# Whither the local state?

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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, there has been no repeat so far of the kinds of resistances seen from some Councils in previous eras. The appearance, at least, is one of a pragmatic if reluctant acceptance in which the response of Councils of all political complexions has been to comply and implement the cuts required by the 'austerity' programme. This may be 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. Those hoping for Councils to be some kind of focal point for local resistance are thus left to lament: what are Councils doing?; why do they 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'. Lastly, of course, it may be that Councils are resisting, but in ways which we have failed to sufficiently recognise, in that we could have been looking for political 'grandstanding' rather than actual practice.

The focus of this paper is on the questions which austerity now brings into focus concerning the role and nature of local government, its possibilities and potentials as a site for local political engagement with the effects of austerity. It is important here to recognise that the questions which are posed concern the role of local *authorities*- the councils, the institutions themselves, which may or may not be congruent and be connected to political struggles and resistances. In what ways does local government impact on, or serve to cohere, perhaps, these potential resistances is one question which is thus the focus of this paper. Where does local government- councils- actual institutions- fit into this? - can Local Government provide a focus for resistance, could we expect it to, how might it do it, and where would we find it? In order to assess this, I will be looking at the change, over time, of interpretations of local government 'freedom' to resist and where this leaves us now in our understandings of the possibility and the form of resistance now. In particular, I focus on the concept of the local state and subsequent interpretations of what constitutes the 'local' and in particular 'local politics'.

Traditionally, we may have sought to address the relative activity of local councils from the perspective of central-local relations, looking at the relative freedom from central government control, and/or autonomy to bring about local affects or reflect specific local

identities (Pratchett, 2004), or we may have used state-based theories to assess relative autonomy. However, such approaches have increasingly been perceived to too deterministic, paying too little attention to issues of agency and practice, and making a priori assumptions concerning the more or less hierarchical structure of governance arrangements. A more nuanced approach emphasises the resistances in the everyday practices of local settings. Here, we may find resistance in the 'mundane', the day-to-day, if only we look closely enough. We may also need to take a broader look at the meaning of local politics and recognise it in a much broader sense- as being about contestation over meanings, an on-going process rather than fixed, and bounded, in which meanings of 'central' and 'local' are contested, re-made and negotiated. Taking this line, then of course there is local resistance to be found, played out differently in different places, as central government initiatives interact with agency, specific micro-processes and local histories. Here, 'central government control' does not exist independently of action in specific contexts which bring it into meaning. Further, of course there is bound to be 'local politics' as it is inevitable- it concerns the construction of meanings, exclusions and inclusions (Griggs and Sullivan, 2012).

We have then, seen a deconstruction of 'traditional' views of the potential for autonomy and resistance and their replacement with a range of post-structural critiques which have challenged the coherence of abstract structures (Collinge, 2006). However, whilst these perspectives serve to foreground and restore to prominence both the 'local' and the political, there is no necessary connection of these to local government per se. Increasingly the spaces and scales within and over which local politics is played out are held to be contingent, contested, transient. Everything in these approaches, along with a range of broadly post-structuralist approaches now influencing the debate, seems to mitigate against boundaries and institutions acting as administrative 'containers' of local political engagement. This a hard enough target to achieve even taking the 'traditional' approach- in which local government boundaries have been determined by trying to achieve some kind of congruence between community sentiment, efficient and effective service delivery, and patterns of social and economic interaction. Traditional defences of local government in the UK have rested upon either its efficacy in delivering welfare services, whilst also allowing collective decision-making over the allocation of goods and services within a local context- the position put classically by LJ Sharpe in his seminal article in 1970, or upon an ethical defence of local autonomy based on liberal democratic theory (Chandler, 2008). As Stoker et al noted as early as 1996, both practical and theoretical developments had served to undermine both positions, leaving local government on very shaky normative foundations. Now all of the key terms involved in the discussion- 'local'; 'centre'; 'state'; 'freedom', 'power'; 'politics'; 'government'; 'place'; 'locality'; 'scale' have been re-imagined and are now more than ever 'up for grabs'.

The lexicon used to consider local government's role or 'power' vis-a vis the 'centre' is now, as can be seen here, to be used with extreme caution, and littered with inverted commas to indicate that, whilst we (I?) cannot think of better terms to use, we are aware of the essentially contested character of each one. A reflection on the role of local government may be expected to draw on a grammar which might include 'assemblage'; 'ambiguity'; 'practice'; 'mediated'; 'emotional' and even 'peopled'. As an example, let us briefly consider just one of the tenants of elected local government- representative democracy. Broadly deliberative and communicative approaches have undermined the primacy of representative democracy, replacing it with a more issue based approach which requires the inclusion of all who may be affected by a decision or issue. This raises questions concerning the scale/ boundary/ territory over which issues should legitimately be determined, and in turn calls into question the ability of local authorities, as bounded entities, to adequately 'contain' this

overlapping, issue-based politics. Further, post-structural approaches have brought into question the meaning of 'representation' and question whether it is necessarily related to election at all (Barnett, 2013)

In order to clarify some the issues and to contextualise this re-re-thinking of local government, in this paper I am going to take a brief look at one of the concepts which has previously been used to offer an understanding of the place for local government within a discourse of resistance or opposition- that is, *the local state,* using as a starting point and touchstone the example 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'). The reason for this choice is that 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.

Since that time, as noted, 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 are now differently understood. The mid-1970's to early 1980's can be said to represent the high point the application of the 'local state' in what we might consider to be an orthodox Marxist perspective. We can see that what may at one time have been seen as a class-based struggle which may or may tell us something about the autonomy/ radical potential of the 'local state', can also be interpreted as a highly contextualised conflagration of cultural, social and political factors, and from which the emotional aspects (as with other such acts of 'rebellion' or defiance') may have been neglected).

<u>The Clay Cross story in brief</u>

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 chauffer-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.

This short history is used to set 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 Moscows' which could form an alternative to the central state was overtaken by in the post-war period in which the state was seen 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). 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 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 sate' 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.

The re-introduction of local contingency and agency into this study of local government resistance raises important issues for our consideration of consideration of the role of councils amidst austerity. What combinations of factors will be necessary for 'resistance' to emerge? What form might it take in different locations? How and why would local councils be involved?. We can continue to unpick what 'the local state' may be or mean in order to shed some light here. 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 have come to potentially see resistance everywhere and serve to highlight the difficulty in locating a role for local government.

Indeed, in terms of offering possible insights and in terms of academic fashionability, 'the local state' did not have a long shelf-life. 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).

There is not space here to do justice to the wide range of literature from a variety of disciplines which could be drawn upon here; particularly influential was Jessop's development of the 'Strategic Relational' state which allowed for contingency, selectivity and for agency (MacKinnon and Shaw, 2010). A range of perspectives served to undermine unitary concepts associated with the debate- power, state, place etc; agency and practice became more prominent- as an a practice/ agency based 'peopled' state came into focus (Jones, 2007), with state being seen a political process perpetually in motion rather than a fixed entity. Here the state is not perceived as pre-existing the practices of agents and is to be found in the mundane, day to day 'prosaics' of everyday life (the 'statization' of everyday life Painter, 2006). This more 'anthropological' take allows us to potentially see the state everywhere, and weakens the basis for looking at institutions of government per se as objects of study. 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. 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). However, it is here 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).

Such perspectives have both built on and informed a questioning of the scale and extent of the boundaries or 'containers' of both state effects and the local public realm. Traditional notions of hierarchy and scale are brought into question (Griggs and Sullivan, 2013), with Marston et all arguing, for example, for the notion of 'scale' to be dismissed completely and replaced with a 'flat ontology' (Marston et al, 2005). As Cochrane and Clarke (2013, p.20)

note ‘little about this geography will be straightforwardly local’- meaning effective local politics must operate in multiple spaces, including supra-local ones- a politics of place beyond place’ (p.22). ‘Topological’ approaches here replace ‘topographical’ ones, leading to a rejection of a ‘cartographical anxiety’ (Painter, 2008, p. 3) and requiring recognition of ‘a different cartography for our politics’ (Allen, 2004, p. 31), a ‘more spatially curious account of the whereaboutness of government….’ (p. 29). New forms of political alignment are envisaged with include both proximate and distantiated relations and interactions. Thus, according to Amin, the local public realm/ political arena is composed of ‘heterogeneity juxtaposed with close proximity’ (2004, P. 38) and the local public sphere is not a territorial given- it contains varied and ‘porous’ (Painter, 2006, p.764) geographies of connectivity and cannot be determined territitorially.

Given these insights, where might we look for ‘local’ politics- and resistance, what is the nature of the political realm, and what is its connection with the institution of local government?. On the one hand, ‘local state’ theories restricted the politics to struggles over the provision of certain services, with local populations having more or less agency in these struggles. On the other hand, the perspectives set out above indicate that we find resistance everywhere, and that it may often have a ‘local’ character, but often not. Spaces and opportunities are for resistance are here to be found in the ‘gaps’ in interpretations and practices to be found, creating what Allen calls a ‘honeycomb for politics’ (Allen, 2004, p.30). However, there is a danger that we see resistance either everywhere or nowhere- we se it as either all encompassing or so finely ingrained into everyday practice that it appears ‘mundane’ (Allen, 2004). If everything is ruled in, then where can we find specifically ‘local’ effects? More so, where do we find a place for local government in either of these perspectives?

In taking account of the above concerns, we can perhaps offer some defences which offer hope in this respect. The adoption of a flat ontology does not necessarily mean that we have to reject notions of the ‘local’ or indeed of ‘local politics’ as having distinctive characteristics. A flat ontology is not necessarily a smooth one, as Amin (2004) points out. Politics is here reconceptualised rather than removed- as Griggs and Sullivan argue (2013), local politics has to be understood in a new light as being concerned with contests over boundaries, not only physical and institutional, but also concerning what are issues for public debate and concern- what shape and form the ‘public realm’ or the ‘local’ issues take. Concepts like ‘the state’ and the local remain highly politically contentious as their scope and meaning is continually negotiated and never settled. (This connects with Mitchell’s view of the state as a necessary construct, an effect, idea or appearance Mitchell, 2005; Painter, 2010). Local politics is thus not restricted to the ‘formal’ but neither is it in a sense ‘everywhere’, in that its form will take at least temporary settlements. As Allmendinger and Haughton (2011, p.91) note, following Ranciere, the political can never be foreclosed and ’the inherently antagonistic nature of the social is only ever temporarily stabilised’. Thus, politics will always re-emerge., but this suggests that attempts to ‘displace’ political engagement into bounded, containers (ie- local authorities) can at best only be a temporary settlement which will in turn generate its own response. This gives us a much wider conception of the local political arena. As noted, there has traditionally been a debate over the extent to which local government boundaries can ‘contain’ the collective/ political/ community, but now we seem to have even greater difficulty in arguing for a place for local government in this respect.

We can, though, offer further defences which allow us to continue to argue for locality as a site for political engagement, with effects which do not entirely disintegrate into ‘mundane practice’. As Jones (2012) notes, the state may be everywhere but it not the same everywhere. A flat ontology is not necessarily smooth. The exercise of ‘power’ by central

authorities always has effects which are contingent and mediated- allowing for a richer understanding of spatial politics where the local is understood as the 'spatial juxtaposition' of propinquity and connectivity…. 'This means seeing the local political arena as an arena of claims and counter-claims, agreements and coalitions that are always temporary and fragile, always the product of negotiation and changing intersectional dynamics, always spreading out to wherever a claim on turf or on proximate strangers is made, or to where novelty is generated by juxtaposition' (Amin, 2004, p.39).

The local is thus a site of lived space contested and experienced as lived space. Practices will be played out unevenly in differing locations; power here is a topological and relational effect of social interaction, and is constituted differently in space and time; this mediated nature gives the possibility for political agency- openings 'fall out' (Allen, 2004, p.20). As Allen (2003) has pointed out, there is a difference between state resources and the actual effects produced in localities. Both the 'local' and 'place' do matter because they are 'Situated places of transactional intensity' (Barnett and Bridge, 2013 p.1036)- the sites where challenges to meanings and contests are seen visibly- they are the spaces where flows are 'temporarily halted' and thus act as 'generators of democratic energy', serving as reminders of the 'stakes' which are present in living and contesting amidst difference. (Amin, 2004, p.43). Space and place are thus not merely backdrops to social relations and politics but actually help to constitute them- a 'peopled state of momentary and spatialised encounters' (Jones, 2012, p.819). When practical politics is engage in, then a discrete, bounded space and may be 'imagined' but is a vital constituent of practical politics (Moore, 2008, Barnett and Bridge, 2013). Following on from this, institutions are necessary, but their scale is never fixed nor clear- what is needed is experimentation and 'institutional imagination' (Barnett and Bridge, 2013, p.1024).

What is perhaps important here, then, is that despite the long theoretical 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 it 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).However, despite having established that 'local politics', then, may still be a factor in potentially providing resistance to austerity, we are still some way from finding a firm footing for local government in this. As noted, the debate over the lack of congruence between local government boundaries and the actual realities of local political engagement is an old one, well known to anyone who has reflected on local government reforms in the UK. Again, as noted, earlier 'rethinking' has raised similar issues concerning the lack of congruence between a 'new' political landscape and sought new normative defences of local government for 'new times' (Stoker, 1996, Phillips, 1996).

As Purcell (2013) notes, the public realm has been reconfigured, but we are challenged with coming up with positive defences for local government within the framework of a radical local politics. Is it the best that we can do to offer a view of local government as a series of temporary settlements or experiments which can only fleetingly, if at all, capture and contribute to the possible myriad forms of resistance? How temporary can it be (the virtual local authority?). For practical purposes, we know that local government have some degree of permanence. We could look to more frequent changes to boundaries and configurations in response to local popular calls for change (Copus et al, 2013), or perhaps follow others who have argued for the benefits of a variety of tiers to accommodate the changing geographies of interests (following Chandler and others). However, given the perspectives

we have looked at, these responses are never going to be sensitive enough. As Barnett Bridge (2013, p. 1036) argue, there is a need for institutional designs which somehow offer a way out of an impasse caused by being caught between fixed bounded institutions on the one hand, and a focus on the 'mundane' practices . Again, it could be argued that these are long-standing concerns, simply re-stated. However, it is argued that they become particularly important again if at all we want to make out sound defences for looking to local government to 'resist' austerity

## 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 may 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, social movements, 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. The '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). An alternative approach is offered by Shaw (2012) who has written of the 'resilient' local authority, concerned 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 Whtitfield, 2012)

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. 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. 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, next, 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. 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 a tool in the 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). An age old issue- more so now?

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. 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 thus 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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