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Bread and butter politics: Democratic disenchantment and everyday politics on an English council estate

Insa Koch

Abstract: Despite evidence of widespread disenchantment with formal politics among England's impoverished sectors, people on the margins continue to engage with elected representatives on their own terms. On English council estates (social housing projects), residents mediate their experiences of an alien and distant political system by drawing local politicians into localized networks of support and care. While this allows residents to voice demands for "bread and butter," personalized alliances with politicians rarely translate into collective action. The limits of a "bread and butter" strategy highlight the precariousness of working class movements at a time when the political left has largely been dismantled. They also demonstrate the need to account for the lived realities of social class in aspirational narratives for "alternative" democratic futures.

Keywords: democratic crisis, social class, neo-liberalism, voting, working class movements, council estates, alternative democracies, Great Britain

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There is little doubt that growing numbers of citizens are disenchanted with formal politics in Great Britain. Mirroring a trend observed in other so-called advanced or established democracies across the Euro-American world (Braconnier and Dormagen 2014; Dalton 2004; Pharr, et al. 2000; Putnam 2004), British citizens have steadily turned their backs on political leaders and institutions. Public opinion polls demonstrate that many people have little faith in their elected representatives; that they do not identify with any of the major parties; and that they do not trust the government to act in their interests (Power Inquiry 2006). Similarly, membership in political parties and organizations has consistently declined: in 2001, membership in the three main parties was less than 25 per cent of the 1964 level. What is more, electoral participation has also dropped. Turnout for national elections in the UK fell from an all-time high of 83.9 per cent in 1950 to an all-time low of 59.4 per cent in 2001 although it went up to 66.1 per cent in the most recent 2015 elections. Ethnic minorities and those from low socio-economic backgrounds are amongst the most likely to withdraw from electoral participation (Pattie, et al. 2004).

Disenchantment with electoral politics does not mean that people stop engaging with their elected representatives. People on the margins mediate what they experience as a distant political system by vernacularizing politics in their own ways. England's council estates offer a point in case. These estates are state-built housing developments for the working classes, although over decades many have become home to the poorest sectors of the population. On the estates where I carried out ethnographic fieldwork, residents are so profoundly alienated from the political system that they frequently describe politics as part of an alien world of "them" opposed to the "local community" or "us." Yet residents continue to build personal relations with locally based politicians. Where the latter succeed in becoming active in localized networks of support and care that are central to residents' daily struggles for

security and survival, fragile alliances between residents and politicians emerge on the back of which politicians can mobilize electoral support.

An ethnographic focus on vernacular politics engages critically with ongoing concerns about the democratic crisis. Politicians, policy-makers and some academics tend to present popular disenchantment with politics in terms of narratives of civic crisis and voter apathy. Those who withdraw from electoral processes are blamed for their failure to exercise their duties as citizens at the ballot box. These portrayals, however, fail to acknowledge that people on the margins do not see voting as an exercise in abstract or depersonalized rights but as part of a personalized exchange relationship that is centered on politicians' involvement in localized acts of support and the logic that governs them. Where politicians fail to live up to the obligations inherent in such relationships, this can generate feelings of betrayal and electoral support is withdrawn. The limits of personalized politics provide an indication of the dismantling of the political left in the contemporary neo-liberal conjuncture. They also demonstrate the need to account for the lived realities of social class in aspirational narratives of "alternative" democratic futures (Hardt and Negri 2012; Juris 2012; Razsa and Kurnik 2012).

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork over eighteen months between 2009 and 2011 and for shorter periods since then up until 2015. During my initial fieldwork, I lived on two council estates in a single city, situated in the southeast, roughly an hour's drive from London. While the city ranks amongst the wealthiest cities in the country, its council estates have been heavily affected by industrial decline and, like many other estates in the country (Rogaly and Taylor 2009), are stigmatized in the public imagination as places for the "underclass." The bulk of my research was concentrated on an estate of roughly 11,000 residents of mainly white British descent but with a sizeable minority of people of Afro-Caribbean, African and increasingly Eastern European backgrounds. My research focused on those who see

themselves as “local residents” (who are mostly the residents of white British and Afro-Caribbean descent) who have strong connections to the place, often through a family history tied to the city and its industrial history. The majority of them live in socially or privately rented housing on the estate as they cannot afford to become property-owners. They also count amongst the sector of the population that are most likely to withdraw from electoral participation (Pattie, et al. 2004).

Crisis, democracy, and anthropology

Across the political spectrum, politicians and policy makers have taken widespread voter withdrawal and declining political participation as evidence of a civic crisis that is affecting Britain. According to this view, popular disenchantment with the political system is symptomatic of a declining civic society. In the aftermath of the 2001 UK general elections, a House of Commons Select Committee stated: “we find it extraordinary that [the] collapse in electoral participation, put alongside other evidence on civic disengagement, has not been treated as a civic crisis demanding appropriate response” (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee 2001). Policy makers across the political spectrum have suggested that to reinvigorate democracy, incentives to participate (such as through the introduction of compulsory voting) must be increased. This discourse of civic crisis bears resonance with modernist narratives in which prominent sociologists have lamented the alleged decline of social capital in late modern societies, and the ensuing apathy that is said to have replaced once close-knit communities and received forms of sociability and trust (e.g. Putnam 2004; Beck and Beck-Gernstein 2001).

The narrative of civic decline offered by politicians, policy-makers, and sociologists ignores the ways in which the current moment is marked by what Nugent (2012) has referred to as the “dual crisis of global capitalism and representative democracy.” In the decades since

World War II, strong welfare policies and labor laws created the conditions for a relatively inclusive, if by no means equal, society.¹ Large sections of the working and middle class population were still “captured” by mainstream politics (Nugent 2012). Since the late 1970s, however, successive conservative governments and their turn to neo-liberal policies have marginalized the voices of ordinary citizens. As Razsa and Kurnik, drawing on the work of Butler, have put it: “in the face of global economic crisis and calls for ever-greater austerity, the narrowed scope of liberal democracy has meant that even the most basic pleas for shelter, food and employment [become] impossible demands” (2012, 239). Meanwhile, politicians are ever more tightly imbricated with corporate elites as campaign finance and corporate lobbying have become the most influential factors in political decision-making (Crouch 2004).

Political theorists and sociologists have described the crisis as indicative of the emergence of a “post-democratic” (Crouch 2004) or “post-political” (Ranciere 1999) state. This does not imply that democracy was ever a reality as the pre-fix “post” in “post-democracy” may suggest (Ramsay 2013, 13). Private property interests were at the heart of liberal democracy from its inception (Hardt and Negri 2011). However, as Nugent has pointed out, if “economic elites have always been in a position to capture the political domain [...] the manner in which they have done so, and the relationships they have established with subordinate groups in the process, has changed through time” (2012, 181). Democracy today seems to have become a personal attribute of the privileged few (Friedmann 2003, 28). Friedmann describes a bifurcation that has taken place whereby politicians celebrate the transnational solidarity of an international community that endorses hybridity and multiculturalism as a marker of identity and inclusion (2003; see also Friedmann and Friedmann 2013). By contrast, public discourses about the “underclass” in the UK and the US (Wacquant 2009; Welshman 2006),

the “marginal mass” in Brazil (Perlman 2010), and “internal orientalism” in Eastern Europe degrade the working classes as a political group (Kalb 2009).

New actors have come to fill the gap that has opened up between the people left behind and political elites. As Kalb (2009, 208) says “actual outcomes on local grounds are intermediated by various path-dependent ‘critical junctions’ that link global processes via particular national arenas and local histories, often hidden, to emergent and situated events and narratives” (see also Kalb 2011). “Critical junctions” include the rise of populist working class parties across Europe and beyond (Braconnier and Mayer 2015; Friedmann 2003; Gingrich and Banks 2005). These movements capitalize on widespread feelings of anxiety and paranoia by those on the margins through inverting the discourse of cosmopolitanism deployed by elites and through relying on a language of rootedness. In this process, they often appeal to a far right rhetoric that mobilizes tropes of victimhood along nationalist, ethnic or radically local lines. In the UK, the far-right British National Party (BNP) (and in the lead up to the 2015 General Elections, the far-right, anti-European United Kingdom Independence Party - UKIP) has captured votes among the white working classes by mobilizing a language of ethnic victimhood that presents immigrants and members of ethnic and racial minority groups as the beneficiaries of preferential treatment on the part of the state (see also Cohen 1996; Evans 2012; Rhodes 2011; Smith 2012a).

My ethnographic research on the council estate focused on a local independent party that was active on the estate from 2002 to 2012, the Free Worker’s Party (FWP).² The FWP was in many ways a typical populist working class party: it rejected both the policies of meritocracy and multiculturalism at the heart of the New Labour government and the politics of the local Labour party that dominated the city where the FWP became active. But the FWP also saw itself as a left-wing alternative to the far right, in particular to the BNP, as it objected to their ethnic identity politics and instead aspired to build a movement based on solidarity and class

consciousness. It attempted this through a strategy of “bread and butter” – an approach that focused on residents’ daily needs and the localized networks through which residents addressed them. The term “bread and butter” was coined by one of the party’s supporters when once describing the party’s activities to me, but I should be clear that party members did not officially endorse the term, nor would they necessarily say that “bread and butter” was the end goal of their political mission.³ It was, however, central to the party’s initial electoral success among residents on the estates.

By tracing the electoral rise and fall of the party, I reflect on how people engage with voting, and by extension with politics, as vernacular processes, that is to say as processes that take on locally-specific meanings (Banerjee 2011; Coles 2004; Grisaffi 2013; Paley 2008; Spencer 1997). On the estate, people “tame” what they experience as an alien and distant political system by building personalized relations with politicians that are co-extensive with their own logics of mutual support and care. Nonetheless personalized politics rarely translate into a platform for collective action as they struggle to attain legitimacy in the public sphere.

Ultimately the failure of local politicians to establish themselves as credible alternatives sheds light on the precariousness of working class movements at a time when political elites have narrowed the meaning of democracy and dismantled the infrastructural and political framework that legitimated working class voices. It also complicates aspirational narratives of “alternative” democratic futures which have highlighted the need to break with received forms of representative democracy (Hardt and Negri 2011; Juris 2012; Razsa and Kurnik 2012) by emphasizing the need to engage more critically with the material realities of social class.

The rise and fall of independent politics on an English council estate

“People start to see you as part of the system you’re trying to change.” These were the words of Tony Smith, the last remaining FWP city councilor, in a 2012 interview with the local newspaper, three months before stepping down from political office. Smith was describing the rise and fall of the FWP on the estate where I conducted fieldwork, and to a lesser extent two other estates in the same city. The FWP’s electoral history in the city had begun over a decade before in May 2002, when Smith had been elected in the municipal elections as the first FWP councilor to the city council board. The party’s initial objective had been to mobilize electoral support by running in local authority elections before trying for MP positions in the general elections.⁴ To this effect, the party had formed groups in various cities across the country as well as in Scotland from the late 1990s onwards, and started launching a series of pilot projects in working class post-industrial neighborhoods.

FWP’s founders, a small group of self-proclaimed working class people, sought to create an alternative to the major political parties. Although they had no explicit affiliation with any existing left parties, many of the members had been active in earlier anti-fascist and anti-capitalist movements. The FWP’s opposition was directed against the Labour Party which the FWP felt had “ditched the working class” with its politics of multiculturalism and meritocracy that became central to its third way politics upon being elected into government in 1997. It also feared that the far right, crucially the BNP, would fill the void created by the Labour Party’s abandonment of the working class through its rhetoric of victimhood that saw ethnic and racial minorities as benefiting from preferential treatment at the expense of their white British counterparts. To provide a credible working class alternative, the FWP reasoned that a movement must be built from the bottom-up through localized working class mobilization that took seriously the needs of ordinary working class people.

The party had singled out the estate where I worked as a favorable place to pursue its politics: electoral turn out for both general and local elections had been low for decades, falling to

levels of twenty per cent for local elections prior to the FWP becoming active.⁵ Historically, the estate had been Labour Party heartland. The local Labour MP had represented his constituency in Parliament for over thirty years. His wife was also active in local governance and was a Labour councilor. Yet many residents had little respect for the Labour Party. Those who voted for Labour tended to do so not because of the MP and his wife's party affiliation but because they considered them to be "locals" who could relate to the estate and its people. People told me that they "do not believe in Labour" but that they trusted their MP because of the work that he had put into the estate over the years.

It was against this backdrop that the FWP organized a series of grassroots campaigns led by Tony Smith, himself a local resident, former auto worker, and later bus driver. Smith's first campaign centered on issues of crime and drug dealers' anti-social behavior. He and his supporters argued that the local authorities and political establishment had long ignored serious problems on the estate such as open drug dealing, intimidation, and violence committed at the hands of a few. Challenging what they called a policy of "contain and control", Smith and his supporters organized public meetings and pressured the police to arrest and evict drug dealers from their homes. They also began patrolling the neighborhoods, organized pickets outside the houses of well-known drug dealers, and collected their own CCTV evidence. In other neighborhoods, campaigning activities focused on the lack of adequate educational facilities and tenants' rights. Considerable canvassing accompanied the activities as party members and their family and friends went door-to-door in the lead up to elections.

Smith was the first FWP member to be voted onto the city council in 2002. Three more councilors, from Smith's estate and two other estates in city, were elected into city councilor positions in the next years. Together, they took four of forty-eight seats in the city council by 2005. While this was only a modest success for the FWP, the electoral turn out for local

elections rose from 20 per cent to nearly 30 per cent during these years, a rise in electoral participation which could arguably be attributed to the FWP's organizing work. The FWP also contested the general elections in 2005, taking votes away from the Labour Party even if they failed to acquire a seat. This initial success made the FWP optimistic that it was on the way to mobilizing a working class movement. However, over subsequent years, the party never managed to expand its support base, nor maintain its seats in the local council. By 2012, ten years after the party had first been voted into the local council, it had lost all its seats.

What explains the rise and fall of the FWP? How, in a climate of widespread withdrawal from electoral politics, did the FWP manage to mobilize electoral support? And why did the party fail to succeed in building a movement? To answer these questions, it is necessary to move away from a sole focus on the ballot box to an understanding of how politics is embedded in broader dynamics of social life. In an environment marked by deep disillusionment with representative democracy, the challenge that the FWP faced was how to transcend a deeply felt divide between the world of formal politics and that of everyday life. While the FWP's initial electoral success reflected its ability to become embedded in localized exchange relations through its pursuit of a "bread and butter" politics, the party was ultimately unable to maintain the obligations that followed from such an alliance, thereby engendering yet further electoral withdrawal and reinforcing democratic disenchantment.

Democratic disenchantment

The history of post-war British council estates is a history of gradual economic and political dispossession: of how inhabitants have been progressively deprived of their material livelihoods and the political channels that represented them. The estate where I conducted fieldwork provides an excellent example of these changes. It was built in the 1950s and 1960s

to provide housing for the city's working class. Many people had migrated to the city, both from other parts of the country as well as Britain's former colonies (mainly the West Indies), in search of work at the local car factory where working conditions were unstable but wages were high. Housing policies favored what were then called the "respectable" working classes: to be eligible for council housing, prospective residents frequently had to provide proof of income as council rents still tended to be higher than in the private rental market.⁶

Paternalistic forms of rent and housing management control were common in the early days of post-war council housing as council tenants were carefully policed by a plethora of state officials, including social workers, housing officers, and rent collectors (Ravetz 2001).

Industrial decline and neo-liberal reform since the Thatcher years has had profound effects on council estates and working class lives across the country (Hanley 2007; Rogaly and Taylor 2009). In the city where I worked, the car factory had started undergoing tumultuous periods of restructuring by the mid-1980s. At the time of my fieldwork, the factory employed a mere fraction of its original labor force, with many of its workers hired on short-term contracts.

The rise of an increasingly service-oriented economy has not created sufficient replacement jobs for a local population largely without higher educational qualifications. Local unemployment hovers around twenty per cent, and people are trapped in poorly paid jobs as cooks, drivers, shop assistants, or cleaners. The estate has also been affected by the privatization of the social housing sector, introduced by the "Right to Buy" legislation in 1980 which permitted existing council tenants to buy their houses below market value.

Today, nearly fifty per cent of the houses on the estate are privately owned. Residents who cannot afford to buy are forced to compete over ever more scarce social housing, with many being pushed into an insecure and over-priced private rental market.

Economic dispossession has been matched by political dispossession. The neo-liberal restructuring under the Thatcher years "paled in comparison with what was perceived to be

the abandonment of its traditional supporters by the Labour Party” (Evans 2012: 26). Central to this betrayal was the shift to the New Labour government’s third way politics in the mid-1990s, whose emphasis on multiculturalism, meritocracy, and the expansion of the middle classes left the working classes without a viable political voice. On the estate, most people expressed the feelings of abandonment that Evans and others have recorded (Mollona 2009; Smith 2012a; Smith 2012b). Some people over 50 told me that they had “always been Labour and always would be.” But for others, particularly younger people, this rule no longer applies. Brian, a former car worker in his forties, summed up the feelings of many: “I’m not gonna vote Labour just ‘cos our parents have voted Labour and before them, their parents voted Labour. Labour means nothing to me.”

In such a context of widespread disenchantment, residents felt that their elected representatives failed to be accountable to ordinary people and their needs. “Democracy means nothing when you are uneducated and poor,” a local resident in his fifties told me rather prosaically. People often spoke about politicians in terms of a contrast between “us” and “them.” “It’s like they are just part of ‘them’,” a local woman in her late thirties explained, “they have nothing to do with ‘us’.” This vernacular was also elaborated in narratives about the hidden dealings of state power: politicians were often portrayed as individuals who strike deals behind closed doors to enrich themselves at the expense of ordinary people. Tracey, a woman of Afro-Caribbean descent in her early forties who was widely respected in the neighborhood because of her long-standing leadership of a local informal drop in center told me:

“It’s all good and well if you do local politics for the people here, if you do all the bits and pieces. But the higher you get, that’s where the challenge comes. Look at the expenses scandal and what happened there.⁷ Parliament is structured in such a way that you have to do certain things [and] you to become like them. Once you got your feet under the table, well,

you know, a lot of them politicians, they think ‘Oh, it’s really comfortable here’, and they change, and they don’t care about us.”

Given such widespread mistrust in the formal political system, withdrawal from electoral politics became for many residents a reasonable and a socially expected response. “Why should I vote?” a resident in her late forties asked me defiantly when I pressed her, “They just do what they want, so there’s no point in me voting!” The same logic also applied to participation in political organizations, principally trade unions, which most residents considered to be merely “closed shops.” People also made conscious efforts to keep politics away from their everyday life. For instance, it was considered rude to “talk politics” in social settings, particularly in the pub or in people’s homes, and when I tried to raise political issues in these settings, people often claimed that they did not “know anything” or didn’t “want anything to do with politics.” Lindsey, a local resident in her late thirties and a mother of three, recalled an episode from her childhood in the following words:

“I remember, going back to my childhood, that one election when my mum was watching TV. My mum, she was in a nightie and having a drink and watching Inspector Morse or whatever she was watching on TV [when] these politicians knocked on the door and even offered to give her a lift to the polling station. And my mum said: ‘I’m not voting ‘cos I’m not well’ [...]. And she was so annoyed that they tried to pick her up and give her a lift, and she was like: ‘How dare these people’ ...!’”

In short, many residents have come to associate politics with a world of hostile and corrupt dealings that lacks legitimacy. This, then, is how residents experience democracy: as a failure on the part of politicians to be accountable to the needs of the common people and those of their estate. This raises the paradox of how, within such a context of widespread disillusionment, the FWP managed to mobilize electoral support.

Bread and Butter Politics

Council estates are often portrayed in the media and popular culture as places of social breakdown and decay. Although daily life is marked by precariousness and danger, support networks run strong: it is often precisely through the support of kin, friends and neighbors that people get by and make ends meet (Koch 2015; see Edwards 2000; Mollona 2009; MacKenzie 2013; Skeggs 2004). Daily life is organized around an idea of “give and take” that takes the form of Maussian relations of exchange. For example, women rely on the support of kin and friends (who are often fictive kin) by sharing child care duties, lending and borrowing money from one another, and sometimes sharing housing for extended periods of time. Similarly, in dealing with local crime, dormant networks of neighbor relations spring to life as people call on each other for effective protection and informal policing of their neighborhood. For example, Tony Smith had once dealt with a local drug dealer who was intimidating his wife and children by mobilizing neighbors and friends to “gang up” outside the drug dealer’s house. “Ours is a world where you do or get done,” he said when explaining how he and his allies had confronted the neighbor.

Some white working class people in England are known to lament the arrival of, and perceived threats from, non-white and sometimes non-British residents (Dench et. al 2006; Evans 2012; Smith 2012a; Rhodes 2012). But the presence of these narratives does not overshadow the extreme fluidity across groups as people have adapted to the realities of a post-colonial Britain (McKenzie 2013; Rogaly and Taylor 2009; Tyler 2015). On the estate where I worked, many young people grow up as the mixed-race children of white and black Afro-Caribbean parents, and friendship relations between the two groups run deep. Residents of Afro-Caribbean descent assume prominent positions in the local community, for example, Tracey, introduced above, who ran the community center with great charisma. She and others took pride in promoting their Caribbean lifestyle, including food (jerk chicken and rice and

peas) and music (reggae) as part of what it means to be “local.” By contrast, people were often less willing to appropriate as “local” the practices of other immigrant groups, including South Asians (although their presence in the city was strong). One reason for this could be that historically migrants from South Asian backgrounds had moved to other neighborhoods in the same city and there are comparatively speaking few of them living on the estate today.

The chief criterion for distinguishing between insiders and outsiders, or between the “us” and “them.” is not along racial and ethnic lines but rather according to a distinction between “locals” and “non-locals.” To be “local” means to be embedded in the localized relations of support and care, and to be able to claim loyalty to particular individuals, families, as well as to the places that they inhabit (Degnen 2013). In this respect, people attribute foreignness or difference to those who they do not consider “local,” while emphasizing similarity and connectedness with reference to those they know. For example, in my own experience, it was only by investing time into relations with residents at the local community center where I was based and by partaking in my host families’ daily life that my status gradually changed from being a “researcher” or “student” to being a “local resident,” a “friend,” or even fictive “member of the family.” But the point does not only apply to anthropologists. Crucially, anyone otherwise associated with the world of “them” can be appropriated into the “us” by proving themselves through their actions. A particular housing officer or a council worker can be considered “one of us” if they have made an effort to get to know residents and to integrate themselves into local life (Koch 2014).

Understanding these processes of personalization is crucial when it comes to analyzing the role of locally based politicians. As Heredia and Palmeira (2013) argue in the context of Brazil, politics is not limited to the ballot box but takes place through personalized relations that unfold between politicians and people outside of “politics time,” understood as the period of political campaigns and elections. When asking residents what they expect from their

politicians, I was told that they sought somebody who “cared for the local community” or “who was involved.” To be involved meant to be present in people’s lives, to take an active interest in and to show support for the needs of residents and their estate. It was precisely these qualities that were embodied by the local Labour MP and his wife who, through their continued residence on the estate over decades and their long-standing engagement in local neighborhood life, had earned the respect of many. Jane, a resident in her late thirties expressed the importance of local involvement:

“OK right, so I could sit here and moan all day and be depressed and hope that one day when there’s been a revolution, my life’s gonna change and everything’s gonna be better. Well, that’s a whole load of risks to take, and in the meantime, nothing would have happened that would’ve made a difference to what I actually want: I want my own house, with a nice carpet, I want a cooker that actually works and I want the opportunity to go on holiday once a year, that’s what I want.”

Jane also mentioned that it was more important to vote in local elections than to vote in general elections because “they are more relevant to my life.” This is a point I heard many times, although the term “local” elections could, rather confusingly, be used to refer to general elections where people were speaking about “their” local MP.

It is against this backdrop that we have to understand how the FWP managed to mobilize electoral support. The efficacy of its “bread and butter” politics resided precisely in the extent to which it became active in residents’ daily pursuits for security and protection. The party achieved this in two ways. First, the FWP took on important bridging functions in residents’ struggles with the authorities and other formal bodies. These resembled the brokerage politics frequently observed on the margins (Alexander 2000; Auyero 2000; James 2011; Lazar 2004). For instance, when addressing drug dealing, the party pressured the police and

complained to the council. The same approach was adopted with the government-funded employment agency and social security office (Jobcentre Plus), employers, and other institutions. What is more, the FWP went beyond its brokerage roles by claiming enforcement powers, in relation to drug trafficking, thereby assuming state-like functions. One resident, commenting on the charges of “vigilantism” that the FWP had been accused of by the local authorities, told me:

“Well, yeah, some people say they were vigilantes, and why not? Near where I live there was a drug den. And nobody would do anything about it. Basically, what you got to do is smash in the door, shut the place down, kick them bastards out. But it took [the local authorities] bloody months, and months and months! And then [Tony Smith] came along, and he really helped to get things moving.”

Second, the FWP was active in residents’ everyday networks of sociality. As Lazar (2004) has pointed out in relation to political clientelism in Bolivia, to understand how rapport is established between politicians and citizens, we need to pay attention to the affective or non-instrumental aspects of politics. Tony Smith, who was born in the city and who had worked there most of his life, was widely known as a neighbor, family member, and resident. He was already integrated into local life before he started working there politically. When Smith invited me to stay with him, his wife, and two children in their small two-bedroom socially rented tenancy, I saw friends pop over for tea, neighbors bringing over left-over food from Sunday roast dinners, and residents stopping to chat on the street. Smith and his party also organized various outings, leisure activities, and sports tournaments for the party’s own athletics club during which the ethics of sharing that was so central to community life was enacted.

It was precisely by becoming part of daily life on the estate that the FWP mobilized electoral support as part of reciprocal exchange relationships. Some of that support stemmed from people who had built similar relations with the local Labor MP. But the majority of votes the FWP received, Smith told me, were from first-time voters who knew members of the party or felt inspired by the FWP's activities. In conversations I had with FWP supporters, one of the things that residents most valued about the party was precisely that it looked nothing like the established parties. In the words of one resident, the FWP "are different from politicians" because "they don't do politics" or because "they aren't politicians." Tony Smith was repeatedly presented as a "community person" or a "people's person." Yet other people referred to the FWP as a "localist" party, identifying the party with the estate itself. Indeed, the FWP's wider political discourse of creating a national working class movement was simply ignored by the majority of residents or even dismissed as "bad rhetoric." As Tony Smith said, echoing the voices of many residents who had voted for him:

"I guarantee if you go to people on the doorstep on this estate – let's concentrate on the thousand people that voted for us – you [will] get about a thousand views of what the FWP is about. The majority don't really understand where we are coming from, but a lot of people think we are a localist party; they think we're good because we dealt with the drug dealers and that. People think of us as the good gangsters from next door. Most people don't do politics, and if you don't listen to politics, you don't know."

It is important to point out that while residents voted for the FWP because of their personal ties with Smith or the party, not every supporter had personally benefited from their interventions. Rather, while not having met or interacted with Smith and his party, some had friends, neighbors, or kin who had talked about their local activities on the estate. As Braconnier et al. argue in the context of a poor Brazilian neighborhood, electoral choices do not have to be the result of dyadic relationships between individuals and their elected

representatives (2013, 45). People sometimes intended to vote for Smith and his party not because they had personally encountered the FWP but because their vote signified an act of loyalty to their friends or kin. One resident explained: “I voted for Smith ‘cos my friends told me I should.” There were also others who voted for Smith as an act of loyalty to the estate itself: “I voted for them ‘cos they were a local party, they were for people from this estate,” another resident told me.

To sum up, the FWP mobilized support on the estate by practicing a vernacular form of politics: one that derived its legitimacy not from its association with the formal political system but rather from its submission to local networks and their logic of support and care. In this process, voting can be understood not as an exercise in abstract or depersonalized rights, but rather as part of a personalized exchange relationship. And yet, six years after having four councilors elected to the city council, the FWP had lost all of its seats. This raises the question of what caused the downfall of the party.

Betrayal

In his analysis of the gift, Mauss (1992) demonstrated that exchange locks people into on-going relations of debt: each act is only one instance of a whole web of rights and obligations as people are expected to reciprocate an act of favour rendered to them in the future. Among residents on the estate, there was a strong expectation that relations carry commitments over time. This also brought the possibility of being let down as an ever-present threat. One of the most common, but also severe, insults was to accuse someone of being “selfish” and of exploiting one’s own kindness. On the estate, where life was marked by the unpredictability of material hardship, the scope for such accusations was wide. Proving one’s loyalty or commitment could be onerous: requests for sharing money and housing could easily place individuals on the verge of financial ruin, or force them to make difficult decisions between

helping family and placing themselves in conflict with social welfare agencies and the law. For example, on several occasions, I observed women feeling pressured to put up a partner or a grown up child even where this led to breaking official rules that provided benefits only to the sole occupier of a home (Koch 2015).

Just as people fear betrayal by family and friends, they also have high expectations of individual state officials and politicians who they have established relationships with. As people often told me, they were “tired” and “sick” of outsiders who “come into the local community, do their bit and then leave again” (an accusation that I, as an anthropologist, was not immune to). I quickly recognized the fragility of such relations. In the many cases I witnessed, people felt that individual state officials had failed to attend to their needs or requests for help. These officials were described as “traitors” or sometimes as “criminals” and “crooks” who had turned out to be “no better than the rest.” Local politicians too were expected to work hard to maintain support over time. People I spoke to emphasized that politicians need to “earn their votes” and that they had to “deserve” the support from local people. One local resident who, in the past had run for local councilor, when I asked why people should vote for him, said: “...because I’ve lived on this estate for so long. And I’ve done so much for this estate. I’m not a politician, I’m from this estate.”

Against this backdrop, the FWP struggled to live up to its perceived obligations. Local authorities and the Labour Party actively resisted the FWP’s aggressive opposition to the local establishment. Housing officers and council officials reported to me how “angry” and “hostile” the FWP had been, sometimes taking this as evidence of their “anti-authority” and “anti-democratic” thinking. They also labeled the party’s policing activities of local drug dealers and anti-social tenants as “vigilantism” and “witch hunt politics” intended to cause the “downfall” of a few select individuals living on the estates. But it was not just the party’s campaigning activities on the grassroots level that were under attack: the authorities called

into question the integrity of the FWP's politics itself. In council meetings, letters published in the press, and in its own print media, some members of the Labour Party accused Tony Smith and other FWP members of links to anarchist and violent Irish nationalist groups, while others denounced the FWP's opposition to Labour's identity politics and policy of multiculturalism as "racist."

The public onslaught might not have been so damaging had the party commanded larger resources and a greater presence in the public sphere. But the FWP had very limited resources and institutional support. Tony Smith and other FWP councilors recalled how the public accusations of racism, vigilantism, and extremist links all acted to delegitimize the FWP. When the party attempted to respond to these accusations in their own print magazines, the web and even through legal action by charging the Labour Party with libel, much of the councilors' time was taken up by defensive actions. Meanwhile, they struggled to influence decisions in the town hall. Smith reported that he felt heavily victimized in meetings as FWP proposals were routinely blocked and the party's positions outvoted, leaving it unable to deliver on the changes they had promised. In the lead-up to local elections, the party struggled to keep up with increased Labour Party canvassing initiated after the FWP's early electoral success. A member of the FWP described the difficulties:

"I used to have faith in [the FWP]; at one stage we had four councilors. And then we got absolutely annihilated by Labour. And what's more, they get students in and they canvass and they do it for a living. But we have to work full-time and fill it all in. And then you are in council and you're being outvoted all the time. And after these years, the people who've been voting for you say 'You're not getting anywhere' and then people lose faith in you and you lose them forever."

This quote makes clear that there was a direct link between the FWP's struggles to establish itself as political party and its subsequent loss of support. When speaking to residents about the FWP, I was often told of the hard work that Tony Smith and the party had done for people on the estate. Many said that they "did not know what had happened to the party" or that they were not sure "where they had gone." But others were more forthcoming in their criticism: for them, the FWP's inability to deliver, let alone expand on its initial activities, amounted to a personal betrayal. The FWP's work had raised their expectations that they would be different from the other parties. Mandy, a resident in her forties, felt that they had turned out to be "no better than the rest": she told me that the party had just "sort of disappeared like all the others who come and go." In a subsequent conversation, she reiterated some of the public allegations against the party, telling me that she did not like how the FWP had "caused the downfall of particular people on the estate," and that they had been "a bit racist" for targeting black drug dealers.

Ironically, the FWP's short-lived history on the estate may have had the opposite effect from what it had intended to achieve: far from radicalizing local people and building a working class movement, it may well have ended up reinforcing widespread disenfranchisement and anxiety. It is in this sense that we have to understand the statement made by Tony Smith at the beginning of this article that "people start to see you as part of the system you're trying to change." Claire, a local woman in her thirties, told me that she used to vote for a "localist party round here" (the FWP) but had no intentions to vote again in the run-up to the general elections in 2010 because it had not "gone anywhere." She was extrapolating from her experience with local councilors to the general elections. But abstention was not the only consequence of perceived betrayal: Smith and some other FWP supporters also worried that residents might turn to far right politics, notably the British National Party (BNP), which experienced a resurgence of popular support in other post-industrial neighborhoods in the

2000s. Smith once said that in the future, “they could easily pull off an electoral success.” He explained:

“Look, in other places, they are just getting more and more votes because ... people look at their policies and say, seventy per cent of their policies most people would agree with.⁸ And people on this estate and places like that, they don’t look at that other thirty per cent; they look at all them things that go on that affect them on their estate, and that’s why they are gonna vote for them and they don’t see the bad side, they are only looking at the bits that are affecting them. And if [the BNP] come to places like [this estate], they’ll get their votes here too.... And if there isn’t any counterweight to what they’re saying, if [the FWP] shouldn’t be around anymore, then they’ll get all the votes.”

Contrary to Smith’s expectations, at the time of writing, the BNP has fallen back into decline. However the possibility of right-wing populism has not disappeared: the BNP has been superseded by UKIP, the UK’s most recent anti-European and nationalist party. In the 2015 general elections, in the local constituency encompassing the estate, UKIP obtained 6.8% of the total votes (while the local Labour MP won a majority of 50%). UKIP’s presence in the British political landscape illustrates that the social insecurity and anger felt by disenfranchised populations energizes popular receptiveness to ideologies of racial or ethnic nationalism (Kalb 2009, 2011; see also Braconnier and Mayer 2015).

The threat of UKIP achieving a lasting breakthrough on the estate should be considered against two potential drawbacks. First, it needs to succeed at making a discursive jump between the lived reality of fluid racial relations and the party’s own narrative of national victimhood. Second, it would have to master the challenge that confronted the FWP: that of earning loyalty through the pursuit of a “bread and butter” politics as well as maintaining such loyalty over time. UKIP’s more established position in mainstream politics and its voice

in the public sphere may place it at an advantage compared to the FWP, but it remains to be seen if they will succeed in mobilizing electoral support on the estate.

Conclusion: personalized politics and “alternative” democratic futures

The electoral history of the Free Workers Party sheds light on how people on the margins engage with electoral politics under conditions of sustained disenchantment with their elected representatives. While the FWP was ultimately committed to setting up a class-based movement, its means of mobilizing a largely apathetic electorate were very different from this long-term goal: its campaigning strategies were focused on the pursuit of a “bread and butter” politics that emphasized the need to address the immediate and everyday concerns of residents on the estates. By pursuing a politics of brokerage and by assuming, to limited extent, state functions themselves, the FWP managed to mobilize electoral support. At the same time, however, the party quickly lost its seats as it failed to establish itself as a political alternative. This failure was due to the de-legitimization of the FWP because of the onslaught the party faced from the city’s establishment and its own limited resources in the face of it. For residents, the party’s inability to attend to their needs, let alone expand on their initial activities, amounted to prove that they were ultimately no better than the rest.

The FWP’s failure to establish itself as a political alternative is not evidence of the insufficiencies or weaknesses of “bread and butter” politics. The strength of this political approach for mobilizing electoral support resides precisely in the ways it differs from the kind of politics that residents were accustomed to from their elected representatives. “Bread and butter” politics derives its legitimacy not from its association with the formal political system but rather from its submission to local realities and their logic of mutual support and care. In this process, voting can be understood not as an exercise in abstract or depersonalized rights, but rather as part of a personalized relationship: it confirms what Lazar (2004) has

called a relational view of political agency centered on reciprocal relations between people and politicians. The “bread and butter” approach is not unusual nor does it seem especially unique, rather with its emphasis on proximity over distance and on personalization over abstraction, it has been central to the ways in which people on the margins have appropriated electoral politics to their own ends in various places (e.g. Auyero 2000; Braconnier et. al. 2013; Heredia and Palmeira 2013; James 2011).

While we need to seriously consider politics as practiced by those on the margins, we must not lose sight of the difficulties of translating “bread and butter” politics into a sustained platform for collective action. This may well be less of a problem when dealing with electoral politics on a local level: in the UK, the localized nature of municipal elections (as opposed to general elections) has always allowed a greater space for such politics, as it has in other places (e.g. Grisaffi 2013; Medeiros 2001; Nonini et al. 2007). But when it comes to a more general politics of representation, “bread and butter” politics needs broader alliances to succeed. This was something that the members of the FWP were aware of in their own intention to build a movement that, ultimately, would be founded around issues of solidarity and class. Historically, it appears that “bread and butter” politics was most effective when institutional mechanisms and appropriate political channels were in place that legitimated localized demands and that could translate them into general policies of welfare and labor. As Evans (2012) has shown, working class support for the Labour Party in the post-war decades was mediated precisely through paternalistic housing policies that reinforced localized kinship and neighborhood connections rather than an abstract identification with party politics.

Judged from this perspective, the failure of the FWP to build a sustained political alternative is perhaps most telling of the dismantling of the political left and the lack of legitimacy of working class politics in the current moment. As my case study has shown, a crucial factor in

explaining the downfall of the party was precisely its inability to establish itself as a publicly accepted alternative at a moment when mainstream politics has become de-captured from the voices and needs of the poor. When the FWP succeeded in being elected to the local council, it faced allegations of vigilante, anti-democratic, and even extremist practice – accusations that pushed the party into an isolated position. While these denunciations were part of the usual tit-for-tat that characterizes relations between political opponents and their parties, they also revealed so much more: they reflected the lack of political and institutional support for independent political movements and the difficulties facing alternatives to the political status quo. The FWP’s story draws attention to a broader point (Braconnier and Mayer 2015; Friedmann 2003; Gingrich and Banks 2005) – namely that a retreat to defensive populism may be only space left to working class people in the current political system.

Given the lack of a political and ideological framework that can “scale up” and render legitimate the voices of alternative or independent movements, it may well be time to experiment with alternative democratic practices that do away with the system of representative democracy itself. Such is the suggestion of what may be called “alternative” or “active” democracies that have formed around Occupy and other recent protest movements (Butler 2011; Hardt and Negri 2011; Juris 2012; Razsa and Kurnik 2012) and that developed from earlier critiques of the alter-globalization movement (cf. Graeber 2009; Maeckelbergh 2009). This approach suggests that received forms of representative democracy – chiefly elections – have become obsolete and should be replaced by horizontal network structures, including consensual decision-making and direct assemblies, as well as the use of social media including Twitter and Facebook as a means of mass communication. As Hardt and Negri (2011) put it: “If democracy – that is the democracy that we have been given – is staggering under the blows of the economic crisis and is powerless to assert the will and

interests of the multitude, then is now perhaps the moment to consider the form of democracy obsolete?”

The analysis offered here is sympathetic to the premise that representative democracy is in crisis. I am less optimistic about the claim that the politics of Occupy are indicative of a new “politics-in-the-becoming” (Razsa and Kurnik 2012, 249) that allow citizens to articulate “shared visions and goals from the bottom up” (Juris 2012, 261). While this may well be the case for largely middle-class occupiers caught up in the spirit of protest, for many working class people the emphasis placed on form over practice, or process over substance, is far removed from their own reality of struggling for a “bread and butter” politics. As Shah puts it, “fantasies of the future need to be linked with the prosaic material workings of the present in order to analyse and resolve the contradictions in the present which prevent radical transformations from coming about” (2012, 350). The transnational character of Occupy, with its emphasis on building a global community of citizens, may well be antithetical to working class people’s concerns about localized communities and their position as embedded in place-based networks of support that have increasingly come under threat with neo-liberal housing policies and financial capitalization. Unless activists and scholars can adequately acknowledge and theorize these differences there is a danger that the recent protest movements will end up perpetuating class divides both in rhetoric and in practice – and in this process, forego the opportunity to redefine the conditions for more inclusive democratic futures.

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¹ Authors have identified the racialized and gendered workings of post-war welfare policy (e.g. Lewis 1992; Patenam 1988).

² This is a pseudonym. All names and the place of research have been made anonymous.

³ Indeed, one of the more senior party members once used the term disparagingly to refer to the politics practiced by the local MP on the estate.

⁴ The political system in the UK is made up of a two-tier system which encompasses national and local levels of governance. Each level furnishes its own political representatives and has its own elections: Members of Parliament (MPs) sit in the national Parliament and are elected every five years, while councilors sit in the local councils and are elected every four years.

⁵ All statistics are taken from the local city council's website, which I have omitted from the list of references to preserve anonymity.

⁶ Residents who could not afford to pay the higher council housing rents had to rely on the private rental market, which meant they had very little protection from the welfare state.

⁷ The expenses scandal was a major political scandal in 2009 caused by information that was leaked of expense claims made by members of the Parliament over several years.

⁸ It has also set off processes of gentrification in parts of the estate. Given that my research is concerned only with the more established residents who have been left out of these processes, I have not focused on this aspect in the present paper.