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Putting Localism in Place: Conservative Images of the Good Community and the Contradictions of Planning Reform in England

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ABSTRACT

Over the past 5 years, the UK Coalition and subsequent Conservative governments have sought to develop an agenda of localism. Recent research has evaluated how this has played out in practice. This article takes a different approach, interpreting how the language of community and place in English politics has been mobilized in reforms of the country's planning system. We do this by tracing how conservative traditions of political thought and imagery of place were used to advance localism. This reveals a range of contradictions within the English localism agenda and highlights the wider political challenges raised by attempts to mobilize the affective and morally charged language of the local.

Introduction: Putting Localism in Place

Decentralization of power to local scales has been a central component of successive waves of state restructuring in recent decades, playing a key part in the reformulation of governance (Rodriguez-Pose & Sandall, 2008), including planning reform initiatives across many countries. Discourses of 'localism' have been mobilized from across the political spectrum, promising greater economic efficiency and more effective administration. Most notably, however, they have been presented as a means of enhancing democracy – drawing a link between the 'local' and more responsive forms of governance (Painter *et al.*, 2011).

The turn towards the local has been particularly marked in the United Kingdom, where successive governments have introduced initiatives to enhance participation and promote new forms of empowered 'community' governance (Newman & Clarke, 2009). In this article, we offer a contribution to ongoing debates about the uses, potentialities and limitations of the local through assessing one recent high-profile initiative – the 'Localism' agenda that was prominently promoted by the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government

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elected in the UK in 2010, focusing particularly on its implications for reform of the planning system in England.[1] In the field of planning, localism has been most closely associated with the introduction of new arrangements for 'neighbourhood planning' and generated much recent research activity (see, for example Gallent and Robinson (2012), Mace (2013) and a special issue of this journal (Haughton & Allmendinger, 2013)). Yet, there is also much that can be learnt from experience internationally, particularly of the ideological dimensions of local politics (for example in the USA, (Trapenberg Frick, 2013), Europe, (Jacobs, 2012) and Canada, (Filion, 2012)).

Whilst much research on localism has focused on analysing how it plays out in distinct localities, this article takes a broader and hopefully less parochial view. In so doing, we seek to make three key, distinctive contributions by analysing the phenomenon of localism as part of a wider conservative ideological terrain. First and most importantly, we highlight the often overlooked significance of the affective, ambiguous and morally charged language of community and place within the politics of localism. We also highlight the importance of positioning any particular articulation of localism within a wider historical and cultural context to reveal the political and ideological tensions that underpin 'community' and 'place' and how these influence contemporary political formulations. Finally, we argue that such analysis can usefully help to interpret how various ideas of the local are generated and sustained, taking the land-use planning system in England as a key site where such debates have been worked out in recent years. We present localism as having changing characteristics, identifying three key phases, reflective of the tensions inherent to the concept and its articulation through planning reform.

Coalition Government 'localism' and the Rhetoric of the 'Big Society'

The 2010 General Election campaign in the UK was fought over the implications of a severe economic crisis. Whilst the Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Government that assumed power sought, as its principal priority, to reduce public spending, it also made commitments to decentralize power and introduce a new era of 'localism'. As the foreword to the Programme for Government by the two party leaders, Prime Minister David Cameron and his then Deputy Nick Clegg, made clear:

> We both want a Britain where our political system is looked at with admiration, not with anger. We have a shared ambition to clean up Westminster and a determination to oversee a radical redistribution of power away from Westminster and Whitehall to councils, communities and homes across the nation. Wherever possible, we want people to call the shots over the decisions that affect their lives. (HM Government, 2010, p. 7)

Commitment to fostering some version of localism had been a key campaign commitment of both parties and might therefore be interpreted as a natural area of common ground on which coalition policy could be forged.[2] Moreover, the language of localism provided an important narrative through which the new government sought to differentiate itself from the New Labour administrations they succeeded and which they portrayed as committed centralizers whose high-spending 'big government' approach had contributed to many of the problems facing what Conservatives characterized as 'broken Britain' (Finlayson, 2007).

In opposition, David Cameron had promised to fix 'broken Britain' by creating a 'Big Society' through decentralizing power, freeing citizens from the deadweight of the state, and generating a new culture of civic action amongst individuals and within neighbourhoods.

The Big Society was to be a salve for social ills, a means not just of coping with cuts in public spending but of realizing that society was actually better off without the state's distorting effect on individuals and communities (Levitas, 2012). This narrative of decentralization and empowerment was partly a populist response to a perceived crisis of trust in the British political system, rocked at the time by the financial crisis and its mutation into a crisis of public spending but also by a major scandal involving inflated expenses claims by Members of Parliament. These crises have converged with longer standing concerns about growing apathy towards politics and a democratic deficit which had previously motivated New Labour Governments to experiment with their own version of a 'new localism'.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Big Society and localism agendas each generated considerable debate,[3] with some viewing them sceptically, including Liberal Democrat and Conservative members of government (Watt, 2010). Advocates, however, did seek to set out a coherent philosophical account of the Big Society as an articulation of long-standing traditions of Conservative political thought, arguing for a revived and enlarged civil society as a response to a bloated central state and the rapacious free market (Blond, 2010; Glassman & Norman, 2011; Political Quarterly, 2011). For some critics, the idea was viewed as a troubling incursion into the properly left-wing terrain of mutual and collective organization (Barker, 2011; Featherstone et al., 2012). More generally on the left, however, it was interpreted and dismissed as ideological cover for cuts that would have deeply iniquitous effects on British society.

Subsequent academic debates examined the extent to which localism and the Big Society provide a vehicle for the further evolution of the neoliberal project (Levitas, 2012; Newman, 2013). In planning this has sought to question whether localism represents a substantive new direction or simply a further evolution of the neoliberal problematization of land-use regulation in England (Haughton & Allmendinger, 2013; Lord & Tewdwr-Jones, 2014). More broadly, there has been a tendency to engage with the contradictions and tensions apparent in the localism agenda, acknowledging that this is certainly not a straightforward substitution of the market for the state and may open up unintended political possibilities (Featherstone et al., 2012; Levitas, 2012; Williams et al., 2014). Others have sought to interrogate the extent to which the claims for democratic renewal or more efficient governance are likely to be realized (Buser, 2012; Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012). These studies highlight how the rhetoric of the Big Society and localism promotes ideas of the 'naturalness' of uneven spatial development and recasts 'fairness' through its problematization of the redistributive state (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012; Holman & Rydin, 2013; Newman, 2013; Matthews et al., 2014).

At a more conceptual level, one key line of enquiry has sought to explore localism as a distinctive set of political rationalities, evolving from the managerial approach to government characteristic of New Labour. Localism, thereby becomes a mechanism to govern at a distance through the imposition of new rationalities (of fairness, efficiency and democracy) and technologies to 'conduct the conduct' of citizens and the local state (Finlayson, 2011; Clarke & Cochrane, 2013; Davoudi & Mandanipour, 2014; Williams et al., 2014). These various debates highlight the ambiguity of 'the local' and the importance of interrogating claims made about its potential as a site where the Big Society or any other political project may emerge (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013).

By the time that much of this literature appeared in print; however, the debate could be seen as largely academic. The term the Big Society had largely fallen out of use within UK

Government, and localist rhetoric too had become much less pronounced, apparently abandoned as their fragile political capital was exhausted. It is therefore tempting to dismiss them as little more than a short-term political fix. However, whilst they may not have mobilized lasting political momentum and only ever became an uncertain frame for policy-making, we suggest there are at least three significant reasons why recently articulated ideas of localism merit further interrogation. First, reforms enacted under their names are still working their way through into practice and will have real effects on England's localities over the coming years; the resonances of localism are therefore still being felt as the challenge of coping with a radically different configuration of state resources unfolds. Secondly, the local remains a key political stake and so the legacy of the Big Society will continue to exercise a hold of some sort on the political imagination in the UK. Thirdly, the Big Society and 'localism' represent an attempt to articulate a vision capable of sustaining the neoliberal settlement in an era of austerity, one that is replete with contradictions that reveal wider lessons about the political potential and limitations of the local in the current conjuncture. We therefore see that much can be learned from an analysis of the politics of localism, especially of its affective and morally charged dimensions, which have shaped the complex ways in which governments undertake activities such as planning reform. In the next section below, we situate our approach to this task within the tradition of studies of political ideology.

Understanding the Politics and Ideology of Localism

Following Finlayson (2007, p. 3), our aim in this article is to assess the Big Society and localism agendas as examples of the 'essential political art' of persuasion involving 'the deployment of images, ideas, and arguments that [seek to] affect how we understand the challenges we face and how we might rise to them'. This requires that we take seriously the rhetoric of localism as an attempt to organize the reshaping of governance and the land-use planning system. We therefore situate our approach within the broad field of studies of political ideas in action – or political ideology. We are mindful of the complexity and freighted nature of the term 'ideology' (see Hall, 1988; Freeden, 1998; Norval, 2000; Finlayson, 2012); equally we are conscious that there may be various approaches suitable to the analytical task at hand. We do not therefore intend to argue here for a single or best approach to the study of political ideas but rather to establish a set of 'thinking tools' (Bourdieu, 1990) through which we can develop our argument.

Recent approaches to the study of ideology stress the value of political analysis that is attuned to studying the 'essentially contested' nature of key political concepts, signifiers or arguments as they emerge and are used in the messiness of political practice. Such work highlights the importance of analysis that explores how key political ideas come to be constructed or articulated in particular ways at particular times (Finlayson, 2012). Ideologies can therefore be understood as mental frameworks or traditions that organize how people come to understand themselves and the world around them. Ideological analysis must therefore pay attention to the various forms of political work that ideas can be put to, for example: persuading people to understand themselves and act on the world in particular ways; linking actors, ideas and material practices together; mobilizing them to achieve particular goals or to respond to key challenges in certain ways. All of these tasks are premised on the power of ideologies to effectively frame understanding and action.

As Hall (1988) argues, political ideologies in practice are typically complex, hybrid constructions that seek to hold different sets of concepts, actors and actions together, frequently by managing the tensions or contradictions that exist between them. Indeed, ideologies are shaped not only by continuity, but also by tensions. They are

> those dynamic actual states and works within which there are not only continuities and persistent determinations but also tensions, conflicts, resolutions and irresolutions, innovations and actual changes. (Williams, 1981, p. 29)

Understood in this way, the purpose of ideologies is to establish the dominance or hegemony of a particular way of seeing and acting on the world, leading to the active decontestation of key terms and their establishment as part of a ruling common-sense through managing these tensions between concepts and actions. A central part of the analysis of ideology is also therefore to understand how and why particular ideas are able to 'grip' people, pointing to the importance of the affective dimensions of political language and argument (Hall, 1988; Freeden, 1998; Finlayson, 2012).

Drawing on this broad orientation[4], we therefore seek to analyse 'localism' as a contested concept (or 'empty signifier') that has become increasingly significant for political practice in many locations. In order to fully interrogate the particularities of any given articulation of localism, however, it is necessary to critically assess its broader ideological framing, the ways in which a given idea of 'localism' fits within or seeks to modify a particular worldview in order to respond to key challenges. As we have argued above, we view the affective dimensions of the latter as particularly significant in the case of localism which is often associated with a fuzzy nexus of morally charged ideas about community and place.

Localism as articulated by the Conservative-led Coalition Government in England from 2010 to 2015 therefore needs to be understood in relation to the wider ideological traditions of the Conservative Party in England. However, it is also necessary to trace articulations of localism through into practice, exploring the challenges that they face as they seek to effect change. The rest of the article therefore seeks to assess coalition localism in each of these two ways; first in relation to traditions of English conservative thought about community and place and then by tracing these ideas through the *real politic* of planning reform, arguing that the rhetoric of localism has passed through three distinctive phases that highlight deep-seated tensions in conservative ideology and associated attempts to mobilize the affective language of the local. The next section starts by discussing the key ways in which conservative political thought has imagined spaces and places.

Conservative Spatial Imaginaries and Traditions of Political Thought

In reviewing Philip Blond's book *Red Tory*, widely reported to have been one of the key influences in developing the idea of the Big Society, Raban (2010) suggests that both Blond and David Cameron drew on a vision of society that is rooted in Ambridge, the fictional rural village in which BBC Radio 4's long running soap opera *The Archers* is set:

> The rhetoric of both men seems to be shot through with plaintive rural nostalgia for the small, self-contained life of the village; for a world where 'frontline services' are 'delivered' from within the community by the church, the WI and the Over Sixties Club, where no one dies unnoticed by his neighbours, the pub serves as a nightly local parliament, 'ethos' is reinforced by the vicar in the pulpit of St Stephen's and 'mutuality' flourishes in the gossip at the shop …

Beyond Raban's satirical intent, there is an important kernel of truth in this analysis and the 'Ambridge' parallel is one that was widely used to describe the Big Society (if these references were often critical, government ministers also made use of the parallel – see Clark, 2010c).

This image of rural localities as the bedrock of English governance has been long established in political discourse to portray a natural order of government, and a particular kind of localism. The rurality of this image contrasts it with other more 'progressive' forms of localism, that have been more agnostic about its imagined location, and perhaps more amenable to it being an urban phenomenon. The Poplarism of the 1920s, a deliberate policy of left-wing local authorities to redirect resources towards the poor, the local socialism of the 1980s, and to a lesser extent New Labour's 'new localism' of the early 2000s were largely urban phenomena, a means of granting some autonomy to urban neighbourhoods often as a means of their regeneration (see Painter *et al.*, 2011). The Coalition Government's formulation of localism draws on a different tradition of thought on place, most frequently identified in the work of Edmund Burke, but also in the work of de Tocqueville, Chesterton, and Belloc (see Kirk, 2001; Barker, 2011). For the purposes of this argument, we might identify two facets of localism that have a bearing on how we understand its modern-day incarnation and its importance for the activity of planning. First, such localism is concerned with boundaries. It rejects artificial boundaries, imposed on communities and places by government. Burke argued:

> No man ever was attached by a sense of pride, partiality, or real affection to a description of square measurement. He never will glory in belonging to the Checquer, No 71, or to any other badge-ticket. We begin our public affections in our families. No cold relation is a zealous citizen. We pass on to our neighbourhoods, and our habitual provincial connections. These are inns and resting-places. Such divisions of our country as have been formed by habit, and not by a sudden jerk of authority, were so many little images of the great country in which the heart found something which it could fill. The love to the whole is not extinguished by this subordinate partiality. ([1790] 1986, p. 315)

Instead Burke argues, communities should be able to organically recognize their own boundaries, based on their 'affections'.[5] As we will show later, this ideal of the organically bounded community still runs strongly through recent UK Government policies. Secondly, localism is explicitly concerned with governance. Localities are the site of Burke's 'little platoons', or de Tocqueville's 'civil associations', able to govern themselves, allocate resources, account for local circumstances and ensure they are sustained as coherent places. In contrast, the bureaucratic state is problematized as deeply injurious to the needs and desires of the locality, especially through imposing arbitrary rules based on abstract conceptions (such as seeking equality between places). This leaves dilemmas as to the role of the State within this conception of localism. From the early twentieth century, distributists and some thereafter, argued that the 'servile state' should be replaced by a 'distributive state' in which property is widely owned by numerous private individuals, rather than capitalists (Belloc, 1909; Blond, 2010). For others, the state's role is to 'foster the natural associations of family, neighbourhoods and civil society' (Letwin, 2003 preface), identifying a smaller, more enabling role for the State to create the conditions for localism.

However, this Burkean, localist view of community and society does not mesh easily with other long-standing lines of Conservative thought, notably the ideas of one-nation conservatism which stress the obligations of a benevolent and paternalistic ruling class,

and neoliberalism, with its familiar arguments in favour of the virtues of free markets and competitive individualism.

In many ways, localism fits more cosily with One-Nation Tory ideals such as responsibility towards one's fellow citizens, notions of benevolent leadership and a suspicion of liberalism. This is perhaps best illustrated by a famous speech made in 1924 by then Conservative Party leader Stanley Baldwin:

> To me, England is the country [side], and the country [side] is England … The sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy, the corncrake on a dewy morning … These things strike down into the very depths of our nature. (Baldwin, [1924] 1999)

The rural England invoked by Baldwin fits with the 'imagined Ambridge' of localism. Yet localism also stands apart from more corporatist, state-brokered versions of society that have been favoured by One-Nation Tories. The post-war Conservative governments promoted extensive development co-ordinated by national government,[6] an activity at odds with localism, and to some extent its own Baldwinite commitments to rurality (though, as discussed below, many of those organizations associated with protecting rural life have sought a role for the state in controlling development). Finally, the extent to which the Big Society and localism aligns with One-Nation Tory ideas of 'bounded inequality' (Dorey, 2011), particularly when it relates to places, might be disputed as localist ideas of place celebrate its individuality rather than attempts to manage inequality between places and communities.

Localism also appears uneasily associated with New Right thinking, particularly its celebration of liberal individualism and entrepreneurial initiative. In particular, Blond's work and that of Norman (2010), the other key Big Society thinker, have been critical of monetarism and 'a market monopolized by vested interest and the dominance of the already wealthy' (Blond, 2010, p. 18). Whilst both Blond and neo-liberals share an antipathy towards the State as a mechanism for distribution, Blond argues that economic liberalism has removed from society the associative traditions that were the bulwark against an overweening state. Nonetheless, Government initiatives under the banner of localism also involve giving fiscal incentives for communities to accept development, indicating a rather more instrumental view of individuals and communities than might be imagined by Blond *et al.* Neo-liberal visions of place also sit uncomfortably with the imagery employed in localism. The 'smooth spaces' of neo-liberal economic flows cause place to become fluidly constituted (Peck & Tickell, 2002) rather than organically evolving over long stretches of time. Furthermore, neo-liberalism views places in economic competition against one another (Harvey, 1989). On the face of it, this may not be entirely antithetical to localist thought concerned as it is with the particularities of place, rather than attempts to equalize them. However, the consequences might be deleterious to ideas of stable, coherent communities as people move in search of better economic opportunities. For example, the Conservative think tank Policy Exchange produced a report 'Cities Unlimited' (Leunig & Swaffield, 2007) that advocated removing regeneration monies from 'failing' places and promoting migration to 'successful' cities such as Cambridge, subsequently labelled 'insane' by the opposition leader David Cameron perhaps indicating its distance from (his then) localist ideas of the intrinsic value of place (BBC, 2008).

The Coalition Government's localist ideology is constituted through tensions between One-Nation Tory thinking based on Disraelian advocacy of 'enlightened self-interest' (see Dorey, 2011), Burkean notions of civil society, and the language of 'nudge economics' as

a means of incentivising communities. For some, localism is not completely opposed to neo-liberalism: 'Cameron's embrace of localism … is not necessarily incompatible with his basic Thatcherite credentials' (Seymour, 2010, p. 31) in seeking to reduce the powers and scope of the state and to create further opportunities for privatization within what remains of the public sector (Raco, 2013). However, others such as Blond stress the distributist elements of the Big Society in contrast to neo-liberal thinking (2010). Whichever version of localism is presented, the core image is one of the stable communities with a coherent notion of their identity and past coming together to act in unison, in other words, the romantic idea of the village community.

Planning Reform, Place and Conservative Localisms

If the idea of localism sought to mobilize particular images of place and community, its ideological constitution must be judged not just by its intellectual content, but by its capacity to reframe actually existing relations in key areas of public life. In the next two sections, we therefore trace the impact of these ideas on attempts to reform the land-use planning system in England. We start by considering how the three, related but distinct, conservative traditions of thought about place and community identified above (localist; one-nation; neoliberal) generate substantially different views of land-use planning as a state activity.

Planning has perhaps existed most easily with the One-Nation conservative ideology, reflecting shared commitments to the welfare state, economic efficiency, environmental protection and some limited reduction of inequalities (Thornley, 1991). The desire to protect rural areas from untrammelled development, preserving the social order of villages and ensuring that communities are self-sufficient chimes with both One-Nation conservative ideals and the aims of many planning policies in England. Preservationism in planning has a long history – since the 1920s, eminent planners such as Patrick Abercrombie, Thomas Sharp and Clough Williams-Ellis have viewed state regulation through a planning *system* as the best means of preserving the countryside: 'thanks mainly to the initiative of certain enlightened and zealous high Civil servants, Government control or intervention has in many recent instances actually saved the situation' (Williams-Ellis, 1928, p. 121). The post-war emergence of the planning system stressed state regulation of development, coordinated by planners, as the prime means to curtail the destruction of the countryside and communities within.

Whilst One-Nation Conservatism has not been entirely opposed to state-led town planning (though we should be careful not to overstate their convergence), neo-liberal thinking has been very strongly opposed to planning. For Hayek and his followers, state-led planning was a barrier to the efficient operation of markets, representing an inefficient bureaucracy, and hindering freedoms for landowners and homeowners. Consequently, from the 1980s onwards, reforms have sought to diminish the scope and reach of the planning system, removing barriers and reducing regulation of land and property markets (Thornley, 1991). The tensions between One-Nation conservatism and neoliberalism that run to the heart of Conservative party politics in England (Gamble, 1988) have, however, raised particular challenges in relation to planning (Thornley, 1991). During the 1980s and 1990s, Conservative governments struggled to balance these beliefs and interests, and preservationist opposition located particularly in the shire counties led to a move away from a more neoliberal drive to deregulate planning control (Allmendinger & Thomas, 1998).

The relationship between planning and the politics of localism reveals further tensions. On the one hand, localism matches neo-liberalism in its disdain for the state and its bureaucratic structures. The challenge from localism to planning lies in its fundamental view of the state and its (in)ability to improve places. This is summed up in a speech by Greg Clark MP, then Government Minister for Decentralisation and a noted localist:

> The old view was that the best way to solve problems – whether in schools, health, local government or planning – was for good, serious people to sit down and work out what is the best template to achieve collective goals, to codify it, and roll that out across the country requiring others to implement it. The idea was that this would lift up the under-performers to a dramatically higher standard and so improve social welfare. The trouble is that people, at least in this country, tend not to fall into line with this approach. They bridle at imposition from afar, however well-intentioned, and will expend considerable effort and ingenuity in resisting it. It requires a bureaucracy of enforcement which becomes divisive and adversarial and costly as well as entailing uncertainty and delay. More than that, it doesn't accord with the real life experience that people are at their best when they can exercise their own talents and judgement – in which local initiative can flourish. (Clark, 2010b)

Yet, as this extract illustrates, the argument against the state is couched less in the terms of economic inefficiency and more in terms of its opposition to the character of the English people and their own initiative which is inevitably framed by their locality. This reveals affective values, solidarity and attachment to place as significant in the governance of communities, a tradition represented by writers such as Massingham, Gardiner and Lymington (see Matless, 1998) who viewed the correct locus of authority as the village, with its 'natural' order. This stood in contrast to the national state, as Massingham (1938, p. 19) noted:

> Our modern schemes for the regeneration of society are born of the theory and technique of national government; the village community, largely oblivious of politics, law, and economics, settled its own affairs by reference to the integral contact of each member of the village and between them all and the land where they lived.

These views are echoed in much of the localist rhetoric of the early Coalition Government, particularly concerning the capacities of localities to govern themselves. As Greg Clark noted in a speech to the Town and Country Planning Association:

> Localists … are optimistic about people's good sense, generosity, and ability to make sound decisions. In planning – as in other areas of life – we start from the basis that people are inherently capable. (2010a)

The supposedly strong, associative tradition of rural areas is drawn upon by Government ministers to argue for a deeper localism which demonstrates their innate abilities to govern. In the same speech, Clark drew on examples from Ascott-under-Wychwood and Burgess Hill, both rural localities in Southern England, as evidence of local communities taking their own decisions with no government interference. Ultimately, planning is conceived as best carried out by communities who can understand their settlement and envision its future.

As we shall explore further below, the vision of community governance promoted through localism therefore stands in a complex field of tensions with both neo-liberal growth objectives, and more One-Nation preservationist stances adopted by influential organizations such as the National Trust and the Campaign to Protect Rural England. In the next section, we go on to assess how these tensions have affected attempts to create a more 'localist' planning system in England.

Table 1. Phases of 'localist' planning reform.

Phase	Approximate dates when strongest	Key developments	Ideological character/ tensions
'Big Society' localism	2009–2011	Publication of Open Source Planning Green Paper by Conservative Party in opposition/Introduction of Localism Bill by Coalition Government	Period marked by strong promises that planning can be a key symbol of the Big Society
'Growth' localism vs. 'One-nation' localism	2011–2012	Publication of the draft National Planning Policy Framework; Daily Telegraph's 'Hands off our Land' campaign	Neoliberal proposals to deregulate meet opposition from broad alliance of preservationist and localist groups
'Muscular localism'	2012-Present	Growth and Infrastructure Act, 2013; heightened Treasury input and emphasis on deregulation and housing delivery	Series of further neoliberal initiatives to deregulate control, including increased use of central government powers

Conservative Ideas of Localism and the Politics of Reforming Land-use Planning in England

Our account of planning reform between 2010 and 2015 is based on a reading of key government policy statements, ministerial speeches and national press coverage of key developments from which we argue that it is possible to identify three broad phases in the development of localist planning that clearly highlight the continuing and distinctive field of tensions discussed above. These three phases are outlined in Table 1, and each is described in turn before its implications are discussed.

Phase 1: 'Big Society' Localism

In opposition and the early months of the new government, the Conservatives and the Coalition identified the planning system as a key site where concerns for community and place met and where the Big Society might therefore be shaped. Indeed, David Cameron (2010) used planning reform to exemplify the change that this new approach to politics would make in moving from the monolithic imposition of state power to a new, cooperative governing ethos:

> Our local plans represent one of the biggest shifts in power for decades. It's genuinely one of the most radical and transformative policies that a Conservative or any government can introduce. Suddenly you can see how a system that was controlled by the few can be run by the many. You can see how it's possible to get neighbourhoods to come together to solve problems together. So this won't just help to improve our broken planning system – it'll help to build stronger communities and help to mend our broken society too.

Planning reform was prominently positioned within the Coalition's ambitions for 'Building the Big Society' being the first substantial proposal under the heading 'Giving Communities More Powers':

> We will radically reform the planning system to give neighbourhoods far more ability to determine the shape of the places in which their inhabitants live. (Cabinet Office, 2010)

This commitment was reiterated in the Coalition's Programme for Government (HM Government, 2010) which promised planning reform in keeping with the Conservative Party Green Paper 'Open Source Planning' (OSP) published in the build up to the 2010 election (Conservative Party, 2010).

The analysis articulated in OSP fits well with the anti-state thrust of the Big Society narrative, describing the planning system implemented by New Labour as consisting of 'bureaucratic barriers', and central and regional 'diktats' disempowering and antagonizing people rather than 'enabling communities to formulate a positive vision of their future development' (p. 1). OSP therefore called for 'radical reform' that would 'shift power away from centralised bureaucracies and into the hands of individuals, communities and councils … to create a genuinely responsive service' (p. 5). Whilst the Big Society was not considered a successful 'doorstep' message in the 2010 general election campaign, the immediate electoral appeal of the ideas contained in OSP may well have been quietly significant. Opposition to new housing development had certainly become a significant issue in many areas of core Conservative support, particularly in Southern England. OSP's promise to abolish the unelected regional tier of government where housing targets were being set and 'imposed' on local communities (a promise also made by the Liberal Democrats) was therefore a significant gesture. Further commitments promised to allow local communities to determine levels of new housebuilding for themselves and to grant them rights of appeal against unwanted decisions.[7]

OSP was principally authored by John Howell, MP for Henley in Oxfordshire where opposition to housebuilding and a conservative attachment to the preservation of towns and villages have been particularly strong, reflecting the powerful southern English shire county imaginary described above. Given the political geography of the UK, such a bias in Conservative policy and thinking is perhaps unsurprising; indeed Greg Clark even alluded to this when suggesting that:

> I believe that when people enter public life, wanting to make a difference, the dreams that they have are of their own communities. Their ambitions may be for the nation as a whole, but when they envision change, it is familiar people and places that they see in the mind's eye. (Clark, 2010b)

The south-east of England has arguably been central to shaping the 'mind's eye' of government for some time in relation to planning, contributing to a view of the system as a problem area of public policy. This reflects its status as a key driver of national economic growth, with attendant concern about housing shortages and affordability combining with particularly strong public opposition to new development which is widely interpreted as a threat to residents' quality of life. This is particularly problematic for Conservative governments committed to a neoliberal growth model premised on the competitive success of the south-east but whose core electoral support is often located in areas marked by strong development pressure and high levels of opposition.

OSP recognized the dissatisfaction of both communities and developers, and the increasingly antagonistic nature of planning as key problems. The empowerment of innately responsible organic communities was presented as a means of transcending this antagonism and generating a new, more positive approach towards development:

> if we enable communities to find their own ways of overcoming the tensions between development and conservation, local people can become proponents rather than opponents of

appropriate economic growth…. Open Source planning will engage local communities and foster a spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship. (pp. 1–2)

This was to be achieved in part by removing the artificial administrative boundaries imposed by the state (cf. Burke above), granting powers for neighbourhoods to self-identify their own 'natural' form within which they would be able to create 'neighbourhood plans' to control levels of development. Neighbourhood planning powers were presented as a means of empowering governance beneath the existing level of local government, based on the model of rural parish councils (though the challenge of defining neighbourhoods in unparished and often diverse urban areas was not clearly addressed, suggesting the dominance of the rather homogenous, rural idyll of a 'natural' community underpinning localism).

This formulation of localism was dominated by a concern for empowerment of communities, but downplayed the role of the market in shaping localities. Yet, conservative neo-liberal impulses required a means of squaring local empowerment with deregulated development. Conservative politicians thus argued that state-led planning had created a 'generation of NIMBYs', whilst localism would transform people into 'homebuilders' (Shapps, 2009). To achieve this, OSP proposed a series of incentives to transform local attitudes and behaviour (including the New Homes Bonus (NHB), a payment to communities for every new house built). Thus, central government rationalities sought to define acceptable forms of localism (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013), using the language of 'nudge economics' to promote the 'homebuilder' as a responsible form of citizenship in contrast to the 'NIMBY' (Inch, 2012). In so doing, it highlighted the uneasy juxtaposition of market-based and more communitarian understandings of place and citizenship (Matthews *et al.*, 2014).

Phase 2: 'Growth' Localism vs. 'One-nation' Localism

In government, the claims made within OSP that the growth/localism tension could be transcended were quickly subject to scrutiny. A series of statements from the Treasury and Department for Business Innovation and Skills, culminating in the 2011 Budget, restated the view that the planning system was a serious barrier to growth. The evidence base for this claim is deeply questionable (see RTPI, 2011); however, it can be seen as a continuation of an essentially ideological, neoliberal distrust of local government and opposition to land-use planning that has characterized the Treasury since at least the 1980s.[8] This led to the re-emergence of some by now familiar rhetoric from Government Ministers describing planners and the planning system as 'enemies of enterprise' and 'drag anchors to growth' (Donnelly, 2011).

Whilst the promised abolition of regional level planning and introduction of neighbourhood planning were included in the Coalition's flagship Localism Bill, some of the bolder commitments within OSP were quietly moderated; for example neighbourhood plans would not allow local people to set lower levels of development than local authority plans and appeal rights would not be extended to communities.

The resultant shift in emphasis from local empowerment towards deregulation in the name of 'growth' became particularly controversial, however, with the publication of the government's draft National Planning Policy Framework in July 2011 (CLG, 2011). The framework was intended to replace and radically shorten a suite of national policy statements that had played an increasingly significant role in shaping local policies and decisions. Central to the draft was a proposed "presumption in favour of sustainable development"

intended to emphasize that the default answer to any proposal for development should be 'yes' unless very clear reasons indicated otherwise. Within English planning law, there is a rather esoteric level of debate about whether this would make any substantive difference to the operation of the system; however, its intention to send a deregulatory message was clear and provoked an equally clear response.

A broad coalition of conservation, heritage and green groups quickly formed in opposition to the proposals. Far from being a radical grouping, however, many of the organizations involved drew considerable support from primarily conservative constituencies (Vidal, 2011). The National Trust in particular emerged as key critics of the draft NPPF with their chief executive Fiona Reynolds suggesting:

> This finally sounds the death knell to the principle established in the 1940s that the planning system should be used to protect what is most special in the landscape. (quoted in Bloxham, 2011)

Whilst planning is rarely front page news, the campaign was coordinated and promoted over following weeks and months by the *Daily Telegraph*, a key plank of the right-wing and broadly conservative press, which ran a high-profile 'Hands Off Our Land' campaign against the NPPF. Launching their campaign, the newspaper drew on a distinctly Baldwinite rhetoric. In an editorial entitled 'A Shameful Way to Treat Rural Britain', they argued that 'In place of the strict curbs on building in rural areas enshrined in the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act – curbs that have helped preserve the matchless beauty of rural Britain – there will be a new "presumption in favour of sustainable development" (Telegraph View, 2011, p. 19). Subsequent investigative reporting sought to expose the strength and influence of the property development lobby on the Government (Blake, 2011) and to foment both national and local opposition to the NPPF which headlines suggested was 'Putting the British Countryside at Peril', posing a threat that would lead to 'Bulldozers coming for the Green Belt'.

This backlash against the imperatives of the market was not, however, a direct defence of coalition localism against the growth agenda. Instead, it might be more clearly understood as a rearticulation of the One-Nation view of the planning system as a means of preserving landscape and communities *alongside* some commitment to localism – a distinctive One-Nation localism converging around a shared concern about the threat posed by the free market to the preservation of the landscape and local powers of self-determination. This was perhaps given its clearest ideological articulation by the conservative philosopher Roger Scruton who, writing in the *Daily Telegraph's*, argued that:

> David Cameron has urged us to put civil society in place of the state, and to return to the people the initiative that central government has stolen from them. I applaud his intentions. But the Coalition's proposals to reform the planning system, while ostensibly returning planning decisions to local communities, leave the default position not in the hands of the community, but in the hands of the developer – the big business from elsewhere, which has no interest in conserving a cherished habitat and which is no more the friend of civil society than was the dictatorial state … There are few success stories in environmental politics. But the 1946 [sic] Act is one of them. And its success is due to one fact above all, which is that it removes the default position from the developer. It is a set of constraints … Thank God for obstacles to economic growth. (Scruton, 2011)

Such arguments, and their high-profile public articulation, demonstrated the presence and strength in planning reform debates of all three of the traditions of conservative ideas about the proper role of the state in controlling the development and use of land identified above.

The campaign forced the Government to engage in a very public debate with many of its own supporters over the planning reform agenda. Writing together in the *Financial Times*, the Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne and the Communities Secretary Eric Pickles (with responsibility for planning) promised that they would not back down on the NPPF and argued that the dissatisfaction of communities and developers stemmed from the same source – 'the complex and adversarial' planning system (Pickles & Osborne, 2011). Reform would, they argued, help to meet the interests of both whilst also maintaining key landscape protections, including green belt,[9] National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The following months involved somewhat awkward attempts to placate all sides of the argument with promises to listen to critics but also regular reminders of the Government's commitment to pro-growth reform, and the requirement for 'responsible' (i.e. growth orientated) localism. With high-profile and vocal critics such as the National Trust and the Campaign to Protect Rural England involved in subsequent discussions, by the time the NPPF was finally published in March 2012 (CLG, 2012) the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development' had been moderated through the addition of a clearer and stronger definition of sustainable development that, it was claimed, dampened the commitment towards growth. Despite such concessions, the final NPPF retained strong pro-growth measures. *The Daily Telegraph*, National Trust and others, however, cautiously welcomed the changes, suggesting an uneasy settlement had been reached.

Phase 3: 'Muscular' Localism

In the period after the publication of the NPPF, planning reform became considerably less politically visible. The government continued to press forward with a succession of Treasury influenced measures premised on the neoliberal view of planning as a barrier to growth.[10] A suite of technical, detailed measures, designed to loosen local regulatory control over development, were given added urgency by the increasingly high political profile accorded to the 'housing crisis' and the government's desire to construct this as a result of restrictive planning practices artificially constricting supply of new housing.[11] Some of these were aimed squarely at 'homeowners' (making it easier to extend their property), yet most were targeted at reducing 'red tape' for developers.

Reforms included legislation in the form of the Growth and Infrastructure Act (2013) which granted central government powers to take over decision-making in 'poor performing' local planning authorities. In the face of opposition criticism that this represented a clear retreat from localism, Pickles (2012, emphasis added) argued:

> There might be a degree of *muscular localism* about it, but we will work together with good local authorities. It is only those local authorities that have been dragging their feet and being wholly unrealistic, operating in a kind of economy la-la land, that we will be dealing with.

The shift towards *muscular localism* seems redolent of the managerial rationalities of previous New Labour governments who often sought to offer 'earned autonomy' to reward good council performance whilst promising penalties for bad performance (Newman, 2001). The imperative of growth had therefore led to the application of more coercive techniques

designed to foster 'responsible' forms of localism from a distance, a means of managing local autonomy without disturbing underlying political antagonisms (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013).

The government did continue to make appeals to localism – then Planning Minister Nick Boles argued that high levels of interest shown in neighbourhood planning showed the Big Society was being realized (Dominiczak, 2013). In addition, although the effectiveness of the NHB had been questioned by the Public Accounts Select Committee (House of Commons, 2013), they continued to argue that 'responsible localism' could be fostered through the use of incentives, including an aborted proposal to pay local residents to accept new housing development (Sell, 2013). However, the period of muscular localism marked a retreat from the strong rhetoric of localism with the politics of planning reform increasingly being framed as a battle between conservation and growth.

One-nation localists, still supported by the Daily Telegraph's 'Hands off our Land' campaign continued to raise concerns about the operation of the post-NPPF planning system (e.g. Hope, 2013). In particular, a requirement for local authorities to identify 5 years of housing land supply was seen to have forced many authorities in areas of high market demand into making locally unpopular choices to designate sites for new housing development. Faced with potentially significant levels of opposition, in the run up to the 2015 General Election Conservative ministers increasingly sought to extol their commitments to protecting green belt land, and revived their localist discourse in their manifesto: 'We will ensure that *local people have more control over planning* and protect the Green Belt' (Conservative Party, 2015, p. 51 emphasis in original).

Discussion

The 3-phase analysis presented above suggests that reform of the planning system proved politically problematic for the Conservative-led Coalition in England from 2010 to 2015. In particular, the affective and morally charged formulation of localism was particularly difficult for the Conservative Party to sustain, revealing strong antagonisms between One-Nation, neo-liberal and localist elements of conservative ideology. These tensions suggest the continued presence of very different strands of Conservative thought, drawing on different spatial imaginaries and understandings of the role of a planning system in shaping spatial development. Moreover, the tensions that have unfolded as the promises of localism have played out suggest the possibility of further real resistance to the spatial intensification of development required by the further evolution of the neoliberal project that has dominated British politics for more than 30 years.

We have not set out to present a full assessment of the planning reforms introduced between 2010 and 2015 or of their overall ideological character. Further research and writing is certainly required to make sense of what has been another turbulent period of politically motivated instability in English planning, leaving behind a planning system that is considerably less well-resourced and under substantial pressure. Our argument does, however, offer an account of the dangers inherent to any Conservative attempt to mobilize the affective politics of place and community.

Viewing localism in tension with other strains of conservative thought allows us to see it less as a 'third way' between One-Nation Conservatism and neo-liberalism, and more as a phenomenon that draws on, and yet also reacts to these longer running conservative ideas. This has distinct consequences for how place is viewed, and particularly how planning is

deemed to manage places. The somewhat chaotic reform of planning under the Coalition Government illustrates how 'Big Society policies' sought to mobilize distinct ideas about the relationship of the state to localities and communities, and how places are able to react to broader patterns of economic change. Our analysis helps to further understanding of the failure of such localist ideas to act as an effective salve to the contradictory politics generated by the imperatives of neoliberal spatial development. It also provides further evidence of a pragmatic tendency towards the central application of governmental rationalities as a means of managing 'the local' (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013) – at odds with the Big Society's promises of an organic order waiting to emerge from under the oppressive weight of the central state and perhaps tacit acknowledgement of an inability to confront tensions between very different traditions of thought about the purposes of planning.

Planning and housing were generally less visible as issues in the 2015 General Election that was won by a Conservative majority Government. Immediately following the election, Chancellor George Osborne unveiled yet another package of measures intended to deal with the perceived problem of 'a planning system regarded by many as one of the most significant constraints facing the economy, bringing delay and inflexibility' (HM Treasury, 2015, p. 41). Alongside this, localism has been recast as part of a decentralization agenda, one in which pro-growth local authorities, are granted extra powers over infrastructure, health services, transport and housing. These reflect a different spatial imagination, shaped by imagery of the 'Northern Powerhouse' rather than a southern English rurality. The implications of this for planning remain unclear, yet they rearticulate a more corporate One-Nation approach to governance. It therefore seems likely that the fragile settlement that was reached between neoliberal, localist and One-Nation/preservationist factions of the Conservative Party will be tested again in the coming years – with the local remaining a significant stake in the peculiar conservative politics of English planning.

Despite such tensions, it is important to keep in mind that a variety of localisms are still emerging as different localities prove more or less able to engage with the contradictory dynamics of change that have been introduced. It is therefore particularly important to retain a wider focus on the spatial realities of contemporary England. The simple images of both an imagined Ambridge and of places as competitive assets are highly selective and ill-suited to recognizing the challenges facing many parts of the country. The broader context of an increasingly regressive local government financial settlement that restricts redistribution to those locations not favoured by the market (Lowndes & Pratchett, 2012) reveals a wider politics, particularly as regards inequality. The constant refrain of localism is its celebration of the uniqueness of place and the need to respect the capacities of communities therein. However, this raises questions as to how a localist policy deals with inequalities between places, and more particularly the problems of deprived places. The argument articulated by Phillip Blond is that deprivation has been significantly exacerbated through top-down state policies and their removal, it is argued, will encourage a flourishing of civil society in these places. Yet, the localist agenda relies on the notion that settled communities will come together and find the resources to solve their problems. Whilst this may chime strongly with the nature of affluent rural and suburban places, its ability to provide a route map out of poverty for diverse urban neighbourhoods undergoing rapid change is not considered – this idealized associationalism either fails or refuses to acknowledge the uneven distribution of power and resources within civil society.

This may reflect a wider agenda concerning the rights to place held by citizens. Much of the localist agenda (reflecting its distributist antecedents) assumes that the bedrock of community is homeownership and that stake in one's locality exists through property ownership. For those who do not own property, the Coalition Government's policies have been less favourable to the part they play in a settled community. For example, housing benefit caps have increased movement of tenants out of homes, with problems of associated homelessness (Murie, 2012). For these groups, stimulating belonging and attachment to 'the local' is sacrificed against national fiscal priorities to reduce government spending, supported by a seemingly more politically successful use of a morally charged rhetoric of fairness to justify widespread and ongoing cuts in welfare spending. If the full promise of localism has not materialized in Ambridge, it seems clear that it was never really offered to many people in deprived areas whose rights to place are increasingly seen as the property of the state and therefore as conditional and subject to ongoing punitive intervention (Flint, 2014).

Conclusions

Affective imaginaries of place and community that seek to mobilize 'the local' are potentially powerful but deeply ambiguous political constructs. In this article, we have sought to assess the Big Society/Localism agenda enacted by the Conservative-led Coalition Government in England from 2010 to 2015 as a means of assessing how the affective politics of 'the local' have been mobilized in recent English politics.

We have assessed localism as an articulation of certain traditions in conservative ideology, showing how affective images of place-based community are central to its imaginary, but also how they contain the seeds of key contradictions that figure strongly in attempts to translate such ideas into effective political practice and to reshape state–society relations in the ways imagined. Further to this, we have traced these ideas through the debates and processes of planning reform, showing how it has exposed deep-rooted tensions within the Conservative party and the contradictory conceptions of place, community and citizenship on which they rest. In doing so, we have assessed one key *location* where Big Society ideas about the benefits of decentralization struggled to effectively re-frame policy. In the case of planning reform the agenda revolved around the tension between how best to protect the shire county vision of an imagined Ambridge and the view of places as a competitive asset. This is, however, a limited conception of the politics of place and the purpose of state intervention, the imaginaries invoked being highly selective and potentially exclusionary. Certainly they do little to address the long-standing effects of spatially uneven development, suggesting a need to locate effective alternatives to this narrow politics of state-place relations.

Beyond the particularities of the English context, our argument also raises wider lessons for assessing the ambiguous politics and potential of 'the local', highlighting a need to explore how the affective and morally charged dimensions of localizing projects fit within broader ideological frameworks, and how this may both define and delimit significant aspects of their political potential. If the local is to remain a key site of political contestation, then there is a clear need to understand its ambiguous range of meanings and political purposes and their potential ideological coordinates, opening these up to critical scrutiny whilst also perhaps treating their expression as the potentially sincere expression of a desire for new ways of organizing society.

Notes

1. Whilst the Coalition Government was elected across the whole of the UK, it is important to note that its localism agenda applied mainly to England since many aspects of local government are now devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
2. This was the first peace-time coalition in Westminster since the 1930s and therefore required a considerable shift in the prevailing political mindset of the country.
3. The article treats the Big Society and Localism agendas as closely related or near synonyms. This reflects the key emphasis the Coalition Government placed on decentralization of power as a means of building the Big Society, and the particularly close relationship between their articulation in the field of planning.
4. And recognizing, but choosing to bracket, the differences between the approaches of the various authors cited above.
5. As Eagleton (2009) notes, Burke's argument is not solely about the 'small place' and does not preclude allegiance to the monarch or the nation, it is merely the 'first principle', the root of these higher order affections.
6. For example, Harold Macmillan, as Minister of Local Government and Planning introduced Regional Housing Boards in 1952. Similar boards were wound up by the Coalition Government in 2011.
7. Currently in England, only the applicant has the right to appeal against a decision they do not agree with.
8. Indeed, it is important to note that whilst the tension between growth and localism runs to the heart of Conservative politics in England, it proved equally problematic under New Labour who similarly identified planning as a problem for both businesses and communities and sought to implement wide-ranging reforms that they claimed would produce a system that could somehow work for all stakeholders. In this regard, further rounds of planning reform should be seen as part of a longer running failure to adequately address the contradictions that the planning system is being asked to reconcile.
9. Commitment to preservation of green belt designations remains a powerful symbol in the politics of English planning (see Elson, 1986).
10. Space precludes a fuller discussion of these measures here, this is not to imply that they are not significant for understanding the overall picture of the Coalition Government's planning reforms, however, that is beyond the scope of this article.
11. Space precludes a full discussion of the political construction of the housing crisis, however, we view this as a problematic simplification of a complex issue that runs close to the core of the broader economic crisis.

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