

## **Beyond sweat equity: community organizing against the “Third Way”**

**A talk by Dr Heather Watkins at Sneinton Alchemy, April 16th 2013**

Between 2009 and 2012, I undertook a PhD at the University of Nottingham which attempted to examine what it meant for community organizers and activists to operate in a changing political environment. This ranged from the end of Labour’s New Deal for Communities, through a revival of localism and social entrepreneurialism, and into an era of financial contraction, public spending cutbacks, and “Big Society.” Three community action groups in the East Midlands allowed me to work with them to examine what this meant for people working at the “grassroots”: one of these was Sneinton Alchemy. Along the way, they helped me to identify some of the key questions and challenges for community organizers:

- What is a community? What gives them their special motivation to work together?
- What does it mean to participate? Does it put you under pressure to change who you are, and what you are trying to do?
- Is there a difference between building solidarity, and networking?
- Can you harmonise building enduring shared interests with competitive behavior?
- Can you find a way to work with the local state and market, and still keep what makes you “different”?
- What is “good sense” and is any of this “political”?

In this short presentation, I will outline some possible answers to these questions, identify the key pressures which present challenges to community organizers working with the local state, and draw some conclusions about the qualities which give local community action its power and potential.

*Heather Watkins*

### ***1 Introduction***

There are many different ways of seeing local action.

- Some people see localism a distraction from finding national solutions to bigger problems.
- Some see the local as a mainly reactionary, protectionist place. “There’s nothing for you here.”
- But many others see it as a place from which we can learn to challenge the forces that directly affect us.

One of my starting points was Coates & Silburn’s, 1967 study of St Ann’s, pre-development. This was met with horror by some participants in Sneinton! But I’ll get to that.

Coates & Silburn thought deprivation and being let down by the state made people acquiescent, and thought the answer was for people to show greater “belligerence in their own interests.”

The approach to community participation typified by New Labour in the 1990s is much less political, and much more about stabilizing the failures of the market at times of crisis – much of it based on a mixture of local enterprise, and low-level co-operation, mostly voluntary.

**However**, Ruth Johns’ 2002 study of St Ann’s took a different view from both. Local communities don’t need to be prodded or fostered - they have **always** been active. It’s the processes of government which pushed them to the margins: centralized planning, the individualization of problem-solving, and the globalised market. They used what space they had, but it was under constant attack. I started to be interested in the space in which people had to work.

Now, Localism is in fashion. The provisions of the Localism Act 2011 are as follows:

- “Empowering communities” (decentralizing some decision making).
- “Opening up public services” to tender.
- “Promotion of social action.”

Eric Pickles (Today Programme, 13 Dec 2010): Called this “A new constitutional arrangement” in which **personal responsibility** replaces **guaranteed state provision**, with the “local” as the key site for the shift.

BUT, that’s the government’s view. I wanted to flip this upside down and examine what any of this means,

politically, for the “grassroots”. And the answer is, many things.

## ***2 What does it mean to participate at the grassroots?***

Community has no one meaning, politically.

For conservatives, the local is seen as a way of retreating from the uncertainty and challenges of globalization. For progressives, it’s a place where alternative ideas can be produced – social and moral economies. There’s a long history to this:

- Medieval Guilds – economic mutual support.
- Levellers, Diggers and Ranters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century – new forms of dissent.
- Owenite self-governing co-operative villages of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- Chartist Land Plans of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the resettlement of workers onto smallholdings, eg at Heronsgate in Hertfordshire.
- Co-operative movement of the mid 19<sup>th</sup> to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Anarchist communities of Kropotkin, based on Mutual Aid and exchange, and local production.
- Post-industrial reconstructions, eg the Brynmawr Experiment of the Depression, based on diversification of employment, employment on infrastructure building projects in exchange for food, community youth clubs.

BUT: many of these were ended by unequal battles with political and economic forces operating at different levels.

They show that you can’t “retreat”. You have to engage with political economy as you find it.

You have to find a way of dealing with the state and laws, the press, lack of capital, resources and skills, and hostile commercial competition.

## ***3 The revival of Alinsky-influenced community action***

One of the most influential theorists and practitioners of community organization in recent times was Saul Alinsky in the US, from the 1930s-1960s. A sometimes controversial figure, Alinsky’s ideas have seen a revival which has surprised some. His group the Industrial Areas Foundation, and other associate groups, use a form of community mobilization which was taken up by Obama, and combines two functions: self-help AND campaigning pressure group. The IAF describe themselves as: “**non-ideological** and strictly non-partisan, **but** proudly, publicly and persistently political.”

Their “Living Wage” campaigns have been enthusiastically taken up by Citizens UK and Nottingham Citizens.

Alinsky felt that the key to communities realizing their potential was a process **self-education**. That meant

- Citizenship was not about “responsibility”, but about understanding how our relationships work, both within communities and between communities and the state.
- Learning to deal with the state, while asserting your own sense of difference from it.
- Having the space to challenge existing institutions and processes.

*This raises some questions about what approach you take to community organisation:*

Do you want to be a “Community Organiser” host, or a local service provider, a “beacon” site, or do you want to be a campaigning citizens’ organization?

One is about building trust and problem solving. The other is combative, about meeting “power with power.”

One is about co-operating with new forms of “governance” or distributed power. The other is about democratization, people learning to be active in defence of their own interests at different levels.

### **Can you be both?**

Can you engage with power and still keep what makes you distinctive?

A lot of people, both within the state, and at the grassroots, have a stake in the “local” and making it what they want it to be.

#### ***4 My framework for approaching this***

What's the problem with a "Third Way" or a "Big Society" approach?

Third Way: sees community action as a partial replacement for state welfare. The state has suppressed natural co-operation and self-sufficiency, and needs to withdraw.

**BUT:**

- 1) It romanticizes community as naturally homogenous.
- 2) It puts all the burden of responsibility onto individual communities – pays little attention to their broader historical circumstances, economic, social and political.
- 3) That it actually represents a narrowing of what local democracy is about – market value dominates. Deregulation appears to set communities free to participate, but attempts to limit the scope of that participation. But history tells us that communities cannot be "engineered", and social gains almost always come from the bottom-up. A degree of mistrust of what others want you to be and do can be healthy! (James Scott).

**Antonio Gramsci:** He saw civil society as neither inherently progressive or regressive, but a battleground, somewhere where different ideas and practices fight it out for acceptance, and where we learn new skills, part of a historical process. So I decided to look instead at three areas which seem to define what community action groups do:

- 1) How a community is formed by its relationship to "political economy" – a relationship between state, society, and the market – forces which unite the community.
- 2) What it means for communities to work with new forms of governance – a set of dominant practices which can be at odds with their difference and sense of identity – forces which often divide the community, and have implications for how the relationship between activists and "community" actually works.
- 3) How groups rooted in specific local struggles ("militant particularisms") might learn to punch above their weight and challenge the relationships around them.

He also provides the idea of the importance of "**good sense**" – critical, acquired, specific, local knowledge which is an important political tool.

This isn't about "good" and "bad" communities, active and passive, "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. It's about how communities are produced, how they understand their situation, and why and how they practice, and this comes from their response to particular local conditions. Most of the world's most successful local or community-based movements are connected to particular places and times which give them their own logic, a motivation and will to produce something different, collectively, which transcends any rational incentives from the state.

*Examples:*

- Latin America's local solidarity economy is linked to resistance to oppressive dictatorships.
- Mondragon Corporation in the Basque region is a response to the Spanish Civil War.
- Coin St Community Builders is a specific response to the political economy of London's South Bank.
- The Scottish Community Land Network is seen as a partial reversal the Highland Clearances.
- The Sherwood Energy Village in Ollerton was an act of "defiance" after the pit closures, but was defeated by the global economic crash.

What's your logic?

#### ***5 My empirical focus***

Why Nottingham? Because of a history of engagements with the state over community development:

- City Challenge, 1990s, led to Renewal Trust.
- New Deal for Communities, 2001-2010, Radford & Hyson Green, controversial.
- A shift towards Community Development Trusts – Meadows, Lenton.

Grassroots groups, NOT legacy bodies from New Deal for Communities or City Challenge, though this was

partially an accident!

None of my three cases were areas of extreme deprivation, which tend to attract significant funding, so a DIY culture was already in evidence.

- TLC, Lenton: an area with a rapidly changing population, wealth inequality, physically divided. The first accredited Community Development Trust in Nottingham.
- North Notts Community Area, Worksop: Post-coalfield reconstruction, physical isolation, and fierce autonomy.
- Sneinton Alchemy: Heterogenous population, external facilitation by NEF, economic focus, contrast with Renewal Trust.

## **6 Findings 1: Political economy**

Local geography alone is not enough to create a regional shared identity.

The way you experience shifts in political economy is more important for binding people together.

What is political economy? A particular conjunction of relationships between state, market and civil society over the distribution of capital and profits. Particular places, institutions, values and agents become validated. So regional identity, **based in solid experience**, is valuable. Community is based in shared economic fortunes. It gives you both motivation, and a shared analysis on which to act. It affects how you diagnose your problems, and therefore what the answers are.

Most people I spoke to rejected external labels of “deprivation”, because they felt it actually rendered people passive.

There are issues of worklessness; immobility; apathy; crime; cultures of individualism – however, these are made, they don’t just happen. Local people have their own understanding of how these have been produced by long processes of political economy. In particular:

- (i) Experiences of **housing**, provision, re-engineering, neglect, polarization.
- (ii) **Employment**: deindustrialisation – a shift from manufacturing to knowledge, service, retail.

In Lenton, they have huge physical and social barriers to overcome.

In Worksop, they have experienced radical political interventions in their economy.

Neither of these affect Sneinton as much! So what defines Sneinton?

- Geographically defined, and autonomous, with relatively integrated housing stock.
- Culturally diverse and adaptable, although with some fracturing along class and ethnic/cultural lines.
- A mixed economy, based on small independent businesses.
- An emphasis on defending its physical integrity, after the experiences of St Ann’s: a process both of exclusion, and individualization, putting people in competition for the best spots.

This tends to give the community:

- A sense of shared moral ownership of the place itself, based on living and working there.
- A real suspicion of state-driven development, and a rejection of technocratic “solutions” from outside.

SO: Place alone is not enough unless you share an experience and an analysis. The first job is to build on your internal sense of shared experience. What do you have in common that brings people together?

## **7 Findings 2: The effects of participating in governance**

BUT, you don’t operate in a vacuum. There are two “realities” associated with being a “community anchor”.

Deep participation and democracy, rejection of hierarchy in favour of trust and respect, collective ownership, local knowledge, community building/advocacy, “passion,” strong mutual commitment, co-operation, willing to work for low/no reward (“sweat equity”).

Vs

Shallow participation based on periodic “consultation”, differences between participants and non-participants, emergence of hierarchies, instrumental and individualistic, professional knowledge, service provision, external incentives, competitive, enterprising.

One gives you legitimacy inside the community, the other outside.

Pursuing funding from investors such as CommunityBuilders puts groups under pressure to consolidate as a particular kind of organization, and “professionalise”.

**Professionalisation:** business planning; managerial control of spending; the recruitment of professional expertise to the Board.

This sound fine, but it comes with some baggage: certain values become accepted as “given”: individualism; hierarchy and bureaucracy.

In fact, much community funding is more about process than outcomes, and this is a cause of real frustration to communities.

There are 2 key problems here:

- 1) **Who is governing what you do?** Do you accept sponsorship from Tesco's, or does that compromise your ability to resist them when you might need to?
- 2) More subtly, does even the language/discourse of professionalization affect who you are, and your legitimacy with other community members?

**There are other values!**

- Fair employment practices.
- The ideological importance of economic and social mobility to participation.
- Forms of shared local ownership as part of a moral economy.
- In particular, the importance local people's involvement taking priority over professional people?

The commitment to the group, collective “experiential” identity (or good sense) remains more important than the ability to liaise externally, because this is what gives you your legitimacy with the rest of your community.

What characterized Sneinton?:

- Unusual emphasis on grassroots participation, and skepticism of state interventions in favour the NEF approach, catalyzing the community from within.
- Having faced divisions within the community over issues of bringing profit into community work, Alchemy was sensitive to community legitimacy, and rejected claims of “leadership”, in favour of a co-ordinator role.
- More keen than others to explore forms of collective ownership as a way of deepening participation.

BUT, is Sneinton's position really just an outcome of operating outside the service/financial pressures felt by TLC/NNCA? Or a choice?

### **8 Findings 3: Different ways of being political**

*What kind of citizens/subjects are we?*

- Are we **libertarians** and consumers, rejecting the state for free individual choice?
- Responsible **republicans**, taking on the role of the state (either stabilizing or autonomous)?
- **Socio-liberals**, balancing demanding our rights and meeting our responsibilities? Both “empowered” and “stakeholding”.
- Or a new “**counter-public**” – redefining the public space and the relation with the state?

The one thing everybody challenged was the idea that communities can be fully autonomous from the state. All were aware of operating within a network of other power players, for example:

- Big commercial players are economically privileged.
- New Academies are politically privileged.

What kind of place do you want in this picture?

Everyone told me they were “not political”, but this generally meant not affiliated to any party. Everyone I spoke to **was** attempting to develop something different, in which the state still has a role; but the community also has a capacity to develop its own vision, in a new territory.

“Networking” is NOT an end in itself – it’s a means to an end.

In spite of a pressure to leave former conflicts behind, this means hanging on to what makes you different, what motivated you to get started in the first place.

- In Lenton, a rejection of economic privatization in favour of something more humanistic, the importance of happiness and reciprocity.
- In Worksop, the assertion of a shared culture, with special emphasis on economic opportunities for young people.

In Alchemy, there is a particular awareness of local politics.

Skepticism of the secure Labour City Council, their tendency towards managerial centralization and hierarchy, and a perceived slowness to adopt the discourses of localism.

This skepticism is based in real events, and not just historical ones - the cricket project, the Victoria Baths consultation.

Therefore, “localism” becomes a way of breaking down a particularly unproductive form of local state politics, an opportunity to negotiate a new interface between the local state and the community.

This involves developing some political strategies which redefine self-interest:

- (i) Overcoming turf wars – “stakeholder” discourse ties participation to control of a particular resource, and this just leads to more division.
  - (ii) Strategic collaboration with parts of the state and other agencies, without co-option to any.
  - (ii) A degree of informal subversion, which allows you to keep your own identity.
- I.e, co-operating from a position of suspicion, not trust! (see Scott).

Maintain a space from the state allows you to develop your own mutual practices; and a stronger sense of your own alternative provides a stronger position from which to set the agenda when you do meet with the state.

## 9 Conclusions

Community organization does not need to be a response to the state or dominated by it! It has always happened and has its own purposes – but it is the processes of government which have excluded and/or managed it, eg individualization. Neither more state, nor more community, is the answer, but a renegotiation of the processes by which they interface.

You may not want to “change the world”, but you do want to recover agency, contribute to regeneration, assert more mutual values, and change relations with the local state, rejecting “processes from outside”.

Alinsky: community organization is a process of **learning about power**, and constructing collective interests. The most valuable tool you have to do that is “Good sense”! What is it? It’s not what any intellectual/ technocrat will tell you, and it’s not populist received wisdom either. It is:

- 1) Identifying the material and cultural forces, at multiple levels, that affect your local trajectory.
- 2) The development of a clear sense of collective purpose, what makes you “different”.
- 3) The practical acquired everyday knowledge and tactics to advance your case with the state, while preserving that space of difference.

The more secure you are with 1 (political economy) and 2 (identity), the easier it is to do 3.

This requires space and time for collective reflection!

But if you make that time, these could form the basis of a new “right to the city” (Harvey) – a genuine democratization of the way that capital surpluses are redistributed in the places where we live.