncan and Goodwin (1982) noted, unlike 'Poplarism', there is no place in the lexicon of local government for 'Clay Crossism'. Ultimately, as Jacobs argues, this may be because the rebellion was a failure which left behind it unpalatable lessons for local democrats. Certainly, the more high-profile activities of perhaps more flamboyant characters like Ken Livingstone, Ted Knight and Derek Hatton in the 1980's lasted longer in the collective memory, although, as Jacobs points out, unlike in Clay Cross, Councillors at the GLC, Camden and Liverpool ultimately remained within the law and eventually conceded in all of the major battles they fought, whereas the Clay Cross Councillors deliberately broke the law and went beyond the 'usual eleventh hour compromise and retreat strategy' (Jacobs, 1984, p. 77).

The attempt to create 'Socialism in one Town' (Skinner and Langden, 1974) started in Clay Cross in the early 1960's when a re-invigorated local Labour Party won all 11 seats on the then Urban District Council. They continued to hold the Council for a 'uniquely creative' (Price, 1973, p.191) decade. They commenced the fastest slum clearance programme in the country, introduced innovatory sheltered, warden-controlled accommodation for the elderly, and continued to supply free school milk in schools when it was withdrawn by central government- using 'creative accounting' before the phrase had been coined to fund a shortfall by raising the Chairman's allowance to make up the amount required. For a decade Labour dominated the Council. It was, specifically, the Council's policy of subsidising Council House rents which placed it in conflict with central government and the law. Throughout the 1960's, Council House rents were subsidised from the General Rates Fund, despite alarm expressed re the need to restore 'proper balance' on the Housing account by the Town Clerk, growing opposition organised by the Ratepayers Association, and increasing pressure from the local media. By 1970, rents received a subsidy of 18% from the general rates, against a national average of 3%. Amidst growing acrimony, in 1970, a District Audit report, following a challenge by the Ratepayers Association, cleared the Councillors of any wrongdoing. However, the Housing Finance Act, passed in 1972 by a Conservative government, required an increase in Council rents, which would have meant a rise of £1 per week in Clay Cross. The Act allowed for the Secretary of State to appoint a Housing Commissioner to take over the powers of any local authority not performing its duties. Twenty- four Labour Councils originally refused to comply; all but Clay Cross eventually conceded. The Council refused to collect the additional rent and invited the Government to send in a Commissioner. After a year in which no increased rents had been collected, a Commissioner was dispatched, in October 1973.

It is part of local legend that the Commissioner was a retired Civil Servant from Henley-on Thames, who arrived in a chauffeur-driven car. He spent one day a week on his duties as head of housing in Clay Cross. On his arrival, the Council refused to give him an office, or even a desk. Rent collectors were re-deployed to other duties. He was relieved of his duties the following March having collected none of the increased rent. In the meantime, the eleven Labour Councillors had been the subject of an Extraordinary Audit for the rent loss and for general 'mismanagement' which also included pay rises given in breach of the national pay code to Council employees. The eleven were surcharged, dismissed as Councillors, and disbarred from office.

Subsequent legal appeals failed and the return of Labour Government in 1974, despite previous promises, did not do enough to prevent their eventual bankruptcy for non-payment of the surcharged amounts.

The account here cannot do full justice to the story, which in many ways is unique. For instance, elections were held for a new Council following the disqualification; however, the Council had only four weeks left in existence, making it the shortest run Council administration in history. Thus, for four weeks before the Urban District Council was re-organised out of existence and amalgamated into the new District of North East Derbyshire (NEDDC), a 'second eleven' of Labour Councillors held the Council and continued the policy. The relationship of Clay Cross with the Labour NEC and the leadership of Harold Wilson, and subsequent feelings of betrayal, are a story in themselves. The rents were eventually collected by the new NEDDC, on a weekly basis, by increases in rents in Clay Cross only. The sense of injustice was strong; the surcharges related to the period during which the Government had delayed sending a Commissioner; Clay Cross was the only rebel Council where there had been such a delay.

The point here, however, is to use the Clay Cross story in the context of what it tells us about the 'local state' and our changing interpretation of resistance and local government. For Jacobs (1984, p. 86), Clay Cross represented 'an object lesson in how not to resist the centre'. Writing at a time when Labour Councils of the 'New Urban Left' were pursuing resistance (within the law) to the Thatcher government's increases in controls over Council expenditure (amongst other things), and practising what some labelled 'Municipal Socialism' (Boddy and Fudge, 1984, Lansley, 1989), Jacobs was already able to identify a new realism even here; Labour nationally and locally, he argued, 'could be in no doubt as to the awkward political implications of defiance and the catastrophic consequences that could follow from this'. The Clay Cross councillors at least had had the power to subsidise rents, a 'luxury' of defiance no longer available, such that.... 'Today [1984] the stakes are so high that another Clay Cross seems unlikely unless there is a threat to the very existence of local government'. Times had already changed so much that Clay Cross was more of 'historic, rather than practical, interest to local politicians'. As noted by Seyd (1990, p.335) in his study of Sheffield, by the late 1980's 'local socialism' had morphed into a more traditional pragmatism and a new strategy of collaboration with local and corporate capital..... 'Trapped between the pincers of central government and multinational capital, the city council has moved from socialism to entrepreneurialism'. Lessons had been learned about what Lansley (1989, p. 195) called 'the wastefulness of courage against ridiculous odds' and 'there was a clear sense that 'the fire has gone out' (Lansley, 1989, p.198).

Resistance by local councils is not solely the preserve of the Labour, as the Conservative resistance to the introduction of comprehensive education in the 1960's shows. However, as Bassett (1984) has shown, the issue of 'localism' has a lineage in Labour Party thinking stretching back to Marx via Herbert Morrison, the Fabians, and Guild Socialism. In this sense, Clay Cross had a place within an 'honourable Labour tradition' (Price, 1973, p.192). Initial support for 'little Moscovs' which could form an alternative to the central state was overtaken by in the post-war period in which electoral victory saw the state as the vehicle for the promotion of social welfare and justice rather than its enemy. Around the time of the Clay Cross rebellion, broadly

Marxist perspectives were being applied to contextualise local government within the capitalist state, arguing that until then it had seemed to exist in a structural vacuum (Dearlove, 1979). 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). However, even the early analyses of the 'local state' varied in their interpretation of how much leeway local councils had within the state. Cynthia Cockburn in 'The Local State' (1977) portrayed a scenario of the 'state writ small', the local expression of the state within capitalism, where local government's role was that of securing conditions favourable to capitalist accumulation, mainly through collective reproduction- the provision of welfare services required to resolve inherent tensions within capitalism.

For Cockburn, however, there was some scope for a class-based politics of resistance and room for manoeuvre based around contestations and tensions within the delivery of these services- including, of course, housing. Direct experience at a local level left the state more vulnerable at local level, conflicts over state outputs was most likely to be focussed at local level, and could lead to the development of social and political consciousness and the potential for organising class struggle around state issues. (See also Corrigan, 1979). Critics of Cockburn, notably Peter Saunders (1982), built upon previous work by O' Connor (1973) and questioned the portrayal by Cockburn of the state as a unitary monolith. Saunders promoted the 'dual state theory' which divided state activity into production and consumption fields, with local government being responsible for the consumption elements, mainly welfare services provided at a local level, including housing. Importantly here, the central and local states were held to be dominated by a particular kind of politics, with the local level being inevitably more pluralist and open to contestation. Saunders, then, held that class was not the 'be all and end all' of local politics, pointing out that struggles over local services included a diverse range of groups. Whilst there was scope for resistance, it was necessarily fragmented and focussed around issues, and thus was difficult to scale up to a coherent resistance movement. Dunleavy (1980) similarly characterised 'urban politics' as the politics of collective consumption, the site in which the inevitable conflicts surrounding issues such as housing were mediated. Whilst offering a more subtle view of the local state than Cockburn, Saunders and Dunleavy thus also offered a broad view of the nature of local resistance which, whilst recognising local contingencies and diversity, funnelled them all into issues surrounding the 'social consumption' of services.

Taking these perspectives as a starting point, the Clay Cross rent rebellion could be seen as both class based and clearly focussed around housing, in the main. From this view, the Clay Cross 'road to socialism' was forged in a tightly- knit mining community, the Councillors largely drawn from the pits and public services trades unionism.... 'as the history of Clay Cross is so inextricably tied up with the mining industry, it is not so surprising to find that the development of political awareness there came through the growth of trade union militancy in the pits' (Skinner and Langden, 1974, p. 13). The town had developed as a 'company town', the slum dwellings originally built by George Stephenson's company. Pit closures and de-industrialisation led to a higher than average unemployment level in the town in 1973 of 18%. Despite the slum house building programme, in 1974, unfit dwellings with outside toilets remained. Certainly, the Clay Cross struggle lent itself to an

interpretation which emphasised its place within broader class relations, which 'represented an extension of class relations and class consciousness from work and home to the council chamber' (Duncan and Goodwin, 1982, p. 93). The Councillors had a 'common background of manual work, family experience of hardship and exploitation, and trade union activity' (Harrison, 1974, p.373). Similarly, the fact that the Council was 're-organised' out of existence adds weight to the view that the state can act to neutralise potential conflict via spatial fragmentation and structural and administrative adjustments (Corrigan, 1979). In this view, local government re-organisation into larger and more inaccessible units, together with the promotion of Corporate Planning and other seemingly neutral management techniques were part of a broader attempt to 'corporatise' the more plural local domain, making it more amenable to a decision-making process more amenable to/ used by the centre. In this light, one of the Clay Cross councillors, Charlie Bunting, said of the rebellion in 1976 'Its dead, local government Reorganisation killed it.... People who had been living in a town that worked at a high political level suddenly found it changed' (quoted in Weightman, 1976, p.633). Similarly, the refusal of Poplar councillors to toe the central line with respect to poor relief in the 1920's had led to the removal of poor relief from local authority control.

And yet, despite the links made by the Clay Cross councillors between their resistance and broader class and work-based issues, Clay Cross was, of course, unique. Similar largely working-class, Labour held mining communities only a few miles away did not resist the Housing Act. Upon merger into the new NEDDC, the Clay Cross stance continued to get support from the newly formed District Labour Party, but not from the elected Labour Councillors on the new authority, keen to comply with the law and angry about the bill they had been landed with for non-collection of rents. As stated, the rent rebellion failed to roll out to other areas of the country, and the struggle could not be 'scaled up'. Commentators at the time stressed the town's uniqueness as much as the class issue. Price (1973) described the town, population of @10,000, as 'a curiously isolated village, standing in the middle of the Sheffield-Nottingham-Derby triangle, with no real connection to any of them' (1973, pp.190). Harrison (1974, p. 373) referred to a 'unique series of acts of defiance'. Price further noted that 'the steam behind the fight comes from personalities rather than ideologies' (p.192). Jacobs (1984, p.75) argued that to link Clay Cross with local government resistance taking place in the 1980's as 'a tortuous analogy', and saw it as 'a parochial rebellion' (p.82).

In accordance with the 'local state' analysis, the councillors did use and exploit loopholes and tensions within the system to gain wins largely for the working class population of the town. However, Jacobs points to the unique local circumstances- the small size of the council, with 11 members, making it easier to maintain unity; the 'one issue' basis of the struggle around rents which came to define the town, and the presence of the Ratepayers' Association around which all political opposition revolved. Following Saunders, it is also possible to see that the issues were not so clearly class-based; many working class residents did not live in council houses. The Labour electoral victories depended largely on the mobilization of council tenants, but the small town was not so clearly 'one place'; this support came from the southern part of the town which could be distinguished from the northern part which had largely developed in the inter-war years.

Goodwin's (1989) consideration of the Clay Cross case was an indicator of the extent to which by then the 'local state' thesis had been critiqued and being replaced with interpretations which stressed not *the* state as a unitary actor and turned attention away from economic determinism. Goodwin noted that along with local economic factors, a distinct pattern of relationships in civil society had played a crucial part, noting that 'Spatially distinct patterns of production will always be combined with, and mediated through, spatially distinct social pressures arising in civil society (p. 153). The radical politics in the town was based on 'the social relations of the community as well as on those of the work-force' (p.153). The industrial militancy of the pits was in this case not fed into life outside until nationalisation of the pits in 1948 ended a particular set of community relations and political life which until then had been dominated by pit owners and the Stephenson company. Civil society mediated the effects of both the local economy and of the local structures of the state.

Whither the 'local state'?

The re-introduction of local contingency into the study of local government resistance raises important issues for our consideration of the role of councils amidst austerity. How might resistance emerge? What form might it take? How and why would local councils be involved? In the 1970's Cockburn and others were careful not to equate 'local government' with the 'local state'. In the intervening years, *local governance* has become the more accepted term, an indication of the further fragmentation of local service delivery and reduced role for local government in direct service provision. There are now more potential sites of and for resistance. Further, a brief look at theoretical developments around the terms 'local' and 'state' indicates that we can now potentially see resistance everywhere.

Moving away from state-based theories, and towards more 'middle range propositions', there was initial attention on 'uneven development' (Massey, 1984) and the specific local and political characteristics forged in places by the differing geographies of capital accumulation. Specific patterns of production, politics and social formation served to focus attention upon 'locality' effects (Massey, 1995; Goodwin et al 1993). Here the 'local state' is seen to be 'simultaneously agent and obstacle for the national state' (Goodwin, 1989, p.153). 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' and the study of local government and governance began to be influenced by a more subtle sociology and by political geographers. Place was portrayed as a mediator of local and non-local forces (Agnew and Duncan, 1989) and the spatial differentiation of political and social relations Cochrane, (1993, p.25) was seen to explain variations in local politics (Gyford, 1991 p. 13). Places here were not passive recipients of central 'state' initiatives but neither were they more or less 'autonomous' local states- they played a part in their own transformation through 'local sociologies of translation' (Jones, 1998, p.964); localities were 'the products of interaction between people, groups and particular places over time' and scale a social construction (Marston, 2000). A 'new' justification for local government to represent

these contingent local variations was perhaps possible, one which was some way from a class-based resistance (Gyford, 1991 p.24).

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. 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. Governance becomes concerned with the facilitation of these interrelationships- there is a need to discursively build the institutional capacity of places (Healey, 1997 p.48). 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. Local government here then has the potential to bring together diverse lines of political discourse to a more or less agreed position, but this is likely to be highly contingent, potentially fragmented, and difficult to sustain.

The meanings of both 'the state' and the 'local' have thus been found wanting by a range of perspectives which have rejected the structural determinism of Marxist and neo-Marxist approaches (Orr, 2009) and which stressed 'the intricate inter-weaving of macro-structures and micro-structures in complex agent/structure relationships...' (Cerny, 1990, p.196). There is not space here to do justice to the breadth of these developments, which have also included the neo-Marxist, discourse-theory based work focussing on the construction of identities (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 1992). 'The state' was thus 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).

In addition, fragmentation of local governance potentially left spaces for the development of alternative public spheres and 'backchannels'. Renewed work on deliberative democracy and participation in local arenas has revealed insights from, for example, Social Movement theory (Barnes, Newman and Sullivan, 2007). Issues of identity, subjectivity, paradox and contradiction emerged as explanations of state-citizen relations amidst local governance, leading to a 're-spatialisation of the public sphere' (Newman, 2005, p.124). Finally in this 'potted history', Foucauldian perspectives have been influential in focussing attention not on state power per se but governmentality, and the use of technologies of power in discourses and practices- focussing attention on both power and resistance in the micro-processes of practice. Here, we find resistance and continued re-negotiation of settlements at the front-line of service delivery, in the interaction between officials, professionals and intermediaries with multiple 'publics'. Power and resistance are everywhere. Such approaches have been particularly applied to 'neo-liberal' state strategies where 'the local' remains a site of governing and local government acts a 'mediating actor, translating government policies in ways that fit- with more or less ease- local politics and culture' (Newman, 2010). The state sponsored neo-liberalism is not unified but an assemblage of sometimes internally contradictory features which are re-articulated

when they come into contact with the 'local'. For 'resistance', then we need to look not for large scale political expressions of opposition, but actually observe practice and foreground agency (Griggs and Roberts, 2012). We should not look for local government to be either agent of the central state project nor 'sites of heroic resistance' (Newman, 2010).

Here there is a recognition of 'the potential for governmental processes to be deflected or blocked in their encounter with empirical social contexts' (Prior, 2009, p. 29). Resistance, then, according to these views, is potentially everywhere, and is difficult to fit into the territorial containers of bounded local authority areas. It is also more difficult to conceive of the role that a local authority would have in promoting it in any consistent way. Resistance and 'subversion' are to be found in the 'sense making' of individuals in everyday practice; there is here an 'emotional turn' in which the 'affective dimension of local practices, drawing upon a body of work that foregrounds the doubt and indeterminacy experienced by individuals in making sense' (Griggs and Roberts, 2012, p.202). Agencies of resistance produce 'outcomes that are uncertain, fragile and contested, and whose effect can be the subversion of formal policy intentions' (Prior and Barnes, 2011)

Local Government and the possibility of resistance

Local Government faces several practical and normative difficulties then, with relation to any possible organised resistance to austerity. Firstly, considerably more so than the days of the Clay Cross rebellion, it operates within a legal and financial straight-jacket which means that resistance has high stakes: it can very soon lead to illegality, and if not, then the centre can intervene to change the rules. It can have an indirect effect on 'production' factors, and the workplace, and therefore on economic 'recovery', and then only in partnership with private enterprise. Beyond that, a local authority is a bounded entity and is a state institution itself. Why should we look to it rather than to, for example, neighbourhood or regional level, or indeed any level or scale? How can it engage with the various publics, at a variety of spatial and territorial levels, which often operate at the margins of legitimate and 'illegitimate' protest, for example- what Clarke (20, p. 81) has called 'the politics of marginal space'? In response to these kinds of questions there have been attempts to re-imagine a 'meta-governor' role for local government, a possibly more radical model based on broadly communicative and deliberative lines, in which the local authority takes the role of 'facilitator' of a range of discourses in a variety of public spheres. It may even be possible to imagine local government here taking up a role 'at the edge' of state and civil society, a 'dual intermediary'. However, this, in turn, is subject to practical and conceptual difficulties (Barnett, 2011).

There have, of course, been practical alternatives offered, and the argument here is not that there has not been any 'resistance' at all. Given the inevitable 'intervention' of practice, outlined above, this is of course inevitable, but there have also been more authority-wide resistances. There has been an unwillingness, for example, to take up Eric Pickles' offer of additional money to Councils which re-instated weekly bin collections; many Councils have increased Council Tax to protect services against every persuasion, political and financial, from the Secretary of State. Councils have to some extent been able to exploit contradictions in the Coalition's 'localism' agenda. Also, nothing here should be taken to detract from the recognition of the scale of the

difficulties facing Councillors who do oppose the cuts. It is indeed the most difficult time ever to be a Councillor. The recent BBC documentary 'The Year the Town Hall Shrank' showed the stark reality of a Labour Council leader in Stoke on Trent agonising over cuts enforced on the Council as he tried to hold up what is becoming an incredibly dented shield. Also, Councils are becoming increasingly vocal about the long-term impact of cuts and the threat to local government's future, also pointing to the threat of civil unrest (Helm, 2012).

In terms of a vision of local government which may offer a viable alternative, there have been models mooted. One is the 'Community Leader' model which has a radical version, referred to above, and a more consensual one which stresses Councils' roles in co-ordinating and leading governance across sectors- of particular importance now with relation to economic regeneration. Various alternatives based around what can generically be called the 'John Lewis' model have been mooted, promoting social enterprise and what in theory could be a more co-operative based model, reviving interest in an theme from Labour Party history (Reed, 2013). Other alternative visions have been expounded. An alternative approach is offered by Shaw (2012) has written of the 'resilient' local authority, concerning more with 'bouncing forward' than recovery, a transformative model which builds on local innovation and creativity. Sullivan (2011) argues the case that local government 'still matters' amidst austerity; it has to 'govern the mix' at local level, offering expertise in co-ordination and decision-making within a logic of care. Local government's practical role would be to continue to offer a safety net to the vulnerable, secure services through a variety of modes of provision, and act as 'springboard' for innovative practice to meet community needs. Others have sought to connect local government with a wide alternative social and economic programme (see for example Whitfield, 2012)

It is this point which perhaps serves to re-ground us, however, and bring us back to a question exposed by the Clay Cross rent rebellion and, as noted earlier, has been a common theme in thinking about the place of 'local' politics on the Left in the UK. How, and can, do 'local' resistances impact upon the structural inequalities which cause them, and how do they connect to wider struggles? The 'local' may indeed be a trap, limiting and fragmenting dissent (Purcell, 2006), and, as Fairweather (2011) notes, 'Putting together 'No to Cuts' banners may be easier than building a network of connected alliances'. In the past this may have been answered with a call for solidarity across the labour movement, facilitated via trades unions and, increasingly, other social movements – feminists, gay rights and others. However, the politics of resistance to austerity has, to a large extent, taken place outside of these channels and away from the formal institutions of local government, which have been more likely to find themselves the object rather than the facilitator of dissent. Levitas points out that there is a rich tradition of working-class self-organisation at 'local' level in the UK- ranging from Friendly Societies to Brass Bands. On a broader scale, as Callincos (2011) points out, internationally, recently, resistance movements from Greece to Spain to Egypt have taken place in and been generated from the outside of 'formal' politics. He links this back to the anti-globalisation protests in Seattle in 1999 and notes that 'the belief that movements can sustain themselves through their own horizontal networks have become a kind of common sense'. Indeed, since the 1980's, there have been few co-ordinated acts of resistance at a local-authority- wide level. The Poll Tax revolt of the early 1990's involved a combination of a disparate but wide-ranging groups, which may well have been supported by many Councillors, but

there was, at best, an equivocal stance taken by local authorities towards the protests, and of course, they did their best to enforce the collection of the Tax.

Conclusion

With respect to the possibility of resistance to central government, and more particularly now to 'austerity', the case of Clay Cross serves us to remind us of some important considerations. Central government does hold the cards much more than it did then. Beyond that, reviewing Clay Cross in the context of local state theory raises some issues which were important before and remain so now. Firstly, how could the 'socialism in one town' have been connected to wider struggles in the early-mid 1970's; surely this would be even more difficult now? In this sense, local state theory does highlight for us the contradictory place of local government within capitalism. As Dunleavy (1984), noted local government might be viewed as either a site for local resistance, or as mechanism to dilute and fragment it. In some ways, to defend a 'strong' version of local independence, may be to weaken the ability to confront structural inequalities. From this starting point, we have been able to add subtlety to these arguments as the 'local state' thesis has been critiqued and post-structural and interpretive approaches have led to a reconsideration of place and locality based politics. As Newman (2010) argues with relation to local governance and neo-liberal strategies, an interpretation which stresses contingency does allow for local governance to challenge, negotiate with and thus mediate and soften the impact of neo-liberalism and act as a bulwark against state power. Local governance may then still have an oppositional role, albeit less obvious and visible externally than an orchestrated 'rebellion'. However, Newman here refers to local governance, not local government.

We have, then, to consider, given what we have said about the meaning of the 'local' as a site of interweaving social relations, with overlapping relational spheres. On the other hand, local governments are territorially bounded in ways which are not congruent with these lived experiences. Using local state theory we would see local governments as facilitation of spatial fragmentation and a packaging of issues in ways which served dominant interests, adjusted as tensions arose. However, going beyond this, bounded local authority areas are symptomatic of what Amin (2005, p. 619) calls 'container geographies' – they are 'calculable spaces'. Following Raco and Flint (2001), they are state- created *spaces* which are not necessarily geographically consistent with the lived experience of *places*. Perhaps, until re-organisation in 1974, Clay Cross did marry the two for a decade or more? However, in looking to local government for resistance we may be still wishing to 'see politics as essentially topographical, when, in fact, much of what people practice as 'the political' or indeed as routine everyday habits and practices is also topological, connecting to various individuals and communities 'elsewhere' (Painter et al, 2011, p. 38). Painter et. al go on to ask if and how the boundaries of the local can be 'captured in an administrative unit' (p.308).

The above arguments do lead us to what Amin has called 'a more cosmopolitan sense of social and spatial connectivity' (2005, p.630) or a 'cosmopolitan geography of belonging' (Raco and Flint, 2001, p. 626). So, whither local government within this? What is perhaps important here is that despite the long journey from the early 1970's,

the 'local' remains vital as a source of political activity. By definition it is the site where most people come into direct contact with public services and collective provision. Issues of place identity serve to mobilise and integrate collective action amongst diverse groups. Problems are experienced and become visible at this scale and is the site of 'practical-oppositional' organisation (Gough and Eisenschitz, 2011): proximity and interaction can facilitate the building of solidarity and collectivity, and this collective practice can open up new possibilities (Levitas, 2012). Local government has more permanence, perhaps, than other issue-based actors, but also could be seen a part of a temporary settlement which may be able 'to fix partial and temporary social, economic and political settlements from a range of pressures, grievances and claims, and then seek to persuade the public of the merits of its case'. (Griggs and Roberts, 2012, p.206). Following Jonathan Davies, we could look to local governments to provide some good old fashioned hierarchy, without which the discipline for resistance would not be present. The 'local' may indeed be chaotic and overlapping, but legitimate decisions need to be taken; boundaries may be arbitrary, but not necessarily permanent, and are themselves subject to tensions and opposition. More radically, local government could 'take the state outwards' (Wainwright, 1994). As Gough and Eisenschitz (2010) put it, 'transforming social relations at higher spatial scales is certainly necessary, but local struggles are a dialectical moment in this'.

Taking on board the re-thinking of the meaning of local politics and 'localism' which we have looked at in overview here, Featherstone et al (2012) have made an argument out for a 'Progressive localism' in opposition to the 'austerity localism' represented by cuts and the Coalition Government's 'localism' and 'Big Society' agendas. They argue that place-based organising can shape 'localism' in a solidaristic fashion. They go on to argue that these 'progressive localisms' can be fed into broader political and social movements, for example by connecting with Uncut UK and issues of local tax avoidance. Thinking along these lines seems to link the contested nature of the 'local' with some of the issues concerning scale of resistance and structural power within capitalism raised by the Clay Cross case and within consideration of the role of the local within the left generally. However, it remains at best unclear how local government fits into this; the case for 'the local' in myriad forms in resistance to austerity is clearly made; however, it is much less clear that the case for local government has been.

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