

LIMITS OF LOCALISM: FOUR DIMENSIONS OF POWER

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Abstract

A trend in the planning discourse tends to portray the local in a positive light. This paper critically examines localism and regionalism, from a theoretical point of view, to find out whether this positive outlook may be maintained. First the ontology of the local is examined, with its substantive, relational and experiential aspects. As a complex, multi-dimensional process, localism is then analysed at the intersection of four dimensions of power: territorial, representational, institutional, and functional. Boundaries are drawn, representations created, relations within and beyond the locality arranged, and functions allocated. The analysis shows a tendency to essentialise the local as a finished, circumscribed, commodified product, at odds with its multiplicity, diversity, inequality, porous boundaries and relational reality. There is also a gap between the definitions and functions allocated to the local in a hierarchical division of labour, relations with intra- and extra-local political and economic forces, and the mythological narratives of autonomy.

Keywords

Localism, power, multiplicity, decentralisation, reductionism.

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1. Introduction

Localism is on the agenda of planners and policy makers in many countries and in different guises, which share an emphasis on place, community, locality, and region as the locus of policy and practice (Department for Communities and Local Government [DCLG], 2011; Royal Town Planning Institute [RTPI], 2015; Stead, 2014; Hadjimichalis and Hudson, 2014). These variations are exemplified by place-making, place-based regeneration, community-based planning and development (RTPI, 2015; Hambleton, 2015; Gleye, 2015; Hildreth and Bailey, 2014; Turok, 2013), by the drive towards regionalism in Europe and elsewhere (Everingham, 2009; Browski, 2014; Keating and Wilson, 2014), and by the recent policy of localism and neighbourhood planning in the United Kingdom (DCLG, 2011; RTPI, 2016). The continued emphasis on place, locality, community and region, therefore, has led to a positive image of localism and regionalism, which is advocated as a progressive aim, ensuring that a locality's future is shaped by the locals, rather than imposed on them by higher-level decision makers, with implications for democracy, self-determination, ecological sustainability, and cultural authenticity (Featherstone et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2014; Davoudi and Madanipour, 2015). In this paper, I aim to undertake a critical examination of localism to find out whether it reflects the conditions of, and the different attitudes towards, localities. Rather than an analysis of the current policies of austerity localism in the United Kingdom (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Sturzaker and Shaw, 2015; Tait and Inch, 2016), the aim here is to develop a theoretical examination of the concept of localism in a broader context, and whether the positive expectations associated with localism in planning may be maintained.

To undertake this examination, I have adopted two basic but interrelated conceptual methods: analytical, to break down the concept of the local and localism into smaller parts and their relationships; and perspectival, to look at localism from different perspectives and see whether it has the same meaning for different parties. Localism is about the local, so the first step in the inquiry would be investigating the ontology of the local, which shows what its elements are, how they are related to one another, and how they are experienced. This investigation dissects the local into its constituent parts and processes, which guards against essentialism and becomes a basis for analysing localism as a complex, multi-dimensional attitude to the local. Four such dimensions are identified, which are powerful forces with overlapping features. First, localism finds a territorial dimension, drawing boundaries around a locality, finding a clear material manifestation and target of attention. Second, localism constructs the representations of the local, so as to communicate a particular image of the local and render it distinguishable from other localities. Third, localism asserts institutional distinctiveness, which is expressed in the relations of power and the idea of local autonomy. Fourth, localism assigns particular functions and roles to localities within a hierarchy of power, as expressed in containment and decentralisation.

These four dimensions of localism, territorial, representational, institutional, and functional are forms of power at work in the processes of localism, constructing particularity for a locality. They are the power to delineate, to represent, to control, and to allocate, forming a nexus through which localism can be critically analysed; a critique of power at an important juncture.

2. The Ontology of the Local: Enduring Essence?

The term 'local' appears in many European languages, with applications in a variety of fields, from mathematics and grammar to law, medicine and theology. These various definitions, nevertheless, all seem to share a core meaning, derived from classical Latin *localis*, which means relating to *locus*, which in turn is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'the place in which something is situated or occurs'. Local, therefore, means relating to place: 'Of, relating to, inhabiting, or existing in a particular place or region'.

The terms place, region and local appear very regularly in the urban and regional planning discourse. The 'place' is seen as the desired outcome of a 'making' process, as seen in the widespread use of the term place-making (RTPI, 2015; Ng, 2016; Shaw and Montana, 2016). On the one hand, the place is branded to have a distinctive identity in the marketplace (Kavartzis et al., 2015). On the other hand, its distinctiveness is thought of as the opposite of the open-ended space, rootless capitalism, heightened mobility, and alienating globalisation (Castells, 1997; Stevenson and Blanche, 2015). Place and region are used as indications of scale, in which geographical space and governance institutions are organised in a hierarchy of levels and roles, elements

around which the governance of diverse urban areas is built (Poppe and Young, 2015; Hum, 2010). The change of jurisdictional scales is critically assessed to be a manifestation of neoliberal globalisation, but the change of natural scales is seen to have potentially positive implications for ecological processes (Hobson et al., 2016; Cohen and McCarthy, 2015).

While it has long been argued that places are not fixed or homogeneous (Massey, 1994), the notion that places can be made, branded, rescaled, and protected seems to hint at the ontological fixity of a 'thing' that can be clearly defined, shaped and controlled. In practice, however, places are continually in flux, made of multiplicity, diversity and change, rather than an enduring essence that can be made and maintained. The local is not an instant creation, nor a fixed and permanent entity; it has a history and an association to a geographical location and material environment, but it is also subject to continual change.

The definition of the local would partly depend on what it is assumed to be made of, and on the nature of the relationship between its constituent elements. Is it made of individuals, households, groups, tribes, and social classes (Hollis, 2002)? Is it a homogenous entity made of similar parts or a heterogeneous collection of different elements, as it has long been recognised (Aristotle, 1992)? Are the relationships between these parts and elements harmonious and interdependent, or are they divergent or conflictual (Durkheim, 1972; Hill and McCarthy, 1999)? Rather than being merely harmonious, recurring and continuous (Durkheim, 1972; Parsons, 1952), these relations may equally be discordant, conflictual, and unstable (Foucault, 2002). Is it made only of social agents, such as individuals and firms, or is it also made of social relations and institutions, which are the changing and recurring patterns of relationship between these social agents (Lefebvre, 1991; Bourdieu, 2000)? Is it limited to the human world, or does it also include the material environment of which they are a part (Lefebvre, 1991; Arendt, 1958)? Is the local made of only the local agents and relations, or does it also include the extra-local within it (Hobsbawm, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Massey, 1994)? Is the local a stable thing or a set of changing relationships (Heidegger, 1978; Norberg-Schultz, 1980)? In a rapidly changing world, can it be imagined as a stable and unchanging object or a historical phenomenon always going through change (Briggs, 1968; Tönnies, 1957; Halbwachs, 1992; Rossi, 1982)? Can the local be perceived from a single perspective or experienced from the variety and diversity that make up the social world, its memories and practices (Halbwachs, 1992; Moghaddam, 1998)?

The debates that follow these questions pose serious challenges to the understanding of the local as a fixity, with significant normative implications for the way localism is projected. The answers, which will be explored in the following sections, show that the ontology of the local may be analysed through its substantive, relational and experiential dimensions. This means that, within continually changing circumstances, the multiplicity and diversity of people, objects and relationships are interlinked in various ways, and experienced from a variety of perspectives. The local is not a fixed thing, but a multiplicity made of different elements in relationship with each other; it is a series of processes that unfold in time, embodied in a material context, and always exposed to the impact of external and internal forces. The ontology of the local shows multiplicity, diversity, relationality, historicity, materiality, and change, albeit with different paces and extents. The ontology of the local is simultaneously substantive, relational and experiential, simultaneously spatial and temporal, which reflects, and is reflected in, the way the local is represented and delineated, and subsequently on the meaning and character of localism.

3. Localism as Favouring the Local: Whose Local?

Localism is defined in both descriptive and normative ways. As a descriptive term, it refers to some characteristics that are associated with a particular place. Therefore, the cultural habits or expressions of an area may be called its localisms, such as linguistic or architectural localisms. It is, however, the normative use of the word that predominates in the planning and policy literature. In a normative definition, localism involves a value judgement, an emotional attachment, and a policy orientation, all displaying the inclination to favour the local. Localism's definition by the Oxford English Dictionary refers to a 'preference for a particular place or region, esp. that in which one lives' and, more broadly, the 'tendency to favour what is local'. Both in its descriptive and normative meanings, localism is closely linked with regionalism as a parallel concept: a description of regional features, and an attitude of favouring the region or regional forms of politics and culture.

Favouring the local requires a clear definition of what that local is. As we have seen, however, the diversity and multiplicity of the local, and its substantive, relational and experiential dimensions are a challenge to identifying whose local is being discussed, problematising the relations of power that are involved. Four dimensions of these power relations may be identified: the power to delineate, the power to represent, the power to control, and the power to allocate.

3.1. The Territories of the Local: Which Boundaries?

Is it enough to draw boundaries around any particular area and call it a place, or should it have specific qualities to be called as such? The core meaning of the terms local and place is their particularity, difference and delineation. These qualities distinguish them from what is general, universal and open, as exemplified in the well-known distinction between place and space. The question, however, is how space is divided into places, and what the basis is for drawing boundaries around an area to call it a place, in the context of multiplicity and diversity, and the difficulties of distinguishing the local from the extra-local. How porous and open is it, or should it be, to outside forces (Massey, 1994)?

To localise primarily means to restrict something to a particular place. It is synonymous with confining, containing, restraining, concentrating, and delimiting, all referring to the act of drawing boundaries around something for determining its limits. The problem becomes how to delineate the local, by whom and to what extent of rigidity. The delineation of the territory lies at the heart of what it means to be local. It is here that the local finds its most concrete form, in its most reductive formula, through the introduction of clear boundaries that would determine who and what is or is not local. It is here that the representations of the locality find material form, legal status, and an institutional apparatus to reinforce it. It is here that the practical considerations for the management of the territory, the development of spatial strategies and plans, and the control of disputes with neighbours and others would also give shape to physical and legal boundaries. As any plan or project can testify, planning processes are centrally involved in the determination of these boundaries as they are necessary frameworks for the collection and analysis of information, division of labour, clarification of responsibilities, and mobilisation of resources (Paasi and Zimmerbauer, 2016). The problem, however, is when these boundaries are reified, fixed as rigid lines of separation, ignoring the complex and interdependent nature of localities.

The process of boundary setting has been discussed widely through the opposition of place to space, a bounded territory with fixed identity and emotional content versus a limitless abstraction with no particular meaning, an opposition that found a clear expression in the battles of postmodernism versus modernism (Harvey, 1989; Logan and Molotch, 1987; Sennet, 1995). In substantive, relational and experiential terms, this delineation can be observed at all levels: delineating a territory, limiting its institutions and social relations, and trying to define and protect its particularities. The process of localisation is based on this delineation. More than anything else, it is the process of delineation that determines the local, which localises a series of elements and designates them as the local. It is here that in and out, us and them, local and extra-local, and other forms of binary distinction are made. Drawing the boundaries is the exertion of power to determine what lies on either side of the divide. It is a process of sorting and designating, which is indeed an exercise of power over the lives of those who happen to be inside or be affected by falling on the outside. The process of delineation is not limited to making spatial distinctions between the local and the rest of the world; it is also about the process of sorting within the spatial boundaries of the local, making internal subdivisions with their inherent power relations (Yang et al., 2015).

Constructing boundaries around a territory, therefore, may be practically necessary in policy processes, but it is equally necessary to maintain a critical outlook on how, by whom, and why these boundaries are made. Are these processes acknowledging the actual porosity of the place, or are they enclosing the locality artificially and ideologically, especially when the local is understood as a series of democratic social relationships rather than mere containers for power (Lefebvre, 1991)?

3.2. The Representations of the Local: Whose Voice?

If the local is made of diverse and multiple elements that are at once substantive, relational and experiential, representing it would be expected to reflect this multidimensionality. However, providing an account of this complexity becomes a serious challenge, as there will be multiple and competing accounts of a multifarious reality. Many accounts would be presented and each account would be told from a different perspective, recounting a different set of circumstances and experiences, and expecting it to lead to different outcomes. The basic question about representing the local is therefore the problem of how to deal with a cacophony of voices that are heard about a locality, both from within and from outside it; as well as the problem of the voices that remain unheard and the stories that are untold.

The concept of public interest, which claimed to represent all of these voices, and therefore claimed legitimacy for planning, has long been questioned (Sorauf, 1957). Simultaneously, planning was accused of representing the views and interests of a social and technical elite, an accusation that continues to this day, even after acknowledging the diversity and inequality of society and the political nature of planning (Gans, 1968; Gunder, 2010). The middle-class professionals were accused of being out of step with the reality of social life, and their claims to knowledge were questioned to be technical and managerial, rather than democratic and inclusive. While some argued for representing the voices of the disadvantaged groups in the planning process, others argued for facilitating the participation of these groups in the process through a dialogue, in the hope of eventually building a harmonious consensus (Davidoff, 1965; Innes and Booher, 2004). Harmony and consensus, however, were beyond reach in an increasingly diverse and unequal society; the dialogue was often held between the public and private sector stakeholders in partnerships for development projects, and the unheard voices remained outside the dialogue (Hum, 2010; Akintoye et al., 2015; Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000; Harvey, 2003).

The representation of the local becomes a contested process in which different parties with differing levels of power and influence produce instrumental, and potentially incompatible, narratives and images. The researchers, policy makers and planners, investors, and activists are all involved in the projection of a narrative that would reflect their perspective. No one is or can be in a purely neutral position to produce an all-encompassing representation, or to produce an account that can capture the potentially vast range of voices that can represent the place. Many representations of the local, therefore, tend to ignore the basic features of diversity and multiplicity; rather than relating to the complex reality on the ground, they may resort to clichés and ready-made images, aiming to project an image of homogeneity of the present, and a single destination for the future. To produce an understandable and persuasive representation of the local which can communicate with others, therefore, reductive narratives are employed to give desirable shapes to fluid and complex circumstances. Reductionism is inherently an exclusionary process in which the image of the local may be constructed in negative terms, justifying wholesale redevelopment, gentrification, or further stigmatisation of an already deprived place (Madanipour, Cars and Allen, 2003). Reductionism and exclusionary effects are also at work when positive images are created through marketing and branding.

Branding turns the local into a commodity in the global marketplace, attaching a positive representation which can be used in marketing and promotion (Kavaratzis et al., 2015; Ashworth, 1990). As competition becomes the dominant form of relationship in neoliberalism (Foucault, 2008), and as cities and regions behave like private firms (Touraine, 1995), the place and the locality as a whole become a commodity and the subject of economic exchange. To stand out in a crowded market, local authorities rely on quality and on product differentiation, hoping to make their locality distinctive through branding and advertising (Simmie, 2003). The economic interpretation of the local privileges the base over the non-base (O'Sullivan, 2012), the so-called creative over the non-creative (Florida, 2002). The reductive forces of the money economy (Simmel, 1978) demand a reductive representation of the local, cutting all the unnecessary elements to the extent that it will ultimately be translatable to numbers. In this process, however, the substantive, relational and experiential dimensions of the local will all be negatively affected, as the focus on the marketable elements denies a level playing field to the inherent capacities and diversities of a locality.

Instrumental and reductive approaches can be seen in all the three aspects of the local. Planning, architectural and engineering surveys and analyses may claim to offer an account of the substantive elements of the local: its

infrastructure of roads and utilities, its buildings and open spaces, its uses of land and its morphological details. These accounts, however, are by nature partial and instrumental, told in expert language and interested in some technical aspects of the local. The relational accounts may compensate for this technical reductionism, placing the substantive in the context of the social and historical relations in which it takes shape and is used. The experiential and expressive form of representing the local may partly revolve around the questions of identity, as a narrative told about a person or a place (Ricoeur, 2007), an essential element of social capital formation and social positioning (Bourdieu, 2000) in the struggle for recognition (Honneth, 1995). This narrative identity demonstrates the relations of similarity and difference (Jenkins, 1996) and therefore expresses the desire for embracing some relationships and avoiding others. In instrumental and reductive forms, however, these social relations and narratives of identity are edited and cleansed, highlighting the marketable and hiding what is thought to be damaging to a polished image.

If the local is substantive, relational and experiential, whereby its elements are embodied in material conditions and embedded in social relations, the representation of the local would have to be sufficiently complex to reflect them. However, like other forms of representing a complex multiplicity, the problem becomes one of selection, as to which elements of the multiplicity can and should form this narrative. In the context of economic competition (Aglietta, 2000), social inequality (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2008; Hamnett, 2003), heightened mobility (Urry, 1995) and the narrow politics of identity (Hobsbawm, 1990; Anderson, 1991), the construction and representation of this narrative becomes ever more problematic. The representation may become a mask that hides an unstable reality behind, or a vehicle of suppressing difference and maintaining the status quo, rather than a fair representation of the local.

3.3. The Institutions of the Local: Whose Autonomy?

Favouring the local is often projected as a view from within a locality, expressing the desire for distinctiveness, self-determination, and resistance against outside forces. It is taken to reflect the conditions and hopes of the localities in their interface with the national and global forces that may overrule them. It demonstrates a search for forms of political power that would enable the local communities to take control of their own affairs, rather than being exposed to powers that are not knowledgeable or sensitive to their needs. Such localism is a desire for territorialisation, maintaining or asserting control over a territory by the people and institutions that reside within it. It is a concept that, in principle, is taken for granted in the contemporary planning and governance discourse to be worth supporting and advocating, as it complies with the ideals of justice and democracy. However, the question of who has autonomy emerges in the shape and legitimacy of the institutions that represent these views and in both extra-local and intra-local tensions.

The historical context of localism lies in the tension between the existing forms of local power and the emerging national institutions in early modern Europe (Potter, 1995; Smith, 1984). In the nation states that were emerging, the tension between the centre and the localities was a defining feature. In the creation of the United States, Thomas Jefferson's ideal condition was a frugal state and a strong locality, to strike a balance between the two sides. This was to be achieved through the 'ward republics' (Jefferson et al., 1999, p.214), whereby the counties were to be divided into 'wards of such size as that every citizen can attend, when called on, and act in person' (Jefferson et al., 1999, p.213). This had already been a successful form of township government in New England, which had 'proved themselves the wisest invention ever devised by the wit of man for the perfect exercise of self-government, and for its preservation' (Jefferson et al., 1999, p.214). The tension between the local and the national, however, was strong, even leading to a civil war in the country. The tension between the locality and the state was paralleled between the tension between the individual and the state, between liberalism and democracy (Bobbio, 1990). The idea of autonomous individuals had evolved over centuries (Coleman, 1996) to become a cornerstone of the modern nation-state (Locke, 1980). Since these early tensions, the relationship between the locality and the nation-state has gone through many variations.

Most significantly, the mid-twentieth century welfare state seemed to have completely won over regional differences and particular conditions; but this was reversed by a period of neoliberal withdrawal of the state, in which the rights of the individual have been reasserted. As a champion of neoliberalism wrote, 'Democracy is essentially a means, a utilitarian device for safeguarding internal peace and individual freedom' (Hayek, 1944, p.52). With the rise of neoliberalism, meanwhile, the tension between localities and the nation-state

has also re-emerged. With globalisation, localism becomes a form of resistance against the global forces that undermine all local cultural specificities and destroy the natural environment (Castells, 1997). The autonomy of both the individual and the local, therefore, has been in direct relationship to the strength, priorities, and reach of the extra-local forces. However, what is assumed to be the autonomy of the individual to make decisions, or the communitarian or civil society groups taking control of their lives (Etzioni, 1995), takes place within an institutional context dominated by the relations of exchange and their associated frameworks.

When seen from within any particular situation, favouring the local may appear to be a natural attitude, which would have always existed. Developing emotional attachments with the family, community and tribe, and with the home, neighbourhood and town, can be found in all human societies. In the modern society, with its mobile and diverse populations, however, the existence of these ties is no longer taken for granted. Stable emotional ties have given way to contractual ties (Tönnies, 1957), and their capacity and usefulness for maintaining social cohesion are questioned (Durkheim, 1972). The changes in the relational and experiential dimensions of the local have transformed the nature of localism from favouring one's community and tribe to favouring one's social relations and institutional connections. The long-established representations of the locality, which were rooted in the ties of blood and kin, are replaced by the contractual construction of binding images in a society of strangers. The meaning of territory, which may have been deeply embedded in historical memories, would be transformed into functional connections to a marketable commodity. While the imagery of localism continues to employ the older concepts of emotional attachment to territory and community, the actual conditions of favouring the local are transformed into contractual and monetary relations set within a global context.

The formal organisations that are set up to support and safeguard local autonomy, therefore, are subject to these pressures from all sides. As part of these formal organisations, urban and regional planning comes specifically under pressure for balancing the competing demands of increasingly unequal forces, from individuals and households, local communities, businesses, nation-states, and increasingly corporate organisations and other global forces. The operations of urban and regional planning are a part of the infrastructure of power in a locality, a part of the wide-ranging governance arrangements within an area (Cowie et al., 2016). Governance is about the distribution of power in a locality (Madanipour, 2012). The implications of localism for governance would imply favouring local stakeholders in the relations of power. However, if the circle of decision-making is not open and inclusive, and if it tends to be primarily revolving around the relationship between the institutions of the state and the market, with token involvement by those who are affected, any arrangement for local autonomy may be exposed to justifiable critique. The institutions that claim to represent the autonomy of the locality would lack the necessary legitimacy, and the problem of autonomy may not be simply reduced to the clashes between intra- and extra-local forces.

3.4. The Functions of the Local: What Role?

Localism and regionalism are largely a form of governance, responding to a political question about the spatial distribution of power. From within the locality, localism tends to be seen as a bid for self-determination, but when viewed from the perspective of a higher level of political power, it can mean at worst unruliness, or at best decentralisation. It becomes a process of localisation in which particular functions are assigned to a locality, maintaining its place in a hierarchy of power.

Decentralisation may be adopted as a method of efficiency, subdividing the tasks into smaller ones within a systematic division of labour. It subdivides the functional and territorial powers and responsibilities, as in the organisation of a large corporation into functional and geographical units, or the subdivision of a large city into districts. This subdivision may be justified on the basis of the efficiency of distributing resources and delegating responsibilities, while safeguarding the effective control of the central power over its subdivisions and branches. In the process of bureaucratisation, complex tasks are split into smaller parts and complex organisations are formed out of a network of lower level agents. It would be a hierarchical and managerial organisation of functions for improved efficiency and smooth operation of complex institutions (Weber, 1948). It draws on the rationalist analytical method of splitting complex phenomena into smaller parts for easier understanding (Descartes, 1968), the division of labour for higher productivity (Smith, 1993), allocating roles and places to individuals and groups, so that their sphere of action is predetermined and controlled, and making society so transparent that no hidden corners are left unseen (Foucault, 1980).

Similar to theoretical tensions between communitarianism and individualism, a tension may be noted between institutional organisation for decentralisation and the rule of the market. When the market is involved, the level of decentralisation is not limited to spatial and functional subdivisions, but to individual decisions in the marketplace. In the tension between bureaucratic and neoliberal forms of state, the former relies on the organisation of roles and functions, while the latter advocates the price mechanism as the best arbiter of tasks and roles. For Hayek, a central authority was unable to address economic problems; what was needed was decentralisation, 'because only thus can we ensure that the knowledge of the particular circumstances of time and place will be promptly used' (Hayek, 1945, p.524). Decentralisation would inevitably lead to a reliance on the market and its price mechanism as the most efficient way of accessing relevant information produced by individual decisions. As Hayek argued, 'the economic problem of society is mainly one of rapid adaptation to changes in the particular circumstances of time and place'; the solution would be 'that the ultimate decisions must be left to the people who are familiar with these circumstances, who know directly of the relevant changes and of the resources immediately available to meet them' (1945, p.524). The hidden problem, however, is that individual decisions are not made freely and are often framed within the institutions of the market, in which the large players dominate.

An example of the shift from strategic decentralisation to a market-based, neoliberal one is the process of localism in the United Kingdom (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012; Sturzaker and Shaw, 2015; Tait and Inch, 2016). When a coalition of Conservative and Liberal-Democrat parties came to power in the United Kingdom in 2010, it abolished the regional tier of government and its associated plans, such as regional spatial and economic plans. A year later, it introduced the Localism Act 2011, which transferred planning competence to parishes and neighbourhoods, albeit subject to checks and balances at the higher level of the local authority. The abolished regional level of governance was made of several local authorities, while the neighbourhoods were micro-units within these authorities. This was a radical change in the structure of territorial governance, produced by a government that is commonly characterised as neoliberal. It opened the field for the market, which is dominated by large firms. Rather than creating a level playing field for local forces to determine their future, it may remove any safeguards that had been provided by the state, exposing these local players to the forces of the market, with its increasingly global dimensions in the scale and reach of its operators. In this change of the level of planning and governance competence, it replaced regionalism with localism, and bureaucratic controls with market ones.

An alternative model of decentralisation, which has roots older than the bureaucratic and neoliberal states, is based on the principle of subsidiarity, which has been used to organise the Catholic Church and is now incorporated into the European Union in its Maastricht Treaty (Cass, 1992). Subsidiarity is seen to have the capacity for opening up space for manoeuvre for the lower levels of authority, whereby 'a larger and higher ranking body should not exercise functions which could be efficiently carried out by a smaller and lesser body' (Melé, 2005, p.293). Subsidiarity paves the way for multi-level governance, whereby different levels of power can work together on a functional basis, each playing a functional role in a hierarchy. The higher levels of authority maintain their overall control, but offer a degree of autonomy to the lower levels. For its supporters, the concept offers an alternative to an authoritarian and bureaucratic mode of organisation in which people are treated as cogs in a machine rather than intelligent actors with the ability to make decisions based on their own judgement. It also offers an alternative to market-based decisions, where monetary considerations are often the only basis for judgement.

Subsidiarity is a form of decentralisation in which that the devolution of power and decision-making are thought to contribute to higher productivity, better working practices and more peaceful political relations. The principle has been used both in functional organisation of multi-national entities such as the European Union, the restructuring of the nation states into a federal or quasi-federal arrangements, and in the development of regional and sub-regional forms of political institutions. It has also been used in restructuring private corporations and changing them from a highly integrated hierarchy to a network of semi-independent units, in which the workers find a degree of control over their working practices (Melé, 2005). In all these forms, from the functional subdivision to decentralised structures, localism is often encouraged from the top, by a centre that continually reshapes the complex organisation and its workings for improved efficiency. It is a technical interpretation of political control, a form of localism as seen from the perspective of a higher level authority. As the history of bureaucracies has shown, however, decentralisation can also generate institutional parochialism, which is why many multi-level organisations are continually in the process of reorganisation.

Subsidiarity engages with the lower level institutions that are part of the hierarchy of power. A further level of decentralisation engages with subsections of these institutions, trying to integrate them in the process of decision-making, as manifested in the idea of public participation. In both public and private sector organisations, the idea of involving citizens or employees in the process of decision-making has been widely advocated as good practice (Perotin and Robinson, 2004; Plummer, 2000; Barnes et al., 2007). Public participation takes place within a clear institutional framework, whereby the control of the issue is not delegated but different degrees of engagement are offered to those that may be affected. An experienced practitioner notes that, 'Public participation applies to administrative decisions – that is, those typically made by agencies (and sometimes by private organisations), not elected officials or judges', with the overall goal of 'better decisions that are supported by the public' (Creighton, 2005, p.7).

While the range and extent of citizen involvement varies significantly (Arnstein, 1969), the benefits of such involvement are widely accepted, to the extent that public participation is now a legal requirement in many countries. Citizens who are affected by government decisions are encouraged to have a say in those decisions and be able to influence them. However, like subsidiarity, it is a technical and procedural solution to a political problem, which does not negotiate for any redistribution of power, but invites some stakeholders to engage with the process. Although it may be a response to democratic demands, participation can be seen as a form of localism that is initiated from a top-down perspective, the view from the higher authorities attempting to engage the affected agents in the process of decision-making while maintaining their own authority to have the final say.

In these perspectives from the top of bureaucracies or from the marketplace, the local is reduced to organisational or exchange relations, while their representations and rationale are limited to efficiency and productivity. Localism becomes a vehicle for the promotion of efficiency through decentralisation. This is, however, not explicitly visible, as the term localism tends to refer, simultaneously, to a preference for historical cohesive communities, contractual relations among atomised individuals, a bid for autonomy, and pressure for decentralisation, each of which could have a completely different meaning. In other words, the steely, top-down pressure for efficiency may be wrapped in the soft clothing of individual freedom of choice, participation, and democratic revival.

4. Conclusion

The paper has argued that the analysis of localism should be placed in the context of a critique of the forms of power that seek to circumscribe the local. The local is ontologically multiple and diverse, with substantive, relational and experiential dimensions. The projected image of the local, and the processes of localism, however, tend to envisage it as static, stable and bounded; these processes engage in drawing rigid boundaries, producing reductive representations, emphasising parochial identities, and assigning limited functional roles in power hierarchies. The meaning of the local is determined at the nexus of these territorial, representational, institutional, and functional dimensions, through the interplay of multiplicity and diversity with instrumental and expressive narratives and the extent of the porosity and flexibility of the boundaries. The meaning of localism takes shape at the juncture of these forms of power and their interaction with each other and with the complexities of the local ontology, which could be ambivalent and regressive, far from an often positively portrayed image.

The defining feature of the various forms of localism is particularism. Localism as resistance and self-determination is shown by individuals, communities, or localities against the power of the state and the forces of globalisation, expressing a desire for self-rule, cultural distinction, and environmental care. However, as this analysis of the constitution of the local shows, the problem lies in acknowledging what it is made of, where to draw the boundaries, how to represent it, how to relate to extra-local and intra-local forces, and what functional roles to expect in a hierarchy of power. Many forms of localism have suffered from the problem of essentialism and reductionism, in which the local has been reduced to a narrow definition, excluding some part of the locality as undesirable or irrelevant, and justifying the continuation of unequal relations of power. Many forms of localism have also suffered from the danger of parochialism, a reminder of the medieval factionalism that was characterised by the spatial subdivision of the church into ecclesiastical parishes, which is now used pejoratively to refer to limited local interests and narrow-mindedness.

The implications for urban and regional planning, with its claim to technical know-how and political legitimacy are far reaching. While boundaries may need to be drawn for managing change in the built and natural environment, they should be acknowledged to be provisional and subject to political debate; the notion that places can be made and that localities can be turned into finished products or commodities for sale are shown to be false aspirations. The gap between a marketable representation and the multiple plurality of the place, or between a stigmatising representation and a rich experience of life, tend to be forgotten in many planning processes. The gap between the nostalgic ideas of the local autonomy, the limited powers of local groups to shape their future, and the domination of the political and economic stage by powerful players may be hidden from view. If localism is taken to be a natural tendency to favour the local, it should be noted that this local cannot be essentialised and managed through exclusionary governance arrangements, nor through relying on a rhetoric that masks the complexity of a context.

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