

The political identities of neighbourhood planning in England

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Abstract

The collective empowerment imagined in the government rhetoric of localism bears little resemblance to the market model of aggregative democracy that characterises much of the practice of participation in spatial planning. This paper explores one of the rare statutory strategies to engage collective participation and to mobilise the neighbourhood as an institution of spatial planning. In a study of neighbourhood planning in England it investigates the new political identities that emerged and the conflicts and antagonism that accompanied them. Drawing on the work of philosopher Chantal Mouffe, the paper explores the significance of the political practices that resulted for the state strategy of localism.

Key words:

Participatory democracy, neighbourhood planning, collective identity, localism

Introduction

The enthusiastic promotion of participation in public policy has accompanied the ascendance of the neighbourhood as the space of privileged knowledge and empowered democracy (Mohan & Stokke 2000). In neighbourhood planning decisions, however, participation is more often associated with a market model of aggregative democracy than the self-determination imagined in collective participation (Pateman 1970; Clarke & Cochrane 2013). Harvesting the ‘amateur’ experience of individuals to guide the expertise of planning professionals would appear to conflict with the promise to devolve power to the neighbourhood as a collective entity (Beresford 1988; Cooke & Kothari 2001). The government strategy of localism offers agency to neighbourhood groups and engages them as collective political partners: the embodiment of a responsible public (Newman & Clarke 2009; Davoudi & Madanipour 2015). In spatial planning, however, collective participation is still perceived as the selfish action of interest groups. It is frowned upon as a disruption of the free exchange of market information or as a privileged voluntarism undermining the even-handed process of representative democracy (Barnes 1999; Newman et al 2004). Arguably, participatory democracy has been incorporated into municipal and national government only when it can pose no challenge to the spatial hierarchies of power and knowledge (Taylor 2007). The state strategy of localism seeks to harness the benefits of collective participation while limiting its impact on the current political settlement. The tensions inherent in this project are clearly manifested in the policies of localism adopted by the Coalition government in England where the scalar imaginary of neighbourhood was recast as the site of community self-determination in planning (Painter, Orton et al 2011). Under the Localism Act 2011 a suite of ‘rights’ was made available to community organisations to agree neighbourhood development plans, trigger consent for new-build projects, be included as potential bidders for the disposal of public assets, and challenge local authorities to take over public services. In granting the legal right to exercise statutory neighbourhood planning powers, in particular, the Localism Act legitimised collective participation and embedded it in the legal framework of municipal and national government. For the first time in English law the neighbourhood was defined as a political identity and recognised in statute as the space of collective participation. Place-based groups were to be empowered but contained within boundaries enforced by the municipal authority and mediated by systems of representative and market democracy.

The aim of this paper is to chart the emergence of distinctive political identities in neighbourhood planning under the English Coalition government between 2010 and 2015. The paper develops the concept of the boundary in the work of the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (1993; 2005), to theorise the unsettled accommodation achieved between participatory, representative and market models of democracy in neighbourhood planning. In doing so, it seeks to critically engage with the new political conflicts and hybrid political practices that emerged in the government endorsement of collective identities and collective participation. Drawing on social movement theory, the paper charts the ‘boundary work’ done by collectives in establishing new political identities (Taylor & Whittier 1995), and explores in primary research the potential for an antagonistic politics in state strategies of participation and localism. It draws on fieldwork with a national sample of neighbourhood plans carried out across England between 2013 and 2014. The findings from this research demonstrate a current of political antagonism developing in neighbourhood planning. They tell a very different story from those that cast neighbourhood planning as ‘post-political’ or as a retreat from contentious politics (Allmendinger & Haughton 2012; Davoudi & Madanipour 2015). While it is important to acknowledge that there are other stories to be told about neighbourhood planning, these findings may make a significant contribution to the understanding of this initiative of localism and the impact it might have on democratic politics.

The paper begins by outlining the market processes dominant in participation in spatial planning contrasted with the participatory collective action associated with social movements. Introducing the concept of the boundary or political frontier in Mouffe’s philosophy, it identifies the boundary lines and boundary conditions established in the English neighbourhood planning system to contain the empowerment of place-based groups. In empirical work with neighbourhood planning groups the paper then explores the antagonism that erupted along these boundaries and the political identities that emerged. The paper concludes by discussing the contribution of neighbourhood planning to the possibilities of a democratic politics of localism.

Participation and neighbourhood planning

Participation in spatial planning was founded on a charter of individual rights and remains predicated on the aggregation of individual views into a mediated semblance of the public good (Allmendinger & Haughton 2012). Local people can be invited to comment on planning

applications and engage in decisions over development plans, but their participation may seem stage managed by planning professionals who assemble a public voice from individual preferences sampled through surveys, exhibitions and forums (Barnes et al 2003). These strategies of aggregative democracy are grounded on the application of market principles to political theory and the resulting assumption that citizens operate as discerning consumers driven by an appreciation of their economic self-interest (Bengtsson & Clapham 1997). Participation is envisaged in this scenario as a market force or an injection of proxy competition into public services in the form of new actors and new tensions. It is characterised as ‘voice’, famously paired with ‘exit’ or the invisible hand of the market in bringing about improvement in providers (Hirschman 1970). As ‘voice’, participation unleashes the unknown power of the consumer into the unreformed paternalism of public services. The presumption of market theory is that the mere introduction of a new set of people into the decision-making process is transformative. In this guise, as ‘a market-like force’ (Hirschman & Nelson 1976: 386), participation has been enshrined by state policy as a transferable suite of mechanisms that can be applied to public services to trigger consumer pressure (Bradley 2012).

Debates over the theory and practice of participation in spatial planning have focused on distinctions between representative, market and participatory democracy and concepts of power and empowerment (Brownhill 2009; Bailey 2010). Participatory democracy has a historical association with the radical claims of social movements and grass-roots community campaigns. In the consciousness-raising of the women’s movement and in organisations of community action, participatory democracy was expressed by ‘subaltern counter-publics’ (Fraser 1997: 81) or autonomous collectives who experimented with new forms of popular participation at a local level ‘as a way to achieve change in a society whose problems are endemic in its very structures’ (Hague 1990: 244). In community groups and residents associations, they challenged the dominant power and knowledge of managerial and professional elites and privileged the neighbourhood as the primary scale from which strategic plans should be developed. This collective aspect of ‘voice’ acknowledged the existence of rival political identities, conflicting interests, structural antagonisms and irreconcilable conflicts. It did not sit comfortably with market theory, or provide public choice theorists with such a handy tool for reforming public services. In market models of participation power dynamics are regarded as inconsequential; the key dimension of participation ‘should not concern power at all,’ (Richardson 1983: 27). It is an exchange of

information between service users and service providers and potential outcomes cannot be pre-judged by existing hierarchies. A market interpretation of participation exhibits a constitutional mistrust of collective engagement in development decisions (Olson 1971). Protest groups that seek representation in spatial planning are accused of self-interest because they disrupt the free flow of market information. They are mocked as NIMBYs (Not in My Back Yard) and presented as unrepresentative of the public will (Burningham 2000; Bailey 2010). Plan-making by communities, and especially villages and parish councils, has been promoted, but these plans were excluded from statute (Owen, Moseley & Courtney 2007). Local priorities may be considered an obstacle to the individualist rationale of liberalism that recognises no collective challenge to the hegemony of the market. The spatial liberal imaginary implies a consensus that is 'continuous and without limit' (Deleuze 1992:6; Clarke & Cochrane 2013). It admits no alternative to the current organisation of society and this negation of political frontiers and of different political identities is the 'symptom of a void that can endanger democracy', argues Chantal Mouffe (1993: 5). It inhibits the constitution of political oppositions and negates the possibility of democratic politics.

One of Chantal Mouffe's major contributions to political philosophy has been in recognising the work done by boundaries in constituting the grounds for political debate (Biesta 2011). Mouffe argues that the establishment of boundaries signals the recognition of dissent and the explicit demarcation of the political community into a confrontation between adversaries. The boundary acknowledges the existence of opposition and the irreconcilability of alternative beliefs. The effect of boundaries is to establish a 'we/they' distinction between conflicting collective identities 'around clearly differentiated positions' (Mouffe 1993: 4). The constitution of collectives is, for Mouffe, the foundation of political practice. The boundary is the condition of possibility for democratic politics since it marks the end of a particular political order and the beginning of a new collective. It establishes a symbolic line which becomes the locus of political antagonism. Across this line collectives can recognise each other as legitimate opponents and develop the political practices of adversarial opposition (Mouffe 2005).

Boundaries are symbolic but not imaginary; they are etched in geography and in people's lives. They delineate territory and symbolically define belonging and exclusion. The significance of spatial boundaries is in the demarcation of similarity and difference. They mark a frontier in the flow of transnational connections and translocal networks, and create an 'inside' that has the semblance of homogeneity and belonging. 'The boundary

encapsulates the identity of the community' (Cohen 1985: 12) and this community is a collective consciousness brought into being by the boundary. In the act of exclusion the boundary 'continuously transforms the reality of difference into the appearance of similarity' (Ibid: 21). Boundaries are symbolic lines of enclosure and opposition that meanings and emotions adhere to, and around which political identities and political entities develop.

The introduction of neighbourhood planning in England under the Localism Act 2011 established clear boundaries for the integration of collective participatory democracy into the top-down plan-making of the local authority (Brownill 2009; Brownill & Downing 2013). These boundaries effectively regulated the relationship between representative democracy and the bottom-up planning aspirations of the neighbourhood and distinguished neighbourhood planning from previous incarnations of community engagement in development decisions. Town and parish councils and neighbourhood forums in defined urban neighbourhoods were granted the right to make statutory development plans for their areas. Boundary conditions were laid down to define the parameters of what could be conceived and delivered under these plans and to expressly exclude issues deemed strategic and therefore lying wholly in the realm of representative democracy. These boundary conditions required neighbourhoods to conform to national and municipal strategic planning policies except where enabling more, but not less, development. They established a statutory consultation process of external examination and formal referendum and the local planning authority was awarded decisive control in adjudicating on boundary conditions. Local authorities were empowered to rule on the boundaries of the neighbourhood plan and in urban areas they were granted the power to designate, or legally recognise, the right of community organisations to claim representation as a neighbourhood forum. Neighbourhood plans that conformed to these boundary conditions and were approved by popular referendum became statutory instruments as part of the local development framework.

The boundaries of neighbourhood planning affirmed that political matters of environmental quality could be sorted by the self-regulating power of the market (Farnsworth 2012; Vigar, Brookes & Gunn 2012). In the uneven distribution of plans, and the unequal distribution of resources needed to help neighbourhoods draw them up, neighbourhood planning appeared to favour those with most resources and to increase their privileged access to decision-making while excluding still further those groups already marginalised. The use of referenda to make potentially controversial and divisive planning decisions suggested that neighbourhoods were capable of reaching a homogenous and harmonious consensus through aggregative

democracy (Clarke & Cochrane 2013). These boundaries also established the neighbourhood as a political entity, or planning polity, and awarded legal recognition to neighbourhood groups as collective actors. Within these boundaries public participation in planning decisions acquired a narrow political domain where the decisions of professionals and the edicts of representative democracy could be challenged legitimately and distinct political identities might emerge. The boundaries of neighbourhood planning became political frontiers between neighbourhoods and municipalities; lines of demarcation where competing and co-operating practices of participatory and representative democracy and market models of aggregative voice confronted each other on unequal terms. The paper now turns to primary research to explore the political identities that emerged along these boundaries. This research was conducted with 30 rural and urban neighbourhood plans (see Table 1) and involved a preliminary review of on-line resources for each neighbourhood, including constitutions, applications for designation, council decision papers, minutes of meetings, consultation strategies, draft and final plans, followed by interviews with the chairs and secretaries of neighbourhood planning committees or forums, observation at meetings, and separate interviews with the relevant officers from the planning authority. The sample is small, compared to the total number of plans which at point of writing is just over 1300 and the findings from this research are not presented as representative. The national sample was assembled from the recommendations of Planning Aid volunteers who were contracted by government to provide support to local groups. The Planning Aid volunteers were aware of our interest in conflict and made their recommendations accordingly. Participants gave their informed consent on the understanding that their localities would be named and that they could be identified from their role descriptors.

The political boundaries of neighbourhood plans

This section begins to chart the impact of neighbourhood planning on the construction of political identities. It examines the impact of local authority jurisdiction over the demarcation of the proposed boundary for the neighbourhood plan and the requirement on town and parish councils or neighbourhood forums to submit this boundary for approval and designation. While the concept of neighbourhood has been a strategic tool of government for decades its geography has been poorly defined (Minery et al 2009; Natarajan 2012). The question of boundaries is essentially a political one because it defines the spatial limits of 'people's felt

sense of identity' (Stoker 2004: 125) and therefore establishes the range within which political decisions feel open to direct participation. The neighbourhood boundary also clarifies the limits of 'nearness' (Kearns & Parkinson 2001), or the parameters of familiarity and trust. Neighbourhood forums in our research sample negotiated between themselves and neighbouring groups to establish a frontier and assemble a collective identity of place. Agreement over the boundary of a neighbourhood plan created new unities in Upper Eden where a consortium of parishes was formed for planning purposes (Upper Eden NDP 2012). It generated an exchange of territory between neighbourhoods in the London borough of Highgate where the regulatory requirement to establish boundaries engendered a popular exercise in elective belonging (Highgate Neighbourhood Forum 2012). In three other London boroughs, however, in Stamford Hill, Bermondsey and Kensington, boundary drawing highlighted the complexity of the social and cultural mix in the neighbourhood and sparked tensions between rival groups seeking to stamp their collective identity on shared turf (Amin 2004; PAS 2015). The boundary determination was a declaration of territoriality defined through exclusion and it could intensify the divisions within neighbourhoods and sharpen the conflict between communities, and especially between the neighbourhood and the local authority (Bishop 2011).

The lines of antagonism implicit in this boundary designation process were recognised in the judicial review brought in 2013 by Daws Hill neighbourhood forum after Wycombe District Council redrew its planning boundary (Brownill & Downing 2012). Parish councils with boundaries already established under local government legislation might not expect the question of the plan boundary to be as problematic but a study of the village of Aberford near Leeds evidences the antagonisms unleashed by the declaration of identities (Interviews 2013). When Aberford parish council submitted an application for boundary designation, Leeds planning authority argued that the traditional boundary of the parish, established on the basis of feudal landholdings, was now bisected by a motorway and included, on the southern side of this barrier, territory belonging to a different council ward, and more importantly, a different housing market area in the local development framework. Refusing to designate the neighbourhood planning area, Leeds council called on Aberford parish to redraw the ancient boundary so that's its southern limit became the new motorway. A confrontation developed as Conservative ward councillors came to the support of Aberford while Labour ward councillors from the area south of the motorway took the opposing side. Underlying this boundary confrontation were housing allocation plans in the southern area for a 4000 home

development. A high level meeting convened by the Executive Member for Housing & Neighbourhoods failed to resolve the impasse and the council continued to withhold designation. In the end the parish backed down and redrew its planning boundary. The Neighbourhood Planning team leader for Leeds City Council, acknowledged the bitterness this conflict created:

'It got very political. It was difficult, and it took a long time, and it has meant that building up trust and good working relationships in those areas have been an uphill struggle.'

The new neighbourhood planning boundary leaves a question mark over the long term future of the Aberford parish boundary itself and it seems likely that the conflict over designation will generate further antagonism as the jurisdiction of the parish itself is challenged. As the neighbourhood planning chair said:

'That brings up a raft of questions over whether the parish should now be withdrawn, because, you know, historically, well things have changed. And this may be the starting point, and part of the concern in our group was this might be the thin edge of the wedge.'

In this case the requirement for boundary designation in neighbourhood planning regulations has generated 'frontier effects' (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 134) by expanding the confrontation beyond the initial point of antagonism. The designation of a boundary has both practical and symbolic importance in not only setting the limit of a neighbourhood plan but in drawing a line between the planning authority and the neighbourhood, a political divide that constitutes collective identities and suggests the ever-present possibility of conflict. The formation of these collective identities is studied in the next section.

The boundary work of collective identities

The innovation of neighbourhood planning is to vest plan-making in a notionally autonomous locally constituted body, and address residents as a collective identity rather than an amorphous and individually imagined public. In social movement theory collective identities are thought to develop out of shared definitions of grievances, antagonisms and plans for action that are continuously fashioned and refashioned (Melucci 1995). Social movement theorists have researched the construction of collective identity through an analysis of 'identity work' (Snow & McAdam 2000), studied chiefly as dialogue and the

attribution of social identity through the spoken word (Bradley 2013). The analysis of identity talk in the construction of collective identity, seeks to detect the verbal boundary markers, or widely shared discursive references that demarcate a sense of collective belonging. Boundary markers must be laid down and maintained to establish the sense of difference through symbols, framing or narrative, often expressed as grievance and antagonism, to construct a 'shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences and solidarity' (Taylor & Whittier 1995: 172; Cohen 1985).

The assemblage of a collective identity is particularly visible in urban areas where the neighbourhood planning regulations allow community groups to establish a neighbourhood forum and apply for designation as a legal plan-making institution. The opportunity for residents groups to convene a legitimate plan-making body makes neighbourhood planning appealing to people who have experienced a sense of powerlessness and exclusion. Forum members appear to be motivated by a generalised dissatisfaction with hierarchical decision-making and they articulate their desire for a more empowered engagement in decision-making (Parker et al 2014). In an interview with the secretary of Fishwick & St Matthews neighbourhood forum in Preston, the sense of grievance that motivates her community activism is clearly articulated:

'I guess this was the reason I got involved, I just realised how much contempt there is, overt contempt, shown to people from deprived neighbourhoods. And I guess the planning process in that particular instance, as far as I'm concerned, confirmed everything that I thought, and I was just absolutely enraged and I just felt that it's the general attitude of public servants towards people in deprived neighbourhoods, the way that they, they just don't count, and that's how it feels.'

Planning was not always the main concern for some of the groups in this research sample; instead it served as a proxy for all government systems from which local people felt excluded. In the Manchester suburb of Northenden the decision of the city council to close the local library spurred a conservation group to set up a forum and begin a neighbourhood plan, buoyed up by their sit-in protest over the closure of the facility. It was an opportunity to move beyond being 'informed, not consulted', as the secretary of the Northenden forum said:

'The council conflate the two ideas, they think informing is consulting and so, there was a lot of frustration on many issues all over because I just think this community's been treated so unfairly actually, it's just not right and that's it, yeah.'

The articulation of a grievance, the assertion of blame on an external agent, and the belief that change is possible, are all necessary conditions for the development of collective identity (Benford & Snow 2000). However, community campaigners have to make these dialogic frames resonate with other people in the neighbourhood in order to generate support and mobilise adherents. They have to inspire feelings of collective efficacy and convince participants that their collective actions can have impact (Melucci 1995). The promise of neighbourhood planning is that community action can have statutory effect and the establishment of neighbourhood forums has generated a wave of organisation-building as collectives are formed, spread and merge in the expectation of enacting a joint vision for their area. In Exeter St. James, where the plan went to successful referendum in May 2013, seven local residents' associations joined together in a neighbourhood forum to agree a development plan (Exeter St James NDP 2012). Despite the huge demands that a neighbourhood plan puts on communities in terms of volunteer time and energy, the promise of statutory impact drives the dedication of community groups. The secretary of Fishwick & St. Matthews forum in Preston is keenly aware of the obstacles but feels that a neighbourhood plan has given those active in the community a shared and collectively expressed goal.

We've got a very simple and overarching mission statement and a vision. We all live in and around the area and we kept our mission statement as wanting Fishwick and St Matthew's to be a better, cleaner, safer place to work and live in. Because I look down the main road and I don't see what you see. I see a pretty town, people that are happy and, you know, not that sort of atmosphere of just tough life. I can't not be optimistic, surely. I do think it's possible; neighbourhoods do improve.

As neighbourhoods assume collective identities around the right to plan, boundaries of political conflict are established on the foundations of earlier grievances and on competing claims of legitimacy. Participatory democracy can be depicted as a model of self-selection in which the 'usual suspects' get to be heard (Millward 2005). In contrast local authorities are paraded as egalitarian and even-handed, with their democratic mandate securely evidenced in the ballot box (Allmendinger & Houghton 2011; Ellis 2011). The well-documented democratic deficit that is so evident in the representative democracy of parish councils, with their frequently uncontested elections and co-opted rather than elected members, might point to exceptions to this argument since it increasingly overshadows the accountability of local authorities themselves (Bishop 2011). A revitalisation of democracy has been identified as one of the consequences of participatory neighbourhood planning in town and parish councils

(Brownill & Downing 2013). In Thame, the Oxfordshire market town whose plan went to successful referendum in May 2013, the participation carried out by the town council over a controversial housing allocation gave the councillors a much stronger awareness of their relationship with their constituents and helped develop a more pronounced sense of spatial identity, according to the town clerk. She summed up the renaissance in local democracy the neighbourhood plan had brought about:

It feels, to me as the Town Clerk having worked at all three levels of local government that the role of the Town council is changing significantly. I was involved in a unitary council where responsibilities changed and what is happening with the neighbourhood planning feels similar.

Within the boundaries of neighbourhood planning, existing political identities acquire greater definition and collective identities gain resonance. The bounded space allotted to participatory democracy mobilises a politics of community action that might rejuvenate the democracy of elected government.

The political identities of boundary conditions

Neighbourhood plans are pre-determined by law to support development and this boundary condition appears to enforce compliance to a pro-growth agenda and to expressly exclude any political debate over market-led house building. However, in establishing this exclusion, the intelligibility of neighbourhood opposition to house building is explicitly recognised, and residents are addressed as rational collective actors, rather than irrational NIMBYs (Burningham 2000).

Market incentives are provided to orient neighbourhoods towards developers, requiring them to factor land values and business demand into their plans. This orientation to the private market is initiated in the urban boundary designation process as the regulations require that representatives of local businesses are engaged in the neighbourhood forum and the planning process. Leeds city council held back the designation of a neighbourhood forum in the inner city area of Holbeck until it was satisfied that sufficient engagement with local businesses had taken place (Interview 2013). The local residents leading Holbeck's neighbourhood plan are seasoned campaigners for public services but the requirement to consult with local businesses meant that they began to address the private sector and became strongly aware of

the market interests shaping their locality. As the chair of Holbeck neighbourhood forum, a council tenant and veteran community activist said:

I think it has made us more commercially aware, and made us realise that we do have to take on board the fact that these are private companies and need to make money. And if we need them to do it in our area then we have got to help them. Which is something I don't think we had ever thought about to be quite honest.

The Holbeck forum understands that attracting private investment into the area brings with it the risk that gentrification may follow, leading to the displacement of low-income residents. In mapping development opportunities in the neighbourhood, the community activists discovered that large areas of derelict land within their boundary were owned by the elusive multi-millionaire Barclay Brothers. They attempted to negotiate the future of the land with the remote multi-national owners whose headquarters is located off shore from the Channel Island of Sark. The requirement in the neighbourhood planning regulations for local people to engage with the private market has in this example encouraged the forum members to look outside their locality, to see it as a place of global connections. The politics of community action, focused since the 1960s on the local authority as the arbiter of decisions, is forced by the boundary conditions of neighbourhood planning to become strongly aware of the role of multi-national markets, and engage as a political identity with a politics 'of place beyond place' (Massey 1994).

At the far end of the neighbourhood planning process another boundary condition, the requirement to hold a referendum, looms over the process of collective participation. The key assumption underpinning the government strategy of localism is that the smallest geographic unit of governance provides the greatest opportunities for citizens to participate in decisions (Lowndes & Sullivan 2008). There is nothing intrinsic, however, to local-scale decision-making that guarantees greater popular participation (Purcell 2006). As 'aggregative democracy' the referendum allows a simple majority to approve the neighbourhood plan and suggests the possibility that minority views can be simply overruled and ignored (Allmendinger & Haughton 2012; Davoudi & Cowie 2013). In our sample the claims on democracy made by neighbourhood plans were based not on the final ballot but on the 'nearness' of the plan and its planners to the direct experience of local people (Kearns & Parkinson 2001). This 'nearness' is a spatial construction in which a discourse of neighbourliness is conjured through face-to-face contact, regular encounters, routine

interactions, and local knowledge. Although posited as actually-existing conditions integral to neighbourhoods in the strategy of localism, these everyday relationships have to be constructed in emotion before they can become collective identities of place (Bradley 2014).

‘Nearness’ conveys both the process of constructing the sense of neighbourhood and the resulting network of face to face interactions that sustains participatory democracy. In the residential community of Coton Park, an estate of 1000 homes near Rugby, in the Midlands, the launch of the neighbourhood forum drew in people not previously involved in community events and easily reached its statutory minimum of 21 members. But there were never enough active members to hold contested elections (Interview 2014). The forum produced monthly newsletters, ran displays at community events, drop-in sessions, youth groups, ‘street chats’, social media and on-line surveys and went door to door with questionnaires. They presented the neighbourhood as a space of democratic debate, sitting out with desk and chairs on the pavement. The chair of the neighbourhood forum explained the network of interaction that resulted:

If you're putting yourself forward for consultation events and all and sundry are coming to meet you then you become a more known face. I run the baby group so I know loads of Mums, we've got a dog so you're out bumping into dog walkers who know you. So the number of people that I recognise on the estate is quite large and so at that point they know that you're the person to talk to about neighbourhood planning. So it's like your identity becomes defined by what you do. Which is quite nice but equally sometimes you think, I want to take my daughter to go and play on the swings and not have to answer lots of questions about it.

Statutory consultation periods are built into the neighbourhood planning process so that the local authority can monitor public responses to the designation of the planning boundaries and the constitution of a neighbourhood forum, as well as the publication of the draft plan. There were two objections during the initial consultation in Coton Park; the objectors lived on the estate and maintained their opposition in face-to-face dialogue with the forum throughout the planning process. Following consultation on the draft neighbourhood plan, the question of opposition became a political factor, since the potential impact of individual voices on the overall outcome of the referendum had to be assessed. The chair of Coton neighbourhood forum explained:

It does become representative when we have the referendum and you have to always work on the 'yes' vote. It starts to become a more political animal now because we'll go through the responses to the draft plan with an eye to how they are going to vote. If they say they object to this policy and we don't take it out, they're going to vote 'no'.

A process of democratic engagement that is far more intimate and politically complex than a simple aggregation of preferences appears to take place in this study of neighbourhood planning. The neighbourhood forum is embedded in a network of social interactions and collective identities and can derive more legitimacy from its face-to-face encounters than its self-appointed status might suggest (Clarke & Cochrane 2013; Davoudi & Cowie 2013). Boundaries, and boundary conditions like the requirement for referendum, can serve as symbols that strengthen shared connections and help construct 'nearness' (Cohen 1985). The rationality of localism, with its problematic assertion that the neighbourhood is inherently democratic, has authorised collective political practices through which space can be constructed as both neighbourly and democratic.

Conclusion: the return of politics to localism

The policy of neighbourhood planning appears to bring about 'the constitution of collective identities around clearly differentiated positions' (Mouffe 1993: 4) and might therefore be considered as offering the potential for a new democratic politics of localism. Neighbourhood planning recognises the neighbourhood as the collective locus of participatory democracy and establishes boundaries to integrate and contain it within representative politics and market rationalities. These boundaries are the conditions of possibility for democratic politics, as Mouffe argues. In this indicative research the right to make a statutory development plan at neighbourhood level inspires collective identities to develop around shared definitions of grievances, antagonisms and feelings for place. Neighbourhood planning gives voice to residual anger at exclusion from political decision-making and its collectivising effects can mobilise a global sense of place and enhance the effectiveness of collective action. Market models of aggregative voice are mediated by the relational complexities of 'nearness' and the political practices of negotiation, bargaining, and debate can all be evidenced in neighbourhood planning. Participatory democracy is collectivised; market democracy may be localised and participation in representative democracy may be enlivened. Neighbourhood planning has established the political identities of a new planning polity and a new frontier of political antagonism may now emerge.

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