# The Dialectics of Deracinated Localism: Some Notes from the North

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I am currently finishing fieldwork in a northwestern, post-industrial border town. What 'unites' communities here is their attempts to root themselves in an essentially rootless landscape. This is not a new observation, it is the core of Zygmunt Bauman's work (1). Here, even the most provincial inhabitant is now effectively a citizen of 'the global', simply because the processes which make and re-make the local every day are global. Many people have moved with these processes, but those who refused to move with them are just as uprooted by those who moved, as those who moved. This is the macro aspect of the contradictory processes which now animate small towns such as these.

As the functions of government are gradually sold off, public life continues to shift towards a deracinated form of localism. The Localism Bill is only the most recent Janus-face covering these processes, presenting rhetoric from nineteenth century co-operatives, it seeks to turn their functions inside-out, into yet another form of market economy on the one hand, and free labour on the other. There is a blurring of the public and private here, of capitalism and voluntarism, which cannot be neatly re-connected: The Localism Bill is Janus-faced, presenting one thing on the surface of its rhetoric, but another in practice. As Bob Colenutt pointed out (2) the aim of the bill is to devolve power and give locals more control, but, he explains, 'the politics behind these headlines are complex, combining hard-nosed political economy with conservative idealisations of the good society.' Colenutt believes that contrary to the current rhetoric, the Localism Bill will create a very circumscribed set of freedoms. Should, for instance, a local community group claim that they can tidy and clear all the grass verges at less cost than the current council provider, they would have to go into a tendering process, at which point they would potentially be vying with corporate outfits who have infrastructure and capital. In this sense, the rhetoric about working for nothing – voluntarism – must be viewed with its dialectical other side, privatisation and wage repression. In fact, the very point at which a 'worthy' suggestion is raised is also potentially the point at which that worthiness puts itself under threat from competition. This is the realpolitik of deracinated localism, it is a localism that is fundamentally rootless, it sits on a landscape of wider uprooting.

This talk of 'roots' is both appropriate and ironic: If this town is now known for anything in its post-industrial form, it is for the local 'green' growing group who successfully projects itself through national and global media. Yet a notorious neo-Nazi recently pulled more votes than the Green Party in council elections here. As I write, Anders Breivik is on trial in Oslo. The local neo-Nazi has posted what looks like correspondence with Breivik on his blog, which he has attempted to caveat by arguing against some of Breivik's ideas. It is unclear whether these posts are genuine or not, but the wider point I want to make here is that there is nothing exclusively local about localism any more. This point maps onto the global, media-savvy growers, and our local fascist, whose attempts to re-localise – mentally – into smaller and smaller borders, this country, this county and this town, are actually underpinned by the unfettered global circulation of rhetoric, eco rhetoric, and fascist rhetoric.

The local neo-Nazi retrenches to his remote farm, where he pictures himself with his hunting rifle and swastika, before placing these images in global flows of information. In this sense, there is nothing national about nationalism either. This man accesses his information in the public library in town, provided for by the 'liberals' of the council he despises. Yet the provision of the library is under threat, and the library opening hours have been reduced. This man sits, oblivious to the real threats to public life, inside one very large signifier of the way that public life is moving. He is literally in the instability, completely oblivious, as he communicates within global flows which never cease, about the need to make things stable, as he sees it, in particular ways. The way he 'sees it' is also being constructed by these flows, he does not simply step into them to make contributions or interventions.

Taking his cue from the British National Party, who in recent years attempted to elide their hard fascist roots, our local neo-Nazi recently tried to make his image more 'friendly'. But this led to him being expelled from his own party, as his makeover involved bringing a female, eastern asian fascist to the town for a few days of canvassing. They chatted to a Pakistani market stallholder, and posted pictures of their day out online. He also posted photographs of himself and the asian fascist, posing with guns, in front of swastika flags, pictures of Hitler, and reproductions of romantic landscapes in oil. A dictat was then issued by Party Central, which expelled the local fascist immediately, for mingling with the 'gook public'. All of this played out on cracked stone flags, against the crumbling stone walls of a ruined farm, which looks more eighteenth century than twenty-first.

The local food growing group's retrenchment into local borders is from the point of view of production, but their project holds some contradictions too. For instance, they are reproducing the lexicon of choice on their sign boards, 'strawberries, leeks', etc. 'This is what we do for you', they say, 'and this is the choice we provide'. If we then go to the local Morrisons, we can see a 'Market Street' reproduced in the vegetable section. This section is tricked out like a 'real' market. In the supposedly 'authentic' local growing project, we have a simulation of supermarketization, and in the supermarket we have a simulation of the 'authentic'. This example may seem like a poetic point: Each project is simply trying to use the language of the other. But actually, the local 'radical' growing group are a Limited Company, selling produce to nearby gastropubs, and Morrisons are engaged with community work, via a project called 'Let's Grow', which awards grants of £2000-£10,000 to allow schools to teach young people how to grow food. The term 'market town' has become shorthand for post-industrial small towns. But a dialectical reading can take us to a place where the authenticity that 'market town' supposedly designates slips into neoliberal, capitalist markets, and vice versa. If there is any veracity on this landscape, it is a veracity of slippage: what is 'true', what is 'authentic'

here, is the contradictory nature of the discourses. I want to argue that because of these contradictory discourses, a return to dialectical thinking, to Hegel's 'aufheben', concepts which carry their opposites, which cannot be separated out in any neat, binary way, is crucial to understanding what is happening. I am for a version of dialectical thinking which up-fronts the contradictory and irrational nature of our worlds within language, and against one which supposedly delivers some Hegelian Ultimate Truth. Zygmunt Bauman always writes dialectically, but the thing he never writes about these days is dialectics (3). My project here has been to explicitly inject dialectical thinking into community research and therefore sociology as a whole.

What is still happening here is that faced with frightening, radical changes, people re-construct a patchwork, cultural garment, as a form of protection. Rather than seeing this as a collage though, they see it as an 'authentic' identity, competing with other, proclaimed, 'authentic' identities, in order to agonistically vie with them for space and resources. The big landscape, which sits under the cultural one, and produces all the other questions, is capitalism in crisis. Among these heritagised, defused relics, the new middle classes are tentatively trying to step into the dark of the oncoming and uncertain landscape, by re-fashioning a new symbolic cloak, which actually fuses older fabrics and decorative figures together in particular ways. They have capital, cultural or otherwise, ego and nous, ingenium, wit, to do the doing. The middle classes are re-calibrating their subjectivities, something which often involves taking on the mask of previous forms of working class life, as the 'traditional' working classes - who are in no way traditional in the sense one may get from reading E.P. Thompson - by and large get by with what there is. Middle class, former HBOS banking staff, who until recently worked at the headquarters in nearby Halifax, are symbolically detoxifying themselves after the 2008 crash, which HBOS strongly contributed to, by moving into 'localist' organic food production.

Part of this phenomenon is what Richard Sennett

called 'destructive gemeinschaft', negative community (4). Nothing short of a moral re-calibration is being attempted here, which often involves 'finding yourself' again. But Sennett was writing in order to critique an emerging affluence, a post-LA bean bag culture of indulgence, rather than an emerging landscape of what the coalition government call 'austerity'. When the psychological functions of narcissism Sennett tracks so well are set loose on this landscape, there are bound to be negative consequences. But green activists, or fascists, do not make up the large bulk of communities here, despite providing interesting counterpoints. This bulk, demographically, is still the white working classes, but there are very real homologies between these groups: What used to be the traditional white working classes are also trying to root themselves in a landscape which is rootless. This is not new though, they have been trying to do this for several decades now. Their attempts to sink this taproot into permanent nourishment – security – will very often lead to an uprooting.

I spoke to a middle-aged man who worked freelance for a single institution, just outside Halifax. He had line managers, as in a 'traditional' job, but none of the stability or security a traditional job brings. He explained how he got all the down sides of working for a company, being dictated to, being treated 'like I'm their property', but none of the benefits, no personnel department to deal with tax or National Insurance, no regular hours and zero job security. Often he turned up on the days he was supposed to work to find the people running the project were at another site, at which point he simply had to go home, unpaid, having spent just under ten pounds in transport costs. He felt that he had little real recourse to complain, because of his precarious employment status. The few times he mentioned the problems they were simply brushed off. There was a kind of stifled fury under his comments, all the more shocking because of its stifling. This is how lives are lived under deracinated localism, the tendency to turn-inwards is strong. The hidden injuries of class are becoming hard-wired into the landscape. If there is something which is able to take root here, unfortunately it seems to be this. I heard similar stories from barmaids in a local pub who turned up for shifts to be told to go back home again, having spent bus fare to get there. The pub subsequently closed, before opening again under a new landlady. These girls were in their late teens and their expectations were being formed by this cultural mean, it was becoming 'natural'.

But I rarely heard a political analysis of the situation from the subjects of research. I heard lots of stoical acceptance and antagonistic outbursts directed at the unemployed, much more than I heard the situation being blamed on the ethnic other, although I heard this too.

I spoke to men complaining that their girlfriends lived with their mothers, whilst they lived outside of the familial unit, paying a price they couldn't really afford in order to do so. Many were bitter about the lack of access to their children - one was about to have a solicitor he could barely afford send a letter out - and I spoke to women who were entrenched in work and looking after their young, bearing the largest brunt of the costs, both economically and personally, convinced that the male species was fundamentally aberrant. I also heard many ill-informed remarks about single parent mothers being 'the problem'. Of all lone parents the majority are female, 339 households out of 371, but 25% are in full-time employment and 28% in part-time. Single mothers account for 2.2 per cent of the population here and 53% are working, which makes roughly just over one per cent who are unemployed single mothers (5). This did not stop the comments coming. Many of the people proclaiming assumptions such as these shared key symptoms: mis-directed anger, followed by a retreat to a clearly troubled acceptance, neither state being able to articulate what was happening to the whole psychic organism. They work, but their work often doesn't work in the way they think it should. There was something of Beckett about waiting for work which works, in the older, traditional manner. I became very interested in the use of the phrase 'on and off', which arose again and again. It alerted me to the precariousness of everyday life. 'How is work?' 'On and off'. Or, 'I live with me girlfriend, she's scouse, we've been at it eleven years, on and off'. Linguistically, the permanent was often couched in the temporary, and vice versa. This highlights the deracinated nature of contemporary community. This phrase seems to have simultaneously replaced and subsumed older statements such as 'up and down'. Both 'up and down' and 'on and off' map good and bad experiences, but 'up and down' assumes a continuous experience, rather than a fundamentally dis-continuous one. 'On and off' designates a binary switch, but it also designates a single state called 'precarité': again, dialectical thinking is crucial on these landscapes.

In the last issue of Street Signs (6), I outlined the practices of a man working an informal economy. Just before that issue came out, this man was caught, arrested, investigated, only narrowly avoiding a custodial sentence. During this process, he got a job in the pub where he was arrested, the primal scene of his trauma. But when his final magistrates appearance was published in the local paper, he was sacked from this job. He then became obsessed with the pub, wanting to buy it out, just after he was served with a £100,000 fine he could never pay. There was a psychological attempt to control the uncontrollable, which was heart breaking to observe. None of this has finally run its course. This man recently re-gained a job right at the heart of his

trauma, yet again, in a managerial role: The landlord who originally sacked him was forced out by the Punch Group, who own the pub, and so our ex-DVD pirate was able to become a partner in the new management team. This particular, loaded location, the place of his arrest, then the place of his sacking, has become the place he tries to tame, to make his own, to root himself in. When this is considered, the title 'manager' begins to take on different connotations. What is he attempting to manage here? This is tragic in a deeper, almost literary sense. It has become his pathos. This man is trying to tame the very space of his trauma, and by attempting to do so, he is trying to control the out-of-control nature of his own life. A week ago, the pub was completely destroyed by flooding and Punch are now selling the shell of a building as a write-off. This man's 'deracinated localism' was perhaps the most extreme – the most uprooted, the most focussed on a single spot – but it maps onto the deracinated localisms of all the others I encountered. In a way, those undertaking work in informal economies provide a negative mirror image of the supposedly 'respectable' economies: They were trying to make themselves respectable via this work, which was impossible, but then so was everybody else. If the supertanker of capitalism always tries to tame space with approaches to temporality, those thrown overboard, just about bobbing above the waves in its wake, also attempt to do something similar.

'Localism' is perhaps essential, as climate change bites and networks of provision are required to shrink. But how the retrenchment into smaller borders happens sociologically concerns me greatly. 'The local' is the unwritten space of utopia in one sense: the place we have no choice but to go, but of course a lot depends on how that space gets written. If 'the local' could be written without getting tangled in the language of racism, elitism, or provincialism, we could maybe call these processes 'utopian'. But I think we might better use the term 'atopos' here, meaning unplaced, or unbecoming.

(1) See all of Bauman's work after *Liquid Modernity,* Polity, 2000.

(2) Colenutt, B. (2011), 'The Localism Bill – who benefits?' in Red Pepper, January, 2011

(3) I now read the term 'liquid' in Bauman's work doubly. It is constantly re-stated throughout his later work and appears in most of his book titles. 'Liquid' refers to real, qualitative change, but also, for me, it means 'negating': transforming, eroding and consuming. 'Negating' is a dialectical term. Bauman also dialectically telescopes his last book into the next, without ever directly using Hegelian language.

(4) Sennett, R. (1977) *The Fall of Public Man,* Penguin

(5) ONS, Office For National Statistics, Key figures for 2001, Census Area Statistics

(6) Hanson, S. (2011) 'Small Change: Some Notes on an Informal Economy' *Street Signs,* Spring 2011 Issue