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When politicians fail: zombie democracy and the anthropology of actually existing politics

Abstract: While modernist narratives of voter apathy tend to take the individual as their point of departure, recent work in the sociology of care and the anthropology of class has identified alternative understandings of personhood. On a post-industrial English council estate, residents think of politicians as the antithesis of ordinary sociality from whom withdrawal becomes a socially expected response. This is because politicians lack the requisite attributes that make a locally valued person, including a commitment to a locality and its people. An ethnographic portrayal of “zombie democracy” identifies the crucial role played by values other than those of individualism in understanding popular withdrawal from politics. It further extends the call for an anthropology of actually existing politics by bringing an analysis of everyday processes of value accrual to bear on our understandings of formal politics and electoral processes.

Key words: zombie democracy, value, personhood, apathy, electoral politics, democratic disenchantment, social class, United Kingdom

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participated in the research and without whom none of this would have been possible. All remaining errors are mine.

It was 11am on the 6th May 2010, the day of the general elections in the United Kingdom. I was stood outside a local community centre located on a large post-industrial social housing project in the south-east of England, watching the scene. Most days the community centre was a vibrant place; it was located in the center of the estate and accommodated a credit union, an advice center and was home to various social groups. People of all ages would often stop by for a cup of tea and a chat, to seek advice on matters such as welfare benefits and housing, or to attend a group meeting. Today, however, for purposes of the elections, the main hall of the community centre had been turned into a polling station. Party activists were gathered in front of it, none of whom I had ever seen around. But other than that, the place was deserted. The youth workers and various other community leaders had been given a day off work, and most local residents had stayed away. With the exception of three older people who were slowly approaching the entrance of the polling station, not a single person was in sight. As I watched them come closer, Matt, a resident in his thirties and a father of three came out of the center. We had known each other for roughly a year already, and often chatted. He stopped when he saw me. "Look", he said, indicating towards the three older residents, "they look like zombies, creeping out to vote!"

Scenes like this can be read as evidence of a crisis of apathy at the heart of Western democracies today. Policy makers and politicians have seen declining levels of voter turnout as indicative of a democratic crisis (Pattie *et al.*, 2004). Prominent sociologists have similarly linked the decline in popular participation in democratic processes to a loss of trust and social capital in late modernity (Putnam, 2004) and to an unraveling of received structures of class, family and status and the correlating "individualization" of lifestyles in "second modernity" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The old collective institutions upon which political and social life was once founded have given away to the "asocial, free or alternatively isolated individual" (Hey, 2003: 329) who has become estranged from received channels of political representation. As Ulrich Beck has put it, "we are witnessing today an actively unpolitical younger generation which has taken the life out of the political institutions and is turning them into zombie categories" (Beck in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: 203). "Zombie categories" are defined by Beck as "'living dead' categories which govern our thinking but are not really able to capture the contemporary milieu" (Beck in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: 262).

But if Beck's idea of "zombie categories" resonates uncannily with Matt's description of voters as "zombies", it is questionable to what extent we can assume a straightforward homology between the analytical and ethnographic. In other words, to what extent can we assume that Beck's description of "zombie democracy" rings true of the lived experiences of residents like Matt? Does Beck's account of "second modernity", with its emphasis on the decline of class, status and family, resonate with kinship and family life as it is lived out in Britain's post-industrial neighbourhoods? And what are the implications of any potential discrepancies for the way we think about politics and voter withdrawal, more generally?

Interdisciplinary research indicates that the reasons for voter withdrawal and democratic disenchantment cannot simply be reduced to the consequences of "individualization" (e.g. Cook et. al. 2016; Laurison 2015; Manning and Holmes 2013). Nor is electoral withdrawal an inevitable outcome of our times (Koch 2016; Pilkington and Pollock 2015; Rheingans and Holland 2013). To give just one example, a recent special issue on "radical futures" in *The Sociological Review* (Pilkington and Pollock 2015) has shown how marginalised young people continue to engage in various forms of political activism, ranging from self-organised political projects such as occupy to expressing support for populist fascist and left movements across various settings.

In this article, I bring an ethnographic focus on alternative "person values" to debates on voter apathy. Such an analysis builds on the call put forward by Skeggs and Loveday (2012) for a "different political ontology" of the self which starts from the lived realities of people. My analysis emphasises the difficulties of reconciling a quest for moral personhood with the pursuit of formal politics, be that through voting or any other forms of participation in the formal political system. For the people with whom I carried out my research, politicians constitute the antithesis of ordinary sociality. This is because they lack the requisite attributes that make a locally valued person, including a commitment to a locality and its people. An ethnographic assessment of everyday processes of personhood foregrounds a different picture of "zombie democracy" to the one given to us in the meta-theories of modernist narratives (and politicians and policy-makers): one which identifies the crucial role played by values other than those of individualism in understanding popular withdrawal from politics. It further extends the call for "an anthropology of actually existing politics" (Spencer 1997) by bringing an analysis of the "social", and the processes of value accrual that are central to it, to bear on our understandings of formal politics and electoral processes.

Zombie democracy, personhood and the moral self

For Ulrich Beck, the concept of “zombie categories” refers to terms that are still part and parcel of our way of thinking and even doing things but that “are not really able to capture the contemporary milieu” (2001: 262). Elections – and even representative democracy itself – can be seen as an example of “zombie categories”: while formal electoral processes continue to exist, an increasing number of citizens are withdrawing from participation in voting and other forms of formal politics. The rise of “zombie categories” relates directly to a “decline of narratives of given sociability” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: xxii). At the wake of what Beck calls “second modernity” (to distinguish it from “first modernity” that was largely synonymous with the birth of nation states), the old categories of the nuclear family, social class and status, have lost their traction as ordering mechanisms. In their place, the individual has for the first time in history become the basic unit of social reproduction. For Beck, processes of “individualization” have a direct bearing on politics: precisely because the old political institutions were founded on the old ordering mechanisms of social life, they are unable to capture the diversification of lifestyles and opportunities that have opened up. In short, if we are witnessing the “rise of an actively unpolitical generation” (2001: 213), then this is because a political language and structure still needs to be invented that can capture the processes of identity-making that are central to the contemporary moment.

Beck’s analysis is representative of modernist narratives that place the individualised self at the centre of attention. As sociologist Beverley Skeggs argues, “the subject of value today is one that is a forward-propelling subject/object, individualized, always accruing through exchange and investment to enhance futures, opposed to those who are either blocking this future-oriented subject or fixed as a ready supply of labour” (2011: 502). And yet, this individualised and forward-looking subject of value may be more representative of particular kinds of identities, in particular those valued by the middle classes. As her research (1997; 2004; see also Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) and related work in the sociology of care shows (Gillies, 2007; Lawler, 2000; MacKenzie 2012; Reay and Lucy 2000), ideas of loyalty and care remain central to the way people on the margins accrue value in the face of classed stigma and negative labelling. Such alternative orientations are grounded in the lived material realities of social class that make co-dependence a precondition for survival against the predicaments and unpredictability of daily life (see also Willmott and Young, 1957). Skeggs

calls with Vic Loveday for a “different political ontology” of the self (2012: 476), one which places a more relational understanding of personhood at the forefront of critiques of the modernist paradigm.

Important continuities exist between sociological engagements with social class and recent anthropological work of Britain relating to post-industrial communities. Contrary then to Beck’s narrative that “individualization” means “dis-embedding without re-embedding” (Beck, 2001: 276), ethnographers have shown how people remain embedded in particular localities (Degnen, 2013; Edwards, 2000; Smith, 2012; Tyler, 2012; 2015), often under conditions of precariousness and massive social and economic change (Evans, 2006; Koch, 2015; Mollona, 2009). To give just one example, for Cathrine Degnen, knowing a place and its people is “more than a familiarity with, information acquired, or social networks, as might be commonly assumed” (2013: 2). Rather, in the South Yorkshire village of Dodworth, laying claims to “know” people and places connotes “an accrued depth of feeling” and speaks to “the constitution of self and belonging through the tightly woven skeins of social memory, social connections, time and place” (ibid.) Degnen’s work builds on that of Jeanette Edwards (2000) who has also demonstrated that the residents in the northern town of Bacup continue to make connections not only between people but between people and places, including houses, factories, pubs and streets through particular claims of knowing.

Such alternative ways of asserting personhood and belonging complicate the common view that voter withdrawal can be explained as a result of processes of individualization. In the following, I will offer an ethnographic assessment of voter withdrawal that starts with vernacular understandings of personhood and how these provide the framework against which the actions of politicians and the world of formal politics *writ large* are routinely evaluated and judged. For the residents of the council estates with whom I lived and worked, politicians are people who are defined by their very lack of loyalty and care and hence stand outside of and at odds to the local moral logic. It is this lack of ordinary personhood attributed to politicians and those associated with them that leads to the association of voters as people who are complicit in anti-social or even asocial activities, and as “zombies”, as Matt put it in the vignette above. An ethnographic discussion of personhood and politics hence reveals a very different view of “zombie democracy” from that conveyed in the writings of Beck – one which ultimately betrays the continued valence of social values other than those of individualism and hence cautions against any calls for the end of “theoretical

collectivisms” in social theory today.

I have been carrying out ethnographic fieldwork for this research on a number of council estates in a single city situated in the south-east of England since 2009. The fieldwork was broken up into an initial period of seventeen months between 2009 and 2011 and shorter follow-up visits since then. The bulk of my fieldwork was concentrated on a large estate of over 11,000 residents that was built in the post-war decades on the outskirts of a wealthy city. It is largely populated by people of white British origin and of British African-Caribbean descent. Today, relations between the two groups run deep, although in the early days, residents of Afro-Caribbean descent experienced the “unofficial, disguised, fragmented and individually perceived” racism of British post-war society (Werbner, 1991: 14). I met most of the residents who participated in this research by volunteering in a local community centre and by living with a number of local families. Most of my informants were white English or of Afro-Caribbean descent, and aged between their early twenties and mid-forties. They struggle to make ends meet, most of them have teenage children, they are caught between menial jobs and welfare dependence. They also count amongst those who rarely, if ever, vote. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, I was able to reconstruct a different view of political withdrawal from that offered in the dominant narratives. In the following, I will first introduce the estate, then turn to a discussion of localised understandings of personhood and finally, revisit the issue of zombie democracy.

State failure

On my first day in the local community centre on the estate, I met a local woman in her mid-thirties and a mother of three teenage children, who I will call Lindsey. Lindsey and I were to become close friends over the course of my fieldwork. Lindsey took an interest in my research and was always happy to help with contacts, ideas and information. Lindsey was working at the time as a community development worker for a local housing association that managed a number of socially rented tenancies on the estate. She also lived on the estate, had grown up on a neighbouring estate in the same town and volunteered in a number of community projects and sat on local boards on the estate. We got chatting that day about the estate’s reputation. Lindsey complained about the council’s “anti-social behaviour” agenda which had gone tough on young people on the estate by heavily policing the behavior of young men, imposing injunction orders and by constraining their movements in other ways,

such as through the installation of mosquitos¹, and CCTV cameras in areas of the estate where they liked to hang out. Meanwhile, however, the council was failing to do anything about promoting community cohesion. “There is a street on the estate that has been fenced off and the council isn’t doing anything about it”, she said. She wanted to show it to me and offered to walk me to the close.

The street turned out to be a cul-de-sac, mainly with small terraced houses and some low-rise apartment blocks on the eastern edge of the estate, surrounded by residential streets. “People on this street have been cut off from all almost all corners”, Lindsey commented again as we entered the close through its only entrance; a little bridge that had provisionally been constructed over what appeared like a marshy area. A bit further down, I could see what looked like a failed attempt to lay bricks in the bed of a brook. Lindsey explained, “The council were going to pave it all but then stopped. They are blaming the kids for [the water damage] but it was caused by flooding. They would never say that if it was a different neighbourhood!”. Upon entering the close, there was an old people’s home to our left and an abandoned play ground to the right. “This is the only part of the street that has old people and no families, and what did the council do here? They built a playground. Now old people complain about the youths that hang out there late at night but young people have nowhere to go”. A bit further along, we reached a huge gate to our left with a security fence that had spikes on top, making it impossible for anybody to enter. “This used to be open. It leads to the grounds of the school and the kids used to play football here. Then the school closed it”.

We continued further down the road. Next we reached a small patch of land to our right, with grass growing on it, but again, it was closed off with a fence about two meters high. “This used to be rubbish dumping ground but the council closed it down. Instead of giving proper refuse collection for the community to use, they just built this fence to stop people from using it”. Again a bit later, to our right, there was a little metal barrier; behind it a foot path, leading to the old bingo hall which was located close to the estate. “The old people would like to go to the bingo hall but they can’t – quite a few of them have wheelchairs and they can’t squeeze through the barrier. It costs 6 pounds one way to go there by taxi because they have to drive all around the estate to get somewhere that’s just on their doorstep”. Lindsey explained that there were no buses nearby (nor for that matter were there shops or any other facilities that older people could easily walk to). Then she walked past the barrier, careful to avoid the stinging nettles that were growing knee-high, indicating that I should follow. On the other

side, we reached the railway tracks. Lindsey explained that kids from the close simply cross the tracks to get to school, this was much quicker than walking the long way around the estate: “But guess at what time of the day the only two trains come? At 8.30 and at 3.30. The exact times when kids go to school”. We crossed the tracks, past more high bushes, and again, another gate and a long high fence, until we reached the school.

The journalist and social historian Lynsey Hanley describes in her autobiographical narrative of council estate life that estate residents have “walls in their head” (2007). These walls mirror the physical barriers which they encounter in their daily lives as residents of stigmatised places and represent the profound division between one’s own life and the actions of those who have power over you. For many residents I got to know over the course of my fieldwork, outside institutions and officials – be they local authority officials, the housing association one was renting with, or a central government institution – were only known in their negativity, that is to say, through their ability to constrain and disable local people’s lives and what was important to them. Lindsey, for example, alluded to the authorities’ lack of common sense and ability to relate to people’s lives: the playground opposite the old people’s home was creating a nuisance for old people; the football pitch that had been closed off left young people without a place to play; the lack of bus services and safe roads to the local school or bingo hall were all examples of counter-intuitive or ill-considered urban planning. For some of my informants, there was more than mere oversight or lack of common sense, rather they saw this as a deliberate ploy. Lindsey’s words that the same kind of treatment that the residents of the close received by the local authorities would have been unthinkable had the street been in a different neighbourhood also speak of a more deliberate sense of neglect and placed-based stigma. “They just hear the name [of our estate] and they will think “problem!””, Lindsey once said.

For residents like Lindsey, the authorities’ neglect and lack of interest in local people contrasted starkly with residents’ own sense of investment into the neighbourhood. For instance, Lindsey told me how the residents of the close had formed a committee to put pressure on the council for improved infrastructure and more funding. The committee had also organised a number of outings for the residents of the close, including a day trip to Blackpoolⁱⁱⁱ in a hired coach. Over the course of the following months, I also met a few other residents who lived on the close and who echoed Lindsey’s felt injustice. For example, Mandy was a local resident in her late thirties who worked in three jobs, including a cleaning

job in the nearby situated Science Park and in a canteen in a college in town, to support herself and her teenage son. I once got chatting to her when she dropped into the community centre one afternoon. Visibly upset, she told me that she had been waiting for the police to turn up in vain (the local police station was a short walk from the close) after calling them out. She was concerned about a flat in the close that was run as a “drug den” by local drug dealers. Young people, including her son, had started spending much time in the flat and Mandy worried that he would soon get involved in the drug dealing and street-based violence that occasionally erupted outside. “They criminalise kids for being kids and meanwhile they do nothing about serious crime!”, she commented

Mandy’s words spoke to a common theme that I came across, namely the perceived discrepancy between the investment that residents were putting into keeping their neighbourhoods and homes safe and ‘proper’ and the authorities’ correlating failure to do their part. This, then, is how state failure was experienced: as an inability to hold institutions and officials accountable to their perceived duties towards residents and their estate (Koch 2014). What aggravated the situation was the fact that the authorities made claims to legitimacy which they could not challenge: “They just get away with it because they know how to talk properly and they are dressed in a uniform”, Mandy once said to me in a conversation we had about the police. She contrasted this to her own way of talking that, she said, was “not proper in the same way that official language is”. I will now shift the focus from residents’ frustrations with the authorities towards their own sense of investment into the neighbourhood they live in. **Following Skeggs and others in their emphasis on alternative “person values”**, I will explore how care demonstrated for a place and its people are a central means of establishing a locally valued person.

Creating value on the margins

Implicit in the contrast Mandy draws between her own (and other residents’) attempt to have “community” and the police’s correlating failure to do its part, is an evaluation about what counts as “good” neighbourly behaviour: “good” behaviour includes an ability to take care of one’s home and by extension also of one’s block of flats, street and hence neighbourhood. Social historians have noted the importance that council housing tenants place on cleanliness and respectability in maintaining their homes (Hanley, 2007). Similarly, many of the people I got to know spent a great amount of time looking after and talking about their homes (and

sometimes streets or estates). For example, one of the families I was staying with during fieldwork on one of the town's smaller estates consisted of a couple called Jane (aged thirty one) and Marc (aged forty) with four children (aged between six months and sixteen), both parents were working full time, Jane as a shop assistant in a *large supermarket* off the estate, and Marc as a lorry driver for a local business. Marc often complained to me about neighbours who failed to look after their council house in the same spotless manner as he and Jane did, despite the fact that they had full-time jobs and child care duties. "They shouldn't be given council housing", was his opinion, "if they don't look after it". When walking with him across the estate, he would point at houses where the grass in the front garden was not cut, where there was rubbish lying around or curtains in the front windows torn and tatty.

But to show care for one's home and by extension neighbourhood was not just a matter of maintaining homes, gardens or apartment blocks. It also required investment into people and social relations. "People think it's a shithole", Marc once said, "and yeah, it's true, it's not great here, is it? But then again, I wouldn't wanna live anywhere else, this is home for me". Marc had grown up on an estate nearby but he and Jane had moved to their current house after their first son was born. They now had family living on the same street, the children had attended the local primary school, and Jane was sitting on the board for community centre. She and the children also attended the local bingo night in the hall once a week and the children made use of the youth club and computer facilities on site. For others residents, "home" also meant the intense familiarity of a neighbourhood that one had lived in for a long time and established multiple connections with. "I like it because you always have someone to talk to, there's always someone around", Tracey once said. Tracey was a local woman in her late thirties and of Afro-Caribbean descent who was running a popular drop-in centre at the community centre. The practical implications of Tracey's claim were made clear to me when out together: what should otherwise be a ten-minute walk from my house to the "top shops" (the shops in the centre of the estate where many residents do their daily shopping) could easily turn into a half hour stroll as Tracey would stop to greet passing residents, chat to neighbours and inquire about the whereabouts and health of family and friends.

Tracey would tell me about how she knew the different people that she was greeting on the streets: by going to school with one of them, working in a job with another, volunteering in local projects at the community centre with another; and having family or friends in common with yet others again. "I know everybody up here", she once proudly said. These examples

not only linked Tracey to the individual biographies and relationships of other people but also demonstrated the importance of particular sites where she had time with them. Taken together, they emphasised the importance of “knowing” as a phrase and as a practice of asserting belonging, a point made in the ethnographic literature on Britain (Degnen, 2013; see also Degnen 2016; Edwards, 2000). Individual connections could also be scaled into a more general sense of belonging to the neighbourhood or what residents referred to as the “local estate”. For example, one summer, Tracey organised a fair in protest of impending local authority cuts that would affect various community groups. To promote the event, she organised posters bearing photographs of local individuals, and had written “your community needs you” under them. These pictures were hung up in various places, including the shops, the church, the community centre, the fish and chip shop and the local housing association’s office. “People will come because they’ll know the people on the pictures”, she rightly predicted.

Connectedness was then a way of demonstrating personhood, and hence value. As such, it also provided the means by which people drew moral distinctions between insiders and outsiders, or, in the local vernacular, between an “us” and “them”. We have already seen how Marc and Jane set themselves apart from neighbours who they criticised for not looking after their houses adequately. Similarly, people who lacked social connections to the place and to people could be treated with suspicion. This resonated with my own experiences as an anthropologist and my own sometimes painful, and in any case, long journey of becoming accepted by people in and around the local community centre, not just as a “researcher” (and hence as somebody who was not to be trusted) but as someone who could claim to be a “local resident”, friend and sometimes a fictive kin member. But even within networks of friends and kin, moral evaluations were made. A friend or a kin member could be accused of being selfish and of abusing one’s generosity and trust where they failed to live up to locally expected standards of sociality (Koch, 2016). This was particularly evident in situations of conflict where demands for loyalty and support came most acutely to the fore.

The following case offers an illustration: during the early months of my fieldwork on one of the town’s smaller estates, a local community centre was due to be shut down as part of a council led regeneration effort. The community centre had a range of local groups who used the two rooms in the centre for their social activities, including a mother and toddler group, a bingo group and a breakfast group. The committee of the centre, largely run by a single

family, appealed to all its user groups to oppose the plan: the family feared that the regeneration plans would mean “the end of our community” as decision-making powers would be devolved to outside bodies and the community centre be required to share facilities with an adjoining school and nursery. Initially, most groups that were using the community centre’s facilities took an active part in organising a campaign against the closure of their centre, including organizing a fun day, sending out letters of petition to the local MP, and attending public meetings. Gradually, however, support began to dwindle as some group leaders – whose wages were paid for by the council – feared that they may lose their jobs in the future if they continued opposing the council-led agenda. For Tony, the treasurer of the committee (who was also acting as the *de facto* manager of the community centre), this was a grave betrayal: “People are selfish”, he complained bitterly on the day the centre shut down, “they don’t care about the community”. His words resonated with those of other committee members who spoke of these people as “traitors”, “users” and as “apathetic”.

To sum up, an ethnographic focus on everyday life reveals a picture that is different from that commonly portrayed of council estates and council estate life in the media and politics (cf. Rogaly and Taylor, 2009): one which emphasises vernacular processes of claiming connections to other people and to the place. This is not to portray an overly homogenous or romanticised picture of daily life. The case of the community centre shows that demands made on people’s loyalty can often be coercive as they conflict with personal needs, thereby also displaying, in Rapport’s words, people’s capacity as humans “to be and see beyond the cultural particularities of specific lives” (ibid.:93). Rather, my intention has been to give ethnographic substance to the processes of value-accrual that Skeggs (2012), amongst others, has alerted us to: to the ways in which people derive value and self-worth by investing in their neighbourhood and the people in it. These forms of investment are different from the narratives of individualization provided in modernist accounts precisely because they value relational commitments over individualistic concerns. In the next section I will consider how these processes of value accrual provide the normative yardstick against which politicians and those who are part of the formal political system are judged. I am particularly interested to explore how politicians are commonly positioned as “outsiders” who become the very antithesis of ordinary sociality central to life on the estate.

Zombie democracy revisited

One afternoon, in the lead up to the local elections in 2010, I was sitting in the living room in Jane's and Marc's home, watching TV with Jane, when the front door opened and Mandy's close friend, Kate, walked in. Kate was granted the privilege of walking into the house without first having to knock – a right she had gained by developing a close friendship with Jane and becoming a fictive aunt to the children (Koch 2015). Kate was about ten years younger than Jane (she was in her early twenties), she did not have any children of her own, and so spent most evenings at Jane's house with her family. Jane and Kate told me on several occasions that Kate had been with Jane when she took the pregnancy test for her youngest daughter, and had supported her all through the pregnancy and since the birth of the girl with child care duties. Today, as Kate came through the door, she picked up a polling card for the upcoming elections that had been dropped through the letter box. She handed it to Jane. "Oh, I don't need that", Jane said dismissively to Kate. When Kate remained silent, Jane eventually asked her: "You're not going to vote, are you?" Kate looked at her. "No, of course not", Kate replied quickly. With these words, Kate sat down next to Jane and turned her attention to the TV; the topic of the upcoming elections was not mentioned again in my presence for the following few weeks.

I suspect that scenes like this were common in the lead up to the general elections in 2010 and then again in 2015. Electoral turnout has been low on the estate for decades, falling even below levels of twenty per cent for local elections. The figures reflect how many residents thought of elections, and of formal political participation, more generally: as processes that were best avoided and from whom engagement was socially discouraged. Jane's question if Kate intended to vote was then a demand for complicity rather than an interrogation: a demand that Kate swiftly met by offering reassurance to Jane. I encountered similar social expectations to disengage from formal politics in conversations with other residents too. "I have grown up with my parents telling me that politics is bad and that I should stay away from it", a young man told me who I met in the youth centre. He confessed that he was interested in "politics" but "didn't really know much about it". Conversely, if people did participate in voting or had an interest in formal politics, then this was sometimes justified as something they had done for their family or friends (Koch 2016). For example, on Election Day, I happened to run into Matt outside the polling station (the same man from opening vignette). He said that he had just been to vote, but emphasised that he had only done so for his "nan" who had dragged him there by calling him out of bed that morning.

Political theorists Lerman and Weaver (2014) argue that among Afro-American citizens in the US negative experiences of the state are not separate from people's wider relations to the democratic polity. On the contrary, everyday interactions with particular state officials or institutions – such as with a police officer or a council official – directly impact upon the way marginalised citizens make sense of democratic institutions and their elected representatives *writ large*. This is because “citizens come to learn about their government through their direct contacts with it. Interactions between citizens and the state help form ideas about how government functions... [and] about the democratic values and norms that it embodies” (ibid: 10). What Weaver and Larson do not consider, though, is how everyday experiences of state failure are mediated through localised frames of meaning. In my experience, it was precisely through the moral criteria that establish locally valued persons that the actions of state officials and institutions were evaluated. State officials who failed to apply common sense or who were neglectful or ill-informed in dealing with estate residents and their homes, were commonly portrayed as deficient of the “stuff” that made a local person: they were defined by their lack of care and interest in local people and their needs.

While in many instances, perceptions of moral betrayal were directly furnished by everyday experiences of funding cuts, hostile and unresponsive officers, or ill-conceived policies, what reinforced such feelings was the fact that they resonated with what people saw on the news and on TV. During my first stretch of fieldwork between 2009 and 2011, certain crucial events were frequently mentioned as evidence of politicians' indifference, including the war in Afghanistan and Iraq that was considered to have needlessly taken too many lives; the so-called expenses scandal that exposed MPs who used government expenses to fund lavish lifestyles; and the economic crash in 2008. But more poignantly, individual politicians could be criticized for their lack of care: an example of this would be when Gordon Brown, former prime minister for the Labour Party, was caught on camera after a constituency visit in his car calling a woman a “bigot” having just listened to her complain about local unemployment and her fear of immigrants taking jobs from local people. When commenting on this incident in the community centre the day after it had happened, Mandy identified with the woman on TV as “your ordinary woman on the street”, thereby invoking the trope of “ordinariness” identified by Savage et al. (2001) as being central to working class identity. For her, the Prime Minister's insult of the woman amounted to a refusal to engage with the lived realities of ordinary people. She said: “it just shows you that they don't care about the likes of us”.

Mandy's comment shows how "care" provided an interpretive framework or background expectation against which events and happenings could be judged. This could be taken further into more elaborate talk about the workings of power: in my early days of fieldwork, I was sometimes struck by what appeared to be a common belief in conspiracy theories. For instance, in the aftermath of the 2011 Haiti earthquake, Kieran, a young man, told me that earthquakes were induced by governments to "punish poor people". In October 2010, following the news of a local outbreak of swine flu that resulted in a week long closure of local schools, Marc complained that this had been invented by the local authorities to give "teachers a paid holiday". He had to take days off work (unpaid) to take on child care duties. In the case of the regeneration project mentioned above, the committee members of the community centre due to be replaced were convinced that the regeneration project was designed with the aim of causing "the downfall of the local community". Or, to give a final example, at a public meeting organised by the city council, the representative of the local residents and tenants' association, Pete, a resident in his sixties, complained that the traffic lights that regulated the main road connecting the estate to the outside world discriminated against estate residents. He suggested that the lights would stay red for longer for residents travelling outwards from the estate than for other road users. The objective of the policy was to keep residents confined on the estate.

Pelkmans and Rhys (2011) argue that what makes a conspiracy theory different from any other theory is not the fact that it is false, whilst another theory is correct: it is rather the fact that it has been delegitimised as an explanatory paradigm by those in control of the dominant discourses. This is what happened to Pete: his views on the traffic lights on the estate were dismissed in no uncertain terms as the chair of the meeting called him "paranoid" and "silly". But it is also possible to view Pete's narrative in a different light, namely as a distinctly local reflection on the workings of official power. From such a perspective, what is important about Pete's narrative, and to those of other residents mentioned above, is not whether they are "true" in any positivist sense of the word. Rather, they provide a commentary on people in power, as individuals who are devoid of ordinary personhood and the commitments that flow from it. Politicians are portrayed as people who lie and backstab, who have no backbone and interest in local people and their community, and who act to further their own selfish or self-serving goals. They constitute part of the mass of "them" who are acting against the "us", conceived here in terms of the generality of people who are excluded from those in power. Once, when chatting to Lindsey about politics, she said to me: "Even though we have the

right to vote, and to participate in that way, it's like...it's like there is us and then there is them. And it doesn't matter what they say, it's always going to be us and them".

Conclusion: towards a comparative anthropology of actually existing politics

Elections have been described as “sacred” events (Banerjee, 2007) or as “rituals” (Coles, 2004; Herzog 1987) that bring about particular communities or forms of governance. On a council estate in England, the situation could not be any more different: there, elections tend to be strange and even eerie events that cause community centres to remain empty and local residents to stay inside their homes. We saw in the opening vignette that Matt felt alienated from the three older women who had come out to vote (even if he himself voted himself on this particular occasion), referring to them as “zombies who were creeping out”.ⁱⁱⁱ In this article, I have offered an ethnographic reading of voter withdrawal, one which starts from an understanding of local ideas of personhood. On a council estate in England, politicians – as officials who are associated with the government – are not trusted as caring and trustworthy people. On the contrary, residents routinely contrast them to the locally valued person who is someone who invests into the local neighbourhood and the people who live there. From such a point of view, a very different view of “zombie democracy” emerges from that envisaged by Ulrich Beck: one which sees politicians and those who associate with them (chiefly voters) as the antithesis of ordinary residents whose vitality is derived precisely from their embeddedness in the sociality of daily life.

But the analysis offered here does not just demonstrate how ethnographic realities may depart from analytical concepts. More broadly, it challenges the call for conceptual novelty in modernist social theory. For Beck, the rise of “zombie categories” (of which voting and politics could be taken to be examples) calls for the “end of the theoretical collectivisms of sociology” (2001: xxii) and the invention of a new conceptual toolkit capable of grasping the complexities of the new individualised self. My inclination though is that we ought to be more careful than to advocate the end of “theoretical collectivisms”. For many of the residents on an English council estate, it is precisely their relational, affective and social ties that matter to them the most even as their estates and homes have experienced social and economic upheavals over the last few decades. The point of recording such alternative understandings of person values is not to homogenise working class people, lest it is to romanticise working class culture. It is rather to point to the continued existence of what

Beverley Skeggs has called a different political ontology of the self, one which does not take individualism as its self-evident point of departure. Taken together, such alternative perspective caution against the excessive focus on “theoretical collectivism” that have informed modernist narratives in social theory.

Rather than approaching the study of voter withdrawal and politics from the point of view of dis-embedding processes in second or late modernity, perhaps a more fruitful way to proceed is to understand how politics continues to be embedded in social life. Such is the suggestion made by Jonathan Spencer (1997) in his well-known call for an anthropology of “actually existing politics”: for him, politics is always mediated through social logics that are specific to particular places and time – and hence, it is the task of the anthropologist to “gaze wide-eyed at *whatever happened to be designated political* in our own and other people’s lives” (ibid.: 15; my emphasis). Ethnographic engagements with popular conspiracy theories in post-socialist Europe (Pelkmans and Machold, 2011), Asia (Blom Hansen, 2001; Bovensiepen 2016) and across the African continent (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999; Geschiere, 1997; West, 2003) have paid testimony to Spencer’s call for an anthropology of actually existing politics. But when it comes to the setting of a Western democracy itself, such endeavours have hitherto been slow to follow. This is despite Spencer’s warning that “in the end the interpretation of post-colonial politics may be no different in kind from the interpretation of all politics” (ibid.: 15).

Sociological work on social class and anthropological perspectives on post-industrial community life provide a starting point for interrogating Spencer’s call in the UK today. As the introduction to this volume makes clear, if there is “anything that can crystallise the common ground between the two disciplines [of anthropology of Britain and sociology today], it is [...] shared adeptness at scrutinising the taken for granted in social and cultural worlds” (Degnen and Tyler this volume: 2). An ethnographic assessment of everyday processes of voter withdrawal has shown that, on a council estate in England, electoral politics is not any less “cultural” than in any setting in the global south. On the contrary, understandings of politics and political processes are mediated through, and implicated in, local ideas of personhood and moral values that may not be intelligible to those who are located on the outside. Acknowledging these points not only helps, in Katharine Tyler’s words, “to restore people’s humanity” through ethnographic depth (2015: 1182), particularly in the face of negative labelling and widespread stigma. It further extends the call for an

anthropology of actually existing politics by revealing how, at the end of the day, politics everywhere continues to be embedded in social processes.

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ⁱ A mosquito is a technological device that lets out a high-pitch sound that allegedly only young people can hear. Mosquitos were installed during my fieldwork on major public spaces of the estate (including the main area of shops) to stop young people from congregating there.

ⁱⁱ A tourist destination on the east coast featuring fun fairs and casinos, which is popular with estate residents.

ⁱⁱⁱ ⁱⁱⁱ Cathrine Degnen (2007) makes the point that ageing is perceived as an unwelcome movement out of personhood in dominant discourses in the UK, thereby pointing to an interesting overlap between voters as anti-social individuals and older people as persons who lack personhood.