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The Emancipatory Community? place, politics and collective action in cities

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even in big cities people continue to act collectively at times on the basis of common territory: the people of a neighborhood resist urban renewal, white homeowners band together to resist black newcomers, disputes over the operation of schools bring geographical groupings clearly into view ... their very existence identifies the need for a better understanding of the conditions under which collective action on a territorial basis occurs. (Charles Tilly, 1974: 212)

At the heart of my beliefs is the idea of community. I don't just mean the local villages, towns and cities in which we live. I mean that our fulfilment as individuals lies in a decent society of others. My argument ... is that the renewal of community is the answer to the challenges of a changing world. (Tony Blair quoted in Levitas, 2000: 189)

We begin with Tilly's (1974: 212) unambiguously affirmative answer to the question 'Do Communities Act?' because we believe that collective action remains a major, if sometimes dismissed or overlooked, political component of urban life in Western cities. Furthermore, we argue that it is most often in the shared territorial spaces that are constructed to be communities where the city's celebrated ability to allow for the formation of collective political identities and consciousness is realized. This is neither to assert nor deny the normative desirability of the idea and ideal of community, although these are issues we will discuss in this chapter, but rather to recognize that it is a conceptual framework that is often employed by people and organizations in urban areas.

The second quotation from British Prime Minister Tony Blair highlights the parallel political reality that while the *idea* of community is used to mobilize people to act collectively, the *ideal* of community is increasingly invoked in Anglo-American politics. This is particularly true in the rhetoric and

policies of the New Labour government in power in the United Kingdom since 1997. The invocation of community by the Blair government could be easily dismissed as a cynical political exercise designed to put a benign face on the process of state privatization – and there would be no small amount of truth in that depiction (see North, 2000) – but it is also more than this, for political communitarianism has become a core component of New Labour philosophy. Respectively, the two introductory quotes represent the two principal halves of the notion of community: the extent of its literal, empirical existence and its normative ideal – or, as Joseph Gusfield (1975) put it, its semantic and poetic meanings. In confronting these two halves of community, we are foregrounding the processes that occur in the meeting (or collision) of the semantic and poetic meanings of community.

In this chapter we begin by asking why collective action around shared territory, in the name of community, is an almost inherent component of urban life. We then discuss the political debates surrounding the ideal of community, particularly in the context of New Labour and its emphasis on it. The bulk of the chapter, however, will draw on our experiences as activists and participant-observation researchers in the regeneration processes in the Elephant & Castle area of south central London.¹ We have consciously tried to limit the extent to which our discussion of community and the potential for emancipation is an abstract one. Instead, our discussion focuses on the emancipatory potential of community based organising in the contemporary world of British politics.

Place, community and collective action

Community is one of the most ideologically loaded terms in the English language. Rather than define community here, which is well beyond the scope of this chapter, we accept that there are two broad sets of meanings attached to the word. The first is some kind of self-defined group that, in the words of John Agnew (1989: 13) shares ‘a morally valued way of life’. These are what could be called communities of interest, and in an urban environment this can mean people who might not live together in a given space, but nevertheless congregate away from their homes to pursue their shared interests. The second is geographically defined (even if that definition is porous and mutable) as ‘social relations in a discrete geographic setting’ (Agnew, 1989: 13). These two senses of community are clearly related, as shared communities of interest and affiliation often emerge from place-based social relations. But they can also become confused in discussions of community, especially when drawn into divisive efforts to define who is or is not the ‘authentic’ community: Is it ‘residents’? Members of faith groups who live elsewhere but worship in a shared space? Asylum seekers or immigrant communities? Members of

voluntary or community groups that are dependent on funding from state agencies? These are questions that can tear community groups apart. Even in the most segregated cities, differences and conflict are integrally part of intra-community social relations. While helpful for analysis and essential for forging affiliations that work with and through difference, we would also agree with David Harvey (1996) that fixation with these differences can be a barrier to the construction of local urban community groups who are able to act effectively in their collective self-interest.

While the importance of place in social relations has now long been recognized by geographers, they have not considered fully how these interactions influence political consciousness and collective actions at the geographic scale of the community. The relationships between place and collective action have most explicitly been addressed in the context of identity-formation and identity politics (see, for instance, Keith and Pile, 1993; Miller, 2000; Pile and Keith, 1997), often, unfortunately, at the expense of elaborating the importance of urban structures (the nature of and use of buildings and urban spaces) and collective consumption (housing, community facilities and the like). Perhaps the limited attention given these issues is a function of the continued rejection of the structuralist analyses of the 1970s, in which they were foregrounded. While it is unquestionably true that identity (trans)forming relationships are often interwoven with place, and therefore politically and intellectually important to understand, discounting structural issues of, for example, housing access, risks overlooking some of the basics of collective action in urban space. As Joseph Kling and Prudence Posner argue:

Any activist knows that in the United States probably the easiest issue to mobilize people around is the protection of their property rights. Second easiest is the demand that 'the community' participate in decisions that affect the life situation (e.g. property value, child raising and education, shopping, traffic patterns ...). (1990: 36)

Their first mobilizing rationale has a definite class and owner-occupier bias, but if we substitute 'home' for 'property rights' then it would hold much more broadly. Thus we would suggest that at the heart of collective action in the community is defence of the *home* and the means of *collective reproduction* (for housing, education, health care, etc. are not simply realms of consumption but spheres of active, if often unwaged, labour). This is because place-based communities are the sites of residences and the relationships and activities associated with them. For this reason some theorists (e.g. Smith, 1993) have defined the geographic scale of the community as the scale of social reproduction. On some irreducible level, therefore, it is only logical that issues surrounding the home should be at the fore of community-based collective action. The questions then become: how do relations of domestic property lead to collective action in urban space? What is the emancipatory potential of such action?

In one of the most useful, if over-looked discussions of these issues, John Davis (1991) worked through a framework for understanding how place and territory interact with people's relations to their domestic property to create the basis for collective action in urban space. In his work the functional and tenurial relationships (that is, relations of control and ownership) that people have with their domestic property shape and define the potential for collective action in urban space. His understanding of how relations of domestic property can lead to radical political mobilization, however, is more than just taking Karl Marx's transformation from a 'class in itself' to a 'class for itself' and applying it to a neo-Webberian understanding of housing classes. Instead, the model is a three-staged process that begins with *collective consciousness*, which is the recognition of shared interests and property relations (as, for instance, council housing residents). It then moves to *conflict consciousness*, which recognizes not only shared interests, but also how those interests differ from, and are in conflict with, other property interests (such as the local council or a would-be developer). And it progresses to *radical consciousness*, which is the realization that the current structures and relationships governing property are inherently unjust.

We recognize that this schema is very mechanistic, and it is not meant to be a definitive guide to radical community-based collective action. We also readily acknowledge that all too often the process works in reverse. Community groups that emerge out of a radical critique of society can find themselves transformed over time into not-for-profit housing developers and landlords (see DeFilippis, 2003: ch. 2). Similarly, the process doesn't always 'progress' and groups formed to improve local housing conditions remain as such. This is particularly true with middle class homeowner associations, which can be very quick to mobilise, but have little interest in any radical reconstruction of property relations. For instance the most important and successful American social movement of the last quarter century – the anti-tax movement – emerged as a homeowner movement in California and spread from there, bringing Ronald Reagan to power. In short, we do not assume here that consciousness raising and transformation, and changes in the character and goals of groups involved in collective action, are either natural or inevitable developments. Nor do we assume, as Manuel Castells (1983) did, that collective action around issues of domestic property are necessarily progressive or radical. They are clearly not – and the movement towards a radical social critique is not in any way an unproblematic process. But these concerns notwithstanding, the schema proposed by Davis (1991) remains a politically and intellectually useful one, and one which is largely borne out in the case of the Elephant and Castle.

The ideal of community and emancipation

But if we have, briefly, sketched out a framework for collective action in urban communities, we have not dealt with the inherently political question of whether

or not the community should be the focus of collective action. The notion of community as the basis for collective action has been challenged primarily from three different directions, Marxists, feminists, and post-structuralists.²

The Marxian critique of community as a basis for collective action and social change is that communities are not the realms in which the dominant frameworks of power and exploitation in society are produced and reproduced. If class relations are the foundation of social relations then to organize in 'the community,' even if communities are the spatial expressions of people's class positions, is largely to treat the symptom rather than the cause. As Harvey (1981: 115) states, 'This leads us to the notion of displaced class struggle, by which I mean class struggle which has its origin in the work process but which ramifies and reverberates throughout all aspects of the system of relations which capitalism establishes'. To be sure, there have been more nuanced discussions of collective action in the community from Marxists, and Ira Katznelson's (1981) work stands out in this regard. But even in Katznelson's work, there is a politically destructive (to the left) schism between class and community in urban politics. And to Katznelson, this gulf is largely because community politics have slipped far too easily into the pre-figured 'trenches' of community issues and lost sight of class relations and conflict. And while some components of the labour movement in the US and the UK have become more involved in community organizing efforts, and bridges have been built between community groups and organized labour – most notably in the living wage movement which has spread throughout the US and even made it to the East End of London (see Littman and Wills, 2002) – the political gaps are still wide and difficult to overcome.

Feminist and post-structuralist critiques of community have focused on its oppressive effects on individuals in general, and particularly on those different from, or outside of, the dominant social group within the community, and so, despite important differences within and between them, can be conveniently discussed together. In its abstract expression, this critique borrows from the debates between liberals and communitarians, while agreeing with neither. It was perhaps most clearly and thoughtfully articulated by Iris Marion Young when she stated:

The ideal of community, I suggest, validates and reinforces the fear and aversion some social groups exhibit toward others. If community is a positive norm, that is, if existing together with others in relations of mutual understanding and reciprocity is the goal, then it is understandable that we exclude and avoid those with whom we do not or cannot identify. (1990: 235)

Similar arguments have long been made by feminists (see, for instance, Friedan 1984). These critics are surely right that modern and post-modern cities that can liberate individuals from the oppressive conformity of small town/rural or suburban life. It is precisely these kinds of oppressive conformity that have led

authors like Young (1990) and Elizabeth Wilson (1992) to celebrate the emancipatory potential of the diversity and potential anonymity offered in urban space. And it is this celebration of anonymity that leads such authors to significantly challenge the normative ideal of communities.

The debates surrounding the semantic and poetic meanings of community, however, have largely been unheeded in contemporary British politics. Community is, almost literally, the 'Third Way' between the society-centred framework of Old Labour and the individualist-centred perspective of The New Right. The notion of community invoked by New Labour follows Amitai Etzioni (1993, 1996) and borrows heavily from Robert Putnam (2000). Like these intellectual models it is almost completely devoid of class and class conflict and pays little heed to the potentially repressive and intolerant character of communities, which troubles so many critics (e.g. Lees, 2003). Tellingly, in his discussion of communitarianism and contemporary social policy, Adrian Little (2002, ch. 6) discusses only one particular policy arena in any great depth: crime control. It is thus a simultaneously controlling and conflict-free understanding of community informing the dominant political communitarianism in Anglo-American politics.

The intellectual debates around the problematic nature of the ideal of community are therefore particularly important in refuting the simple-minded political communitarianism of public figures like Tony Blair. At the same time, however, they can also potentially undermine the efforts of low-income urban communities to organize collectively in pursuit of their goals. This potentially emancipatory aspect of urban life – the ability to organize collectively – has long been recognized by social theorists, and it was certainly part of Marx's understanding of the potential of urban politics. All this, ultimately, is what leads Judith Garber (1995: 37) to observe, 'as an abstraction, local community is deeply problematic; in practice, it may actually serve women more often than we think.' We agree with Garber's assessment, even if we are not as sanguine as we would like to be about the outcomes of community-based struggles against larger-scale structures and institutions with greater political capacity. For us, the interesting questions are not: are there communities? There are. Or, can they act collectively? They can, as work on urban social movements shows (e.g. Castells, 1983; Lowe, 1986). Rather we want to ask: when they do emerge? How are collectively organized community-based agents constructed? How do they act and with what success?

With this background in mind we now explore these issues in a case study of conflict over the regeneration of the Elephant and Castle in South London.

Elephant Links

Elephant Links is an urban regeneration programme centred on the Elephant and Castle in south east central London. It's the missing part of central

London: typically maps of central London show neighbouring Westminster, the West End, and the City, while the Elephant is obscured by the legend. Yet it is less than a mile from each of those quarters and close to the revitalized South Bank, which now attracts tourists by the legion to its Tate Modern, ‘Wobbly’ (Millennium) Bridge, the London Eye, HMS Belfast, and the GLA Building at Tower Bridge. It has a locally popular, yet run down shopping centre, which, incidentally, was the UK’s first covered shopping centre. The Elephant is one of London’s major traffic junctions for road, rail and bus and suffers from high levels of congestion. Finally, the Elephant is home to gangsters, MPs, architects, journalists, and some of the highest levels of social exclusion in the city. It therefore encapsulates both the emancipatory potential (its density, diversity and plurality) and the oppression of urban life (its concentrations of poverty). Although such concentrations in-and-of-themselves do not automatically have emancipatory potential, they can, and in this case do, provide the space for the collective organizing necessary to realize social change in urban space.

Given its prime location close to central London, the Elephant is also an area ripe for redevelopment. In 1999, the London Borough of Southwark led a partnership of local people, businesses, voluntary organizations, and other public sector organizations that won a Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) funding bid from the central government. A private sector partner in development was chosen the following year to carry forward the plans for regeneration in the area. The Elephant Links programme was about the transformation of urban space and the communities living there. It was also about the age-old question: who would benefit from this transformation? In what follows we discuss how community-based activists at the Elephant used discourses of ‘community’ in an emancipatory project that aimed to ensure that regeneration would benefit local working-class people, rather than just becoming another example of gentrification.

The emancipatory potential of community consultation

British urban policy – in 1999 anyway – included a requirement that local residents affected by regeneration should be fully included in discussions about future plans for the areas they inhabit. Theorists from Sherry Arnstein (1969) have debated the extent that consultation has emancipatory potential. And it was here, literally at the beginning of the regeneration process, that conflict over space erupted. To inform its bid, the council convened a Residents’ Regeneration Group (RRG) made up of local people who met for 18 months and developed their own ‘principles for effective regeneration’: the need to improve – and replace any lost – council-owned housing,³ environmental improvements to local green spaces, and improved community facilities. But these considerations were not at the heart of the council’s regeneration

agenda. In the eyes of the Labour-led Southwark council, local residents would be consulted, but they would not be in charge of the regeneration process. The main themes of the bid for SRB funding were worked up by council officers and presented to other partners somewhat late in the day in what appeared as a *fait accompli*. The bid did not address major community issues around housing and the need for community facilities. The bulk of expenditure would go to provide environmental and transport works to facilitate physical development and the council's flagship social inclusion programme, which looked to help unemployed people to find work (a classic New Labour 'workfare initiative'). Thus the bid focused on top down New Labour-friendly social inclusion policies and the facilitation of land assembly for the development, rather than the community-generated programmes developed by the RRG.

Residents had to fight to get the regeneration programme to address their concerns. They threatened that unless their views were included they would not support the SRB bid, thereby jeopardizing the council's likelihood of getting the £25 million it was seeking to win from central government. Council officers responded that the community's agenda would not adequately meet the government's criteria for funding. Thus while residents were free to put forward their views, the extent to which the process was open enough for residents to pursue their own visions for the Elephant and Castle was limited by the need to meet priorities generated centrally. At their root, then, conflicts, struggles and barriers to emancipatory community organizing in the Elephant stem from this set of power relations governing the regeneration process. While other partners in regeneration saw local residents as objects of, rather than actors in regeneration, residents were able to use government rhetoric about the importance of participation to insist that they be treated as full decision-making partners – not consultees.

Community activists resolved to make Elephant Links a partnership led by local residents. They were concerned that the council was working to a hidden 'social cleansing' agenda. In an infamous remark, Southwark's then Director of Regeneration, Fred Manson, argued that 'We need to have a wider range of people living in the borough ... social housing generates people on low incomes coming in and that generates poor school performances, middle class people stay away' (quoted in Wehner, 2002). Southwark, it was argued, suffered from having too many of the 'wrong sort' of residents: socially excluded people disadvantaged not by exclusionary labour market processes in a global city, but by 'low' aspirations and low social capital that they passed on to their children. The council's answer was managed but inclusive gentrification to bring in more wealthy residents with higher levels of social capital and labour market involvement and paying higher levels of local tax, which could be used to benefit local residents (provided they were not displaced in the process).

Despite these very real problems of social exclusion, community representatives refused to scale back on their vision for the Elephant. They wanted to be involved in the SRB and make it work for local residents. For some, their communities needed to be defended from gentrification, and they had a right to a voice. For others, the broad aims of the SRB programme were loose enough that community benefits could be secured in the future, and residents would be able to influence the redevelopment of the shopping centre and their estates. This is what is so interesting about the Elephant. Even the more radical community-based voices in the Elephant wanted to be constructive. They did not feel that the changes proposed were all bad or that the Elephant was fine as it was. They took the SRB rhetoric of partnership seriously and wanted to be involved in working to improve the plans rather than shouting from the sidelines. As we shall see, the tragedy of the Elephant is that Southwark's actions pushed these voices into an oppositional stance that they had tried so hard to avoid. But on the way, through engagement, local residents also won a number of victories.

Winning resources for an emancipatory project – the Elephant Links Community Forum

Partly as a result of this activism, a Community Forum was established by the Elephant Links partnership through which local tenants and residents could get involved in the SRB. The Resident's Regeneration Group (RRG) joined the forum, believing that it could be an effective vehicle for promoting community interests. But very quickly it became clear that the Forum would need its own staff and resources so that local people could play an equal part alongside the better resourced private and public sector participants. After considerable conflict with the council over how quickly staff and technical support could be hired, the Forum activists won funding from the SRB to hire staff and create an office. An office was opened in the shopping centre, which became a focus for organizing around local residents' views of the future of the Elephant. Residents had won their own voice, their own resources, and a space from which they could develop further their ideas for the future of the Elephant.

Community action through partnership mechanisms

British urban regeneration policy assumes that members of the partnership boards disbursing government regeneration monies act as individuals whose first responsibility is to ensure that the expenditure of public funds is accountable to the government and consistent both with National Audit Office rules and the aims of the SRB. They are thus managers of money, not

local representatives. The Forum's representatives were wholeheartedly committed to ensuring that grants were properly spent, but they believed that this could best be done by ensuring that projects benefited local residents. As they were only five out of the 21 members of the Partnership Board, they felt they needed to act collectively at the board. They met before meetings, made sure they understood the issues, debated, and (eventually) agreed a common position. As one Community Forum representative put it 'we are more together. We disagree amongst ourselves, but we are a united front, perhaps we are more interested. I think we were allowed to dominate, really'. They effectively defended their views of what the Elephant should look like.

Acting through the Partnership Board residents sought to influence decisions on their main priorities – housing and the nature of the built environment that would emerge from the regeneration process. This was a constant battle. The council accepted community participation in discussions about the physical development, but argued for consultation rather than a decision-making partnership. Papers described this or that decision that the council would make without reference to the Partnership Board. The council argued that the physical development was a public-private partnership between the council and a development partner, while the Forum argued for holistic regeneration managed through the Elephant Links Partnership Board.

The impasse was solved when, as a result of community action, the council granted residents a key voice in the selection of the development partner. The Community Forum helped decide the criteria for the technical appraisal, and after the Community Forum, the partnership board and the council independently reviewed each of the three competing consortia on offer, a consensus was achieved over one development partner. However, more radical voices within the Community Forum were concerned that while a creditable amount of consultation and information sharing had been developed through the selection process, it did not amount to shared power or decision-making authority. The council consulted, but made the final decision, and more importantly managed information flows between the developer and the community. So in another successful piece of community organizing, the Community Forum got the board to agree to a more robust tripartite structure in which the board, the council, and the developer would work as partners, with significant levels of independent technical support from the SRB, to manage the master-planning process.

The council responded by trying to limit the role of the tripartite body. Meetings took place between the developer and the council without the community representation. Despite repeated efforts by the council to control the development process, the Forum held out for full equality of decision-making, which was finally agreed in February 2001. After these battles, the community seemed to be in a strong position to influence housing and the nature of the built environment as plans for the redevelopment of the Elephant began

to emerge. But this had been achieved at some cost. Conflict had become embedded in board meetings. The Community Forum took up considerable time arguing its case and walked out when progress was not made to its satisfaction. An article in *Property Week* painted the following picture: 'Once official proceedings begin there is not a spare seat in the House. The Community Forum lines up on one side and local councillors and interested parties on the other in a spaghetti western-style stand off' (Creasey, 2001: 46). The other partners' sympathy for the Forum was, to say the least, beginning to wear thin. They felt that the community side was not paying sufficient attention to the core task of managing the SRB programme, which was considerably behind schedule.

The Forum's perception was that the best way to solve endemic conflict was to change the structure of Elephant Links so as to be community-led and to set up a company with its own staff and budget. This company would then grow into a development trust, which would act as the vehicle into which the community benefits from the development would be vested. Another innovation suggested was a Community Land Trust (CLT), which would own the new social housing that came out of the development. A CLT is a particularly radical and innovative form of property ownership in which the land is taken out of the market, the housing units on it are rendered permanently affordable, and community control is written into its governance structure (DeFilippis, 2002). From the community side, this was seen as a more innovative way of securing community control of social housing than either council housing or registered social housing, which was seen simply as a vehicle for privatization. But here, again, the council procrastinated. Asserting itself, the Community Forum asked for feasibility work for a CDT, which council officers felt was premature. Rather than taking instructions from the Board, they resisted a community land trust proposal in favour of a registered social landlord (or housing association) form of housing ownership.

Overall, then, the community had won a significant role in decision-making and seemed well placed to influence the development of the Elephant so as to meet the needs of the existing working-class communities. But community representatives were also criticized by other partners for the way they influenced board policy through effective organizing and caucusing before meetings, rather than through negotiating and taking other partners with them.

Things fall apart: the end the Forum

The pressure began to tell. Forum members began to fall out with each other, as radical and more conciliatory voices clashed. Representatives from the Heygate Estate, the largest council estate in the Elephant, left the Community Forum because they felt that their core concerns were not represented

adequately in an organization that, as a consequence of the need to fulfil SRB outputs, had significantly widened its membership beyond housing to include some 63 local community-based organizations. Their decision seriously weakened the Forum's claim to represent the local community.

The Forum was in a position to clog up the workings of the partnership if it was not listened to, and that gave it a power it was ready to use. The partnership entered a situation in which neither side could impose its will on the other. This was unsustainable, and the outcome was perhaps predictable. The council organized against these 'unruly subjects', and gained control over what, for it, had become an unmanageable process. After two tied ballots, the Community Forum representative chairing the partnership was deposed by a local business person. Within minutes of his election he began to run the board in what was seen by the community as an exclusionary and authoritarian manner that ditched all pretences towards local democracy in favour of the management of the SRB. The chair and the project director would henceforth set the board agenda. An attempt was made to exclude the Community Forum's director from the partnership table. Community voices from the floor would no longer be called to speak. After the withdrawal of Heygate from the Community Forum, the chair also attempted to reduce its representation on the board. The Community Forum responded that local residents should now form a majority of the Partnership Board. As neither the new chair nor the Community Forum would back down, the result was all out war at board meetings.

The council then came after the Community Forum's resources. In an evaluation, the Forum was accused of 'poor judgement' in prioritising development rather than what were called its core objectives. It was accused of failing to recruit enough volunteers, even though it had grown from 17 to 63 participating organisations. The council then refused to pay the Forum's grant, and its staff were issued with redundancy notices.

The community representatives were 'othered' by council officers who held the partnership to ransom. They charged that the Forum was unduly influenced by its director and a small group of politically-motivated activists opposed to the development. The council systematically undermined the Forum's claim to legitimacy as a community voice by claiming the 'community' was not a unitary actor. It ignored the considerable work the Forum had done to build a federal structure that would ensure democratic legitimacy and that the diverse communities at the Elephant were properly represented. The Forum was put under scrutiny and its identity was unpacked in ways designed to neutralize it, while the legitimacy of the public and private sectors went unchallenged.

At the same time, the council voted to terminate the agreement with the selected private developers. It also sought a new housing-based development on the Heygate involving a consortium of registered social landlords. At this point, it became clear that the council had, for some time, been negotiating separately with housing associations on proposals for the Heygate site,

reversing the Community Forum's earlier victory in winning full replacement of council housing in the new development (MacDonald, 2002).

The Community Forum, by this time without its staff, challenged these decisions at what was to be the last meeting of the Elephant Links Board in June 2002. The chair attempted to rule the resolution out of order, and a near riot erupted as members of the local community vented their collective spleen at what they saw as the combined and multiple injustices of the SRB process. The community chanted out the chair's voice, while the Forum then served an injunction on the board demanding that their funds be restored. After unsuccessful attempts to clear the room, the meeting was suspended and the next day the chair decided that the board was no longer competent to administer the SRB.

The council then moved quickly. It raised the stakes and called for the Forum to turn over all its documents. Rather than attempting to pursue mediation, Southwark went to court and gained an injunction, which was served on Forum management committee members at home, requiring them to hand over all documents, freezing the Forum's bank account, and prohibiting use of any of the Forum's assets. Under pressure, the Forum management committee split and narrowly voted to provide the council with the information it needed. The radicals wanted to continue the battle, and on losing the vote felt that they no longer wished to be on the committee. They resigned.

Elephant Links was reconstituted by the Council without significant community involvement, and in 2004, new plans for the regeneration of the Elephant were unveiled which had been drawn up without community consultation.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have presented an in-depth set of participant observations about the reality of community-based organizing in contemporary British urban politics. There are significant lessons about the emancipatory potential of community-based organizing to be taken from the experiences of the Elephant and Castle, where a federation of community-based organizations – the Community Forum – refused to play by the subsidiary role regeneration rules assigned it. The obvious point is that New Labour's rhetoric of community has clearly not been matched in its actual practice. Or, rather, the rhetoric of community has been put into practice, but because the ideal (or poetic meaning) of community being put into practice denies difference and conflict within communities, it yielded a situation of paralysis. Both as an idea and an ideal, community need not erase difference, but any conception of community that ignores conflict and difference will inevitably struggle if differences and conflict 'crash the party' – as they are so often apt to do. In this sense, the emancipatory potential of community-based collective action in urban space collides with attempts to instrumentally impose an ideal of community in which there is no space for collective action.

None of this is particularly striking, but the extent to which community residents and its principal organizational arm, the Community Forum fought with the Labour controlled Southwark Council is remarkable, to say the least. The Forum – or rather the activists at its heart – were consciously able to weld a collective actor from a disparate range of community-based organizations based in an immigrant reception area geographically located one mile from the Houses of Parliament and the City of London. This location matters. At the heart of a global city, population density, geographical proximity, and the palimpsest of layered traditions of urban political action formed a dense and rich sedimented network of information, advice, support, and resources that community activists could call upon.⁴ This network ebbs and flows and can be reactivated in the most unlikely of settings. In creating the Forum, the council brought this hitherto hidden network together, and the activists then rebelled against the subsidiary position assigned for it.

These activists then used the rhetoric of SRB to pursue their own vision of the city. SRB rhetoric promoted the idea that effective city management requires the involvement of local people and their agreement to plans – and local residents took this rhetoric at its word and insisted on a voice. Its rhetoric proclaimed that local people should be supported so that they have an equal voice, and again residents took the rhetoric at face value, and won significant resources that they controlled. Activists worked through an urban policy framework that facilitated identity formation within a disparate community, and created a collective actor able to pursue an emancipatory agenda for the city built around the importance of community facilities, green spaces, and social inclusion policies that met the needs of local residents. Urban policy, they argued, should be attentive to the cultural needs of the diverse residents in the Elephant.

The partnership structure formed a channel through which these arguments could be made, and acted as a mobilizing process drawing residents together into a space where they could develop their ideas and form an organisation able to represent them. But it also structured the protest in ways that were not always fruitful. Residents became more and more conflict-oriented in their interactions with the council as the process dragged on. This increasing radicalization was a result of the shared resident interests (based on their common housing tenure status) coming into direct conflict with other property interests. The push for a CDT, and then a CLT are emblematic of this radicalization. But at the same time, knowledge of bureaucratic regeneration procedures and administrative codes and an ability to argue in bureaucratic meetings like a partnership board were both necessary and scarce skills (even if their urban location meant that there was plenty of advice to hand). The mode of organization was rather elitist, emphasizing those with the necessary skills while other members of the community, if they knew about the partnership at all, were simply a stage army who watched as community leaders and the council jousted. Those with skills did not pass them on, perhaps

because they did not have the time, but also because they saw themselves as acting *for* their constituents rather than as facilitators of community action from below. There were too few public manifestations of community support for their leaders, and thus their credibility could be challenged, as we have seen, through the systematic undermining of their capacity to speak for a unitary and coherent actor called ‘community.’

Finally, there are significant questions that need to be asked about the emancipatory potential of community-based organizing in conflict with the state. This is hardly new, and the experience in the Elephant bears a striking resemblance to the American ‘Community Action Agencies’ of the 1960s, for which the rhetoric was of ‘maximum feasible participation’. They found that the looseness of ‘community’ was eventually unravelled as radical and conciliatory voices clashed, and newer members of the community were ‘othered’ by more long-standing elements. In the Elephant traditional housing-based activists felt that as the Forum grew, their housing concerns were diluted as the Forum became dominated by minority ethnic and faith groups. By contrast others felt that housing interests were dominated by older members of the white community and that as it expanded the Forum became more representative of the ethnic diversity of communities at the Elephant. The problem with ‘community’ is that the representativeness and authenticity of community-based activists can be challenged by opponents unless they pay close attention to grassroots organization and democracy, and in particular are comfortable, and skilled in, working with and through difference. In short, the dilemma of community as an emancipatory category is that its poetic meaning is often simultaneously supportive and disruptive of its semantic meaning.

Notes

- 1 For one of us this involvement was intensive and occurred over a three-year period as a resident in the Elephant, a member of Elephant Links Community Forum, and an academic in a nearby institution. For the other, the participation was much more limited, primarily serving as a consultant to the Community Forum on occasions. We would like to thank the members of the Forum with whom we worked for the ideas and experiences that we report and comment on in this chapter. Especial thanks are due to Richard Lee, Al-Issa Munu, Anne Keane, Ted Bowman and Celia Cronin, among others from the Forum, and to Julia Brandreth and Karen O’Toole from Elephant Defend Council Housing. They inspired many of the ideas expressed in this chapter, although any mistakes and omissions are obviously the responsibility of the authors.
- 2 This is not to deny the importance of the long-standing debate between communitarians and liberals. But with their starting point as the primacy of the individual in social life and social theory, liberals have always struggled to make sense of collective action and accordingly have largely chosen not to debate on this terrain.

- 3 A key element in any emancipatory project for working-class residents in British cities is the defense of local authority owned social housing (called council housing) with secure tenancies and rent control. See the website of the campaigning organization 'Defend Council Housing', www.defendcouncilhousing.org.uk for more information.
- 4 Many of the key actors at this second 'Battle of Bermondsey' feature in Peter Tatchell's (1983) discussion of his attempt to become the area's socialist MP.

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