

Addressing the elephant in the room: What's *the local* in local government studies?

Within the field of local government studies there has long been a tendency to conceive and engage with 'the local' in a normative way – focusing on its alleged inherently 'good nature' without interrogating what the local actually *is* and *means*. In this reflective provocation, drawing on the case of England, we contend that failure to address this existential question risks pushing local government studies into a cul-de-sac whereby it fails to benefit from the potential of multidisciplinary dialogues, drawing ever tighter boundaries around the field. In response, we shift attention to how we might harness the plurality of the local, suggesting that the real value of the local, both as a concept and practice, lies in its fuzzy and often problematic nature. We argue that embracing, rather than dismissing, this intrinsic character of the local is essential not just to capture its value, but also to open up new avenues in the way we study and conceive it.

In 1972, shortly before the launch of *Local Government Studies*, Jim Bulpitt bemoaned a 'traditional orthodoxy' that unproblematically lauded the fundamental contribution of elected local government, decentralisation, and community participation to the workings of modern democratic states. Half a century later, in the current conjuncture of the demands for a new municipalism, community power and commoning, we might conclude that little has changed. The positive association of the local with democratic renewal continues. Even if it has waxed and waned over time, it has persisted, always there, acting as a sort of benign beam of light in the corner of the room.

Yet, it is equally the case that the contours and source of that light have remained distinctively ill-defined. Who, for example, can refuse the old adage that 'all politics is local'? As an often repeated maxim of politics, it foregrounds the value of the normative engagement with the local in ways which many of us cannot easily resist. But what does it tell us of the complex politics and contested boundaries of the local? In the absence of such critical and in-depth characterisations of what the local actually means, it descends into little more than an inescapable truism that the engagement of citizens with politics and policies is experienced through the everyday practices of living.

Of course, this questioning of the appeal of the local is not to argue that the established perspectives and narratives that constitute the field of local government studies lack an understanding or conceptualisation of the local. Such narratives, at least in the English context, of local government transformation, increasing centralisation, the hollowing out of local institutions, and the imposition of austerity, are all informed by implicit assumptions and critical understandings of the spaces of the local. But such understandings are too often rendered invisible, taken-for-granted or insufficiently addressed. In other words, apart from notable exceptions (Barnett 2020; Wills 2016; Cochrane, 2016; Allen and Cochrane 2007), the local has been the 'elephant in the room' in much of the field of local government studies which has privileged the study of the institutions and practices of *government* at the expense of the *local* (Cochrane, 2016). And in the process, taken-for-granted assumptions have, we

suggest, remained too closed or shut off from a persistent and challenging problematisation of what constitutes the local, a dialogue that is often taking place in other disciplines.

In this paper, we follow in the steps of Barnett (2020) and Cochrane (2016) and call for a refocusing on the 'local' in local government studies. Drawing on the case of English local government, we argue that a turn to the local opens up new ways of better capturing the complexities of the politics, policies and alternative geographies that cut across communities and places. It establishes a fruitful dialogue with other fields and interrogations across different disciplines, while recognising the porous boundaries of the government and indeed the local. Finally, it challenges established narratives of the decline of local government studies positing it that the field of local government studies has not declined but has migrated to other disciplines and areas of inquiry.

In making such claims, our paper echoes many of the arguments of the contribution of Neil Barnett (2024) to this special issue. Reading both contributions in tandem, we argue, opens up a shared but twin-tracked critique of the 'local', not least the continued commitment to the 'benefits' of local government, despite the erosion of many of its underpinning foundations. While Barnett privileges, we suggest, the continued 'grip' of local government and the need for a renewed normative defence of local institutions, we dovetail our analysis with these calls, advocating for the analysis of the different logics of the local at play in different conjunctures. Understanding different articulations of the local as 'competitive foils' (Lichbach, 2003) allows us, we suggest, to gain a better analytical purchase on the messy and contested politics and policies of local government.

Alternative narratives

In recent decades, the enthusiasm and support for the local has been increasingly accompanied by alternative, if not overtly conflicting, meta-narratives. First, a narrative of centralisation and crisis that seems to threaten the local from many angles. In the case of England, this tells a story of growing centralization of power and resources, which has led to a weakening of the local in its relationship with the centre. Coupled with nearly 15 years of austerity, this has generated a hollowing out of local government functions and capacities (Barnett, Giovannini and Griggs, 2021), bringing many local authorities to the brink of collapse, if not full bankruptcy (LGA, 2023). While the inception of devolution deals could have offered an opportunity to rebalance the status and power of the local level, in practice the top-down nature of the process has generated competition and a perception, from the local perspective, that new devolved institutions such as Combined Authorities and Metro Mayors are hoovering powers up towards the novel 'meso-level' they represent (Giovannini, 2021). Although the idea of devolving authority to subnational bodies has gained wide traction (Davies and Giovannini, 2024), the practice of devolution has done little in the way of re-empowering the local – both at conceptual and everyday level.

Second, and relatedly, the idea of the local has been tainted by a narrative of interdependencies, complexities and multiplicities. Planetary urbanisation and its alternative logics have increasingly been projected into the local, drawing attention to the interplay of different logics, be it the local or the urban, across places; indeed, appeals to place have come to step in for appeals to the local. Equally, state restructuring has driven institutional and policy churn which has compounded the local dimension in its meaning and functions to the

point that it is often hard to understand what constitutes the practices of the local or where its porous boundaries are to be set. Indeed, the 'rise of governance' (Jessop, 1998; Marsh, 2011) and metagovernance (Jessop, 2016, 2003; Meuleman, 2008) dynamics have blurred not only borders but also lines of responsibility and accountability processes, which are now dispersed across a wide net of 'local' actors and institutions. Yet, simultaneously, hierarchical dynamics persist, as the central state continues to be pivotal in shaping governance networks (Jessop, 2003).

The boundaries between such narratives are porous. They can be articulated and brought together in different ways. Narratives of decline and marginalisation have therefore led some to conclude that local government is neither local nor government (Copus, 2010; Leach and Copus, 2023), directing further scrutiny on the institutional power of local government and its capacity to lead processes of local democratic transformation. Others have doubted the fortitude of local government and its willingness or agency to resist central government, even going as far as to underline the self-protectionism of local government as the 'last creature in the swamp' (John, 2013; Davies *et al.*, 2020).

Indeed, coalescing with such narratives of managed decline, we have witnessed much 'talk' of the collapse of local government studies. As Sanford (2024) highlights in this special issue, in the English context, recent decades have been punctuated by closure of university degrees, falling student numbers and lost research centres – pushing local government studies increasingly to the margins especially of the wider political and social sciences and adding further flames to the fire of local government decline.

But equally, in the last decade or so, it cannot be denied that narratives of complexities and multiplicities have been deployed to support new forms of municipalism and the development of reform and policy agendas; agenda and programmes that while lauding the local, have often shifted its *locus* and focus (Barnett, Griggs and Sullivan, 2020). In fact, and again in England, community empowerment and place have become infused with multiple practices and demands, such that the local has been attached to the 'blame-shifting' ideology of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government's 'Big Society' and 'Localism' agendas, the new municipalism of community wealth development, and the democratising initiatives of the commons (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2011; Thompson, 2021).

Grappling with the local on the horizon

What do these narratives tell us about the local? A cursory glance might suggest that they tell us relatively little. Appeals to the local morph and evolve as they punctuate dominant narratives and policy statements, with the local deployed in one instance as a tier of government or geographic scale, only to be portrayed as a competitive space or an anti-bureaucratic metaphor in the paragraphs that follow (Cochrane, 2016). Of course, each of these multiple articulations of the local can be found infused throughout the volumes of *Local Government Studies*. They are married to different rationalities for the study of local government, be it as a testbed to explore the macro-tensions of state restructuring, as an exemplar of community politics and new social movements or as the critical moment in the implementation of the emerging technologies of metagovernance and depoliticization.

That these contrasting narratives of the local can co-exist might seem odd, but it is not surprising. For as the work of Bulpitt (1972) insinuated, and that of Barnett (2020) rightly

underlines, the appeal of the local lies not in what it is in its current form, but in what *it might be*. Returning to our opening metaphor, for many the appeal of the local is always that of a beam of light, the ‘local-to-come’ or the promise of the ‘local on the horizon’, that shines light on the ‘dark reality’ of the multiple crises that affect it – thus towards what it could or might be become if the good in it was unshackled. As such, the local-to-come masks differences in the present by offsetting or displacing them into the future.

However, underpinning the plurality of the local-to-come, we suggest there sits an increasing starting point for the investigation of the ‘here and now’: the dichotomy of the local. On the one hand, the local has become an increasingly constrained or fixed institutional space of government: well-established narratives of decline and marginalisation of the institutional power of local government have shed further scrutiny on its capabilities to lead processes of local democratic transformation and resistance. On the other hand, the local has become ever more plural or hybrid: narratives of fluidity thus establish how multiple stakeholders navigate or construct more or less connected geographies of the local.

Making sense of the particularities of the local and its boundaries thus becomes a core task of the work of policy (Papanastasiou, 2019, p.3). But we might go further, suggesting that making sense of the local has become a core task of the world of the scholars of local government. For failing to address this existential question, we argue, risks pushing local government studies – as the field concerned with ‘the local’ – into a cul-de-sac whereby the local and its boundaries are either too porous and fluid to be grasped or are forced into too narrow and reductionist pre-determined boundaries. Resonating with the narratives of decline previously outlined, we run the risk of retreating to narrow concentration on the local as the institutions of government and the mechanisms of representative democracy, which is no doubt part of local government studies, but it is not all of local government studies. To liberally cite Jane Wills, ‘taking’ the local ‘seriously requires rethinking the fundamentals of our spatial imaginaries about political power and the role of government’ (2016, p.3). It requires us to follow the geographies of policies, to examine the movement of actors in and out of the local across different spaces and temporality, and within these different spaces of local to capture how local government acts or not as an anchor for different ‘worlds’.

Embracing the contested nature of the local

This begs the question of what the repercussions of these contrasting tensions might be for the future of local government studies. As Barnett (2020) aptly points out, a potential frustration is this privileging of the local-to-come or pushing the local onto the horizon imposes a taken-for-granted acceptance of the concept. In this way, the local becomes a sort of privileged space to which we aspire, while ‘what exists’ is almost automatically portrayed as a problematic site, for instance, of government control and top-down, structural constraints. Current debates on devolution in England provide a clear example of these dynamics. Critiques of the centrally controlled and contractual nature of ‘devo deals’ (Sandford, 2017; Giovannini, 2021) are often marked by calls for a need to open up towards ‘the local’ – arguing that deeper and more meaningful devolution could be achieved *only if* the focus shifted towards this dimension. Yet, what this local that ‘needs to be unleashed’ actually is often remains a compound matter, encompassing a myriad of ‘locals’ – referring, for example, to institutions such as councils or combined authorities, place-based

communities, forms of citizens participation and co-production (Davies and Giovannini, 2024; Giovannini and Griggs, 2022).

There are of course real, structural constraints to the local that find their roots in persistent austerity, ingrained over-centralization, and unfinished reforms (Barnett, Giovannini and Griggs, 2021). Yet, the risk underpinning these is that they seem to be seeking the local as a space to be corrected, while downplaying the interstices of resistance that punctuate everyday practices of the local – what Barnett, Griggs and Sullivan (2020) call the ‘here and now’ from which we can build alternatives.

As simple as it may sound, we can start by agreeing that the local is an inherently contested concept. Drawing on Abbott (1995), we recognise that what brings a field together is its boundaries, less its shared essence, and more its understanding of what it is not. Boundaries of the local coalesce ‘things’, bringing policies, problems organisations and practices together in particular logics of the local (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). But they also separate ‘things’ from others, an exclusionary dynamic of which we should be constantly aware. Understood as such, the local on the horizon can be framed and utilised as a *mobilising narrative* that brings together a series of different approaches and a rich interdisciplinarity. Indeed, this perspective allows us to capture the deep value of the local on the horizon, focusing on its ability – as a concept and a practice – to enable a series of different ways of talking about the ‘making of’ the local to exist alongside each other.

In this way, the local on the horizon, in its multiple expressions and meanings, comes to provide and contest the boundaries of the field. Such boundaries might be fuzzy, messy and fluid – but we should accept this as a distinctive feature of the local, rather than seeing it as a shortcoming or a sign of decline. Equally, it allows us to go beyond the pursuit of a narrow definition of the local, that would just lead to a fruitless task of trying to unpick its stable primary elements. Rather we accept that there are multiple ways of talking about the local.

By way of conclusion, accepting this plurality of the local leads us to temper concerns that the field of local government studies is in terminal decline. It may well be full of green shoots with the study of the local having migrated to other departments across the university, not least political geography departments in which there is now a plurality of approaches all investigating the spaces and times of the local. Moving forward, however, we suggest that the scorecard of local government studies needs to become more ‘balanced’, investigating further the local as a counterbalance to its sustained focus on government. This demands us all to put our conceptions of the local upfront and bring them out and into dialogue with each other. Evaluating the different logics of the local at play in different conjunctures and investigating how and why different ‘locals’ become dominant will, we suggest, provide valuable insights into local agency and better justify the long-held support for local politics. What could be better for *Local Government Studies* which is, we suggest, the ‘natural home’ for such debates and dialogues.

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