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Perverse Alignments: Women's Activism and the Governmentalization of Community

This chapter tells a twin story. One is of the flourishing of 'community' as the locus of a series of activist struggles and forms of political engagement. As the previous chapter showed, some participants in this research had been inspired by the radical community activism of Latin America or came to politics by participating in community-based struggles. Some had developed local resources to combat poverty, poor housing and rundown estates; others created small-scale cooperative and neighbourhood projects that brought 'personal' issues of childcare, women's health or domestic violence into the public domain; yet others participated in community-organizing as a form of oppositional politics. But a second story tells of the proliferating array of government programmes designed to regenerate, empower and mobilize community as a governable terrain. Participants in this research were ambiguously positioned in such programmes, sometimes confronting them from the 'outside' and sometimes seeking to draw on the resources they offered. Their work sometimes prefigured new policy programmes as governments sought to innovate or to co-opt 'what worked', but it also often contested the logics of those same programmes, as we will see.

Community is, of course, a highly contested concept, and an extensive literature highlights different perspectives, meanings and policy foci (Amit and Rapport 2002; Cohen 1987; Creed 2006; Mooney and Neal 2009; N. Rose 1999). It is the elasticity of meaning that renders community ambiguous, able to be mobilized – and appropriated – within different and often antagonistic political projects. It often implies a commonality of interest, place or identity that can be an unproblematic source of solidarity. As Jane Wills notes, this can be a rather old fashioned idea (Wills 2011); academic work on social networks has drawn attention to how sociability and identity are produced through networks, ideas and things, rather than membership of the shared space of belonging (Cresswell 2010); or as networked individualism rather than a bounded area (Wellman, Wong, Tindall and Nazar 1997). Nevertheless community remained, for many participants, both a common-sense descriptor of where they saw their politics taking place and a resource for their political agency. Such a politics sought not only to transform 'everyday lives' through

informal and unpaid labour but also to challenge deeply entrenched patterns of inequality and disadvantage, poverty and exclusion. But work in and through community brought women into antagonistic relationships and close engagements with governmental power. This chapter begins by tracing a number of different ‘imaginaries’ of community articulated in the accounts of participants in this research. It then explores the governmentalization of community within the UK and how women ‘worked the spaces’ generated by different projects and programmes. It suggests different understandings of the gendered labour in new state spaces, and how women experienced their closure and the partial erasure of the politics they had enabled. Finally, the chapter offers ways of theorizing what I have termed the ‘perverse alignments’ between feminist-inflected activism and the governmentalization of community.

Imaginaries of community

Community was an attractive idea for many participants whose first encounters with political action were those of setting up playgroups, playgrounds, cooperative housing projects, advice centres and other resources for combating local issues of poverty and disadvantage. The experience of encountering such poverty was often hugely formative; Naomi Eisenstadt (G2), who later became Director of Sure Start, recounted how:

So working in the nursery at [name of estate] was enormously formative and there was very little that happened in Sure Start that I can't say I can trace to work I did there. It was the true, the real experience. I was there for five years, and I still use stories from that time in speeches and everything. (Naomi Eisenstadt)

Particularly striking in this quotation is the reference to such experiences as ‘the true, the real’. This, I think, carries a double meaning: first, community exists as an authentic space, untrammelled by the messy worlds of politics and policy, perhaps pre-modern in its sensibilities: a place inhabited by women, children, the elderly and those in need of care, and others not part of a modern public sphere. This, as Joseph (Joseph 2002 and others have noted, is a highly gendered image and one to which I will return. The second inflection of ‘the true, the real’ – and one closer to Naomi’s meaning – is of community as the place where real poverty and disadvantage are lived. This meaning is echoed in other extracts: for example, in the following quotation from Carole Harte (G2), the coordinator of a women’s advice and information centre in Birmingham at the time of our interview:

Over recent years I have been doing something that was fulfilling an ambition, bringing grassroots women who were currently experiencing whatever disadvantage it might be, in this case poverty, into direct contact with those who

shape society to ensure that what we saw at the point of impact, where reality bites, where reality meets policy. (Carole Harte)

Although Carole is from the same generational cohort as Naomi, the ‘real’ here refers not to a past experience but to present actions, and designates places and populations untouched by the efforts of policy-makers of the 1990s to address issues of poverty, exclusion and disadvantage.

But community is not only the ‘other’, the ‘real’, but represents distinctive forms of work:

I guess that at a certain point of your life you have experiences that are hugely formative, form relationships that are incredibly powerful, and the really large network of people that I got to know in those years – I was only in the US for two years, but I got involved in a whole network of people who were doing community action, setting up playgroups, we got a better playground, working to create independent schools. I ended up working with the Black community, with the welfare rights movement. Because I was English it was more accepted – there was less suspicion of me than there would have been for white Americans. So it was a bit of a baptism of fire. At the end of two years my father died so I came back. So by that point I had done one year volunteering in England, involved in this amazing community work in Islington, one year at LSE stepping back and trying to do some thinking about policy, then two years in America, and I thought of myself by that time as a community worker, that’s what I did. And to be honest if you asked me today what I did, who I was, I would say that, the same thing. I kind of feel that’s what I’ve been. (Tricia Zipfel)

Such work tended to be unpaid or underpaid, but it was both a job and a style of politics – local, oriented to issues of exclusion and rights, and traversed by divisions of race and power. (Tricia’s position as a white woman working on Black issues was, in the United States at that time, accepted because she came from ‘elsewhere’ so was not locked into local political struggles.)

Community also became a designator for a range of professions: community planning, community architecture, community education, community arts, community development and so on:

I was an architect with an interest in housing and an interest in social justice. I had worked for a while as a Community Architect but locally I was involved in the Community Forum, and was active in [name withheld] Residents Association. We wanted to get the area to be a general improvement area at the time but we didn’t manage that, but other projects came in – for example an Area Caretakers project. I was also heavily involved in the Neighbourhood Centre as Treasurer and later became the Chair, and I did housing advice sessions once a week for ages. (Esther Boyd)

I worked with community groups in Docklands in the 1980s, with something called the Docklands Forum – a federation of community groups, employers, faith groups, trade unions. We were (in part) funded by GLC, and we worked on a People’s Plan for the Royal Docks as an alternative to the planned airport. We did campaigning to ensure local needs were met and voices heard in the 1980s redevelopment of Docklands. But it was broader than that – we were

both opposing some of the planned developments, but also trying to work for community gain in plans that were put forward. (Sue Brownill, G3)

My politics came from my interest in the arts, the visual arts. I went to a gap year in France, found out about community arts; I was in Paris, thinking about urban spaces, about shared spaces. So I spent time in community arts, then about five years ago worked out what I was supposed to do – which was working somewhere that was, well, challenging the norm, but that was also working with, supporting mainstream thinking to move on, supporting governance to change. (Sonia Khan, G3)

I worked in CDF [Community Development Foundation]¹ for ages. That was the time when they had projects on the ground so there was always a lot to learn, and there were always new projects. That's where I learnt about community development really. When I first got involved in community development, housing and planning were the important issues, but what people actually got when they went out and knocked on doors was play and childcare and stuff. But at the time these were not viewed as such important issues, and it was before the time gender issues were acknowledged – it was all about redevelopment. (Marilyn Taylor, G2)

These extracts show how roots in a community ethos formed the basis of diverse and mobile working lives that offered individuals the opportunity to generate significant spaces of power. But they also suggest something of the tensions. Some are implicit in the different conceptions of space and scale in these and other extracts; about, for example, whether community is a place or an ethos, whether it is exclusively urban and whether different scalar imaginaries can effectively be collapsed into a seemingly cohesive entity. Some are more explicit: for example, the tension between a focus on infrastructure and a focus on everyday lives (see also the extracts from Theresa Stewart in Chapter 2). The extract from Marilyn also suggests some of the limits of the class-based emphasis on poverty and disadvantage that informed the professionalization of community in this period: the neglect of gender and the silence on 'race'. Both came to the fore, however, in other accounts of political work, especially that promoted by some of the left-leaning local authorities in England in the late 1970s and through much of the 1980s, including the GLC:²

I came to the GLC as head of one of the sub-sections within the Women's Support Unit, so I was very involved in women's politics but now within the local authority. And outside of that we set up the Asian Women's Network as a resource centre, we had a little office in a building for women's projects, near Holborn. For several years I was quite active in that, there were several us, the idea was to have a central organization that supported local women's organizations. (Avtar Brah)

Avtar Brah was, as Chapter 2 recounted, primarily oriented to a politics of race, but came to inflect this with attention to the intersections of race, gender and other axes of disadvantage and exclusion. But what is striking in this extract is the ways in which gender and race politics were both brought inside

local government through the development of equality units in the 1980s, and how the resources of the local state were mobilized to promote local activism and local facilities. Other organizations emerged that drew on a mix of state and non-state funding to promote community action and to try to influence policy: law centres, resource centres, housing action projects, community arts projects, women's centres, immigration advice centres and so on. Community activism became a form of collective political practice that was stretched to encompass 'inside' and 'outside' spaces. This form of practice required the knitting together different people and forms of politics:

I suppose it was a kind of community entrepreneurialism. And there's a great debate now, isn't there, about whether this was killed off later by getting grants from the GLC, etc., and whether it [political action] might come back as we are about to lose all those grants. That takes us back to the stuff I'm doing now. But then you just had to run these things. (Jane Foot)

This speaks to how someone still active in the present reflects on the possibilities of community as a site of politics as government programmes and institutional logics have changed over time. One debate has been how far 'authentic' forms of community activism had become compromised as government grants – and, later, contracts – led to projects of professionalization and incorporation. But a second change has been the appropriation of community as a locus of new rationalities of governing: concepts of social inclusion, democratic renewal, active citizenship, responsibility, participation, decentralization and, most recently, the Big Society and other localization projects each seek to reconstruct relationships between state and citizen with 'community' as a primary resource for social action beyond the state.

Then in the 1990s community came back into fashion, but in a way that I wasn't very happy with. I was going to Demos seminars on communitarianism and wanting to throw up basically, and the Americans were all discovering civil society, and everyone was saying how wonderful the voluntary sector was. (Marilyn Taylor)

The journey from community activism to community development and then to communitarianism³ is a highly gendered journey; one in which women are viewed as the economic divers of change but at the same time become charged with greater responsibility for care and welfare (through voluntary labour) and called upon to be the bearers of ethical and moral responsibility. It is a journey in which the boundaries between public, private and personal are redrawn: the feminist claim that 'the personal is political' becomes realized in ways that both take on women's claims for the recognition of issues of childcare, domestic violence and inequalities within the household while the 'personal' – matters of conduct and behaviour – become taken up in public policy. I will return to these issues in Chapter 4, but here want to note how 'community' is traversed by multiple and often antagonistic political

projects. Older models of community activism, inspired by the work of Paulo Friere and the radical politics of Latin America, sit uneasily with more recent developments from the United States, based on the community-organizing work of Saul Alinsky (currently favoured by the UK coalition government and source of inspiration for London Citizens; see Chapter 9). Community professionals (working in community arts, architecture and so on) often found themselves in conflict with community activists. And the politics of community were traversed and confounded by the politics of race, gender, sexuality, generation and other lines of social and political fracture.⁴

Governmentalizing community

The women quoted in this chapter all engaged, at some point in their working lives, with a succession of UK (usually English) government programmes: Community Development Programmes, Inner Area Studies, the Priority Estates Programme, Urban Renewal projects and the New Deal for Communities were all designed to contain potentially disruptive ‘communities’ and to invest in their renewal and regeneration.⁵ These generated new spaces of power and opened up new prefigurative pathways that became inscribed in policies of the ‘Third Way’ governments of Blair in the late 1990s and the coalition government of 2010. But the alignments between community activism and governmental projects of development and containment were played out rather differently in successive programmes. Many remembered the early Community Development Programmes (CDP) as opening up extensive opportunities for local activism to flourish: Ursula Murray recounted how ‘*CDP was a very open initiative that drew in experienced activists. The Home Office couldn’t control it*’ (my emphasis). CDP was underpinned by radical political critiques of inequality and disadvantage. But such critiques generated high expectations of change that clashed with the more limited purposes of government.

Under New Labour community and active citizenship programmes proliferated: Education, Health and Employment Action Zones, New Deal for Communities, Neighbourhood Renewal, Sure Start, Social Inclusion projects and crime reduction initiatives. Such programmes looked to ‘local communities’, local partnership bodies and local neighbourhoods in ways that sought to bypass existing institutions, particularly local authorities, many of which had supported and housed radical left-wing and equality projects through the 1980s and early 1990s. Community was viewed as the place – locality was important here – where new forms of engagement between government and ‘ordinary people’ could be established (Clarke 2010a). They offered lots of spaces of opportunity but were not founded on the same kind of systematic collective critique as CDP and tended to work through an explicitly

partnership-based regime that served to collapse distinctions between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, so rendering critique more difficult:

Partnerships were invited spaces, and therefore the rules of the game were not those of the community, whereas you need popular spaces where people can find their own voice. And that's what I think was missing a bit under New Labour. The real change comes about from the dynamics between the popular and the invited spaces. (Marilyn Taylor)

This extract sets up an opposition between the idea of community as a ‘popular’ space free from governmental intervention and the ‘invited’ spaces opened up as government projects and programmes invited community actors to participate. My interest, however, is in those actors who brokered between these different spaces, aligning different rationalities to open up new dynamics of change. Being part of a partnership or working on a government programme did not necessarily erase radicalism. Many participants lived through different regimes, taking critiques and political learning with them and adapting their strategies as they went:

Over twenty-two years the Priority Estates Programme was always interesting. The idea arose from the outgoing Labour government's concern about run down estates, then in 1979 the new Conservative government launched the project because they knew that Right-to-Buy [a tenant's right to purchase their council accommodation] would never work on the most deprived estates. So we were funded by a Tory government, working in mainly Labour authorities, championing the right of tenants and challenging [local authority] housing management services. We developed a cooperative housing model for public sector housing and then, in the 1990s, tried to apply it to other services. We were piloting a form of ‘neighbourhood management’, but struggled because it was before its time. We applied for a grant to do research on how to build on the housing cooperative model and apply it in a neighbourhood across a whole range of services.

What we were talking about was neighbourhood management, we tried to pilot the model and it just didn't work – it was before its time. But when Tony Blair came in and set up the Social Exclusion Unit, with its amazing analysis of poverty, and neighbourhood disadvantage and inequality, that was just fantastic. I got very excited. I got involved in the PAT [Policy Action Team] on neighbourhood management and felt this was what Priority Estates Programme had been trying to do for years. This is why I went to work for the government in 2001 [on Neighbourhood Renewal] since I did feel excited by it; it felt it was a natural extension of the agenda we had been exploring and slowly developing for twenty years. (Tricia Zipfel)

In the Blair years, programmes of development, participation and empowerment flourished, opening up new opportunities for many participants and benefiting from the relational and political skills they brought. They offered new spaces of power that drew women into governance arrangements while also offering them resources that they could sometimes divert in their efforts to promote social justice. Such participants, however, had to negotiate

the contradictions between their own politics and those underpinning government projects of inclusion and renewal. These consistently privileged a communitarian rather than an adversarial politics of community, and sought to transform governance itself by looking beyond institutionalized interests to the 'ordinary people' of community and civil society.

As such those drawn into these types of programmes have often been charged with complicity in the rolling out of new logics of 'inclusive' Third Way neoliberalism (Bondi and Laurie 2005). That is, they are viewed as agents through whom neoliberalization could colonize potentially oppositional spaces. But I want also to suggest that participants themselves appropriated neoliberal projects and programmes. To explore this a little further I want to develop the idea of 'translation'. This appeared as a practical discourse in some of the interviews – a way in which women described what they did:

You can probably – I can give you an insight into a real world and you can translate that into an academic language which is what people in government, decision-makers expect to see – a language that's recognized by policy-makers. So we need each other, otherwise I might be talking to the Russians in French – it will have no effect. (Carole Harte; my emphasis)

Then I acted as a connector with the rest of the department, bringing civil servants in to meet with them (community forum members) about different issues, translating what they were saying into documents that were acceptable and understandable to the department. (Tricia Zipfel; my emphasis)

These are speaking from different positions, with Carole viewing me as an academic implicated in translating her ideas to policy-makers, while Tricia had, at that time, a Civil Service attachment in which translation between different stakeholder interests was a key part of her role. Responding later to this extract, Tricia expressed a discomfort with her use of the word 'translate' because:

the whole point of the Community Forum was to enable them to speak directly and in their own words and in their own way to the minister and policymakers. We said that they should 'tell it like it is' and that's what happened. My role wasn't to 'translate' in the sense of 'interpret', to make more acceptable or palatable, but to facilitate the exchange and to support it by putting it into documents that civil servants then had to take note of. But it was important that it was me doing it because I totally understood where the forum members were coming from ... Lots of people have commented on the value of having 'people like me' on the inside of government, and it did make the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit different from the rest of government, at least for a while. (Tricia Zipfel)

'People like me' hold contradictory subject positions, both inside and outside dominant institutions and forms of rule. They were inspired by forms of radical community activism that sat uneasily in the culture of the Civil Service. Tricia brought her experience of Latin American participatory politics community activism into what she saw as the bland and technocratic participation promulgated by the UK Civil Service. The work of Carole, Tricia and others

evokes the sense of translation as an active, agential process, requiring the labour of summoning, mobilizing and – most importantly – combining elements into new assemblages (see Chapter 7). And, of course, translation was also needed between the rationalities and practices of different elements of government itself. Governmental projects of community development, community empowerment, the promotion of community cohesion and others tended to be situated outside mainstream service-delivery departments and in rather ambiguous relationships to them. They represented a shift towards more horizontal working, sometimes understood as ‘network’ governance, but were cross-cut by performance and accountability regimes derived from hierarchically organized ‘silos’ of government. They were ambiguously positioned between central and local government, valorizing the ‘local’ and the empowerment of local actors while being suffused with centralizing targets and measures. These contradictions were managed by participants, but also actively ‘worked’ by them to generate spaces of power in which radical agendas could be pursued. Their labour was sometimes co-opted by the various units of government established to promote community development and community cohesion.⁶ These sought to transcend what were considered to be ‘old’ institutional, professional and political barriers by empowering ‘ordinary people’ as active citizens. Indeed, many government programmes picked up on ideas and practices that had been prefigured by radical projects, both in the UK and in international development work. However, government programmes also offered new spaces of agency, of power, that could be mobilized by participants. Here is Jan Etienne talking about working on projects funded from the New Deal for Communities and Better Government for Older People programmes:

The bulk of my involvement in what I might call informal political activities has been working with women's organizations. One of them has been an older women's organization dealing with communities. You get this situation where they [the programme board] want to tackle the needs of particular sections of the community. They put out money for short courses so that people can participate on urban regeneration boards, committees and so on. I have provided a lot of this kind of training. I'm also involved in delivering equality training for various employers, but when I thought about meeting with you I was thinking to myself that one of the things that I really wanted to share was the experience that I've had, that I still have, of working with older women who are living on a council housing estate. This is the part of my work that I feel much more excited about. It's all voluntary, but it's a side of my life that I really get a lot out of ...

I asked her what it was that excited her:

I've been working with an over fifties project in Brent for the last eight years. I'm not a borough organizer kind of person, but what it is about these women, they're probably one of the most multicultural sort of groups that I've ever worked with. I've never come across Irish, African and Caribbean working so well together. Most of them are involved in the Greater London Pensioners Association for which they are campaigning at the House of Commons all the time, equalizing the

pension, you know the whole thing about returning the link to earnings. Some of them are campaigners, some of them are working for Black disabilities. They have all sorts of skills and what I do with them I actually conduct ... put on these little training exercises which are supposed to be about giving them the confidence to be able to challenge the local council. (Jan Etienne)

Carole Harte's empowerment work was not funded by any specific government programme but used the spaces generated by the turn to more participative styles of policymaking to promote active citizenship:

My first funding application – I asked for the money to help me to help women to participate in our society. What I was talking about was active citizenship I suppose. I wrote that I wanted them to stop being passive observers because that's what seemed to change for me when I went through a learning process. Getting more confident, etc. (Carole Harte)

As part of her work coordinating a women's advice and information centre she sought to enable community actors – predominantly but not exclusively women – to voice their experience to policymakers:

We secured funding for a workshop in which women were asked to focus on their own experience. Then I asked them to put them together into themes, then we would look at how those themes related to different policy areas. Eventually we honed it down to a set of recommendations which were presented to a group of minister and senior civil servants. They didn't keep up their end of the bargain (about who we would get to see). But it had a big impact on the women who participated. We're all of us in a bus to London: and some have never left [the council estate], and we go into the Houses of Parliament and it's like 'Wow!' And if you ask them they'll say it was actually brilliant. It's my job not to let them know the struggles we had to get them the bus fare, the childcare and all that kind of thing. (Carole Harte)

This is one of a number of examples Carole spoke about where she had mobilized women to take up 'invited spaces' in the policy process, responding to participation and consultation exercises, organizing focus groups to enable a response to consultations on 'stronger communities' and on crime reduction strategies under New Labour. But this mobilization also set agendas: an event on 'barriers that women faced in their community' was facilitated and broadcast by BBC3. This underscores the role many participants play in summoning and mobilizing 'community' and how they engage in active processes of translation within the spaces opened up by 'participative' styles of policymaking.

I want to juxtapose Carole's experiences with those of Hannah Berry, a young woman who at the time of the interview was working in a community empowerment project for Manchester Women's Network. With a woman from Venezuela she had set up GAP (Gender Audit Project) as a community-interest company, based in a cooperatively managed workspace, shared by several organizations, that Hannah had helped establish. The GAP involved other women in doing the audit research, enabling them to get accreditation for

their skills. They conducted audits for bodies such as the then Local Strategic Partnership and Strategic Health Authority; they made recommendations, produced leaflets and, like Jan and Carole, offered ‘empowerment’ and ‘training’ programmes for women:

The audits show that there is a real lack of confidence among women to get involved in formal structures [e.g. those associated with the Local Strategic Partnership]. This helped us get funding for empowerment programmes for local women. We ran education workshops looking at things like what is gender, how are children socialized, looking at media images of women. We worked with the women to identify areas they were weak in and developed training to suit. (Hannah Berry)

They also secured funding to do awareness-raising in schools, to work with women living in refuges, parents within Sure Start programmes, older women, asylum-seekers, the League of Jewish Women, women with mental health problems, the Red Cross women’s group and research on women councillors:

We always work with existing groups. Our interventions are so tiny the idea is that any learning will be embedded – there will be some way in which they will carry on once we have gone away. (Hannah Berry)

Although these three participants are from different generational cohorts, and come from different political backgrounds – Jan from anti-racist politics and Labour Party involvement, Carole from class-based politics, Hannah from anarchism and direct action on climate change – there are some striking similarities between their descriptions of their work. All described bringing women together to events in which they formulated policy and campaigning ideas; all saw ‘empowerment’ as a political activity; and all explicitly targeted women. And all worked the ‘invited spaces’ of governance to mobilize resources and promote social justice and equality. Finally, all used the language of empowerment, development and active citizenship.

These are however all difficult terms. Cruikshank (Cruikshank 1999), Sharma (Sharma 2008), Brown (Brown 2005) and others have noted their significance as technologies of neoliberal rule ‘which help mould individuals into responsible citizen-subjects who fit the requirement of the prevalent governance regime and who participate in the project of rule by governing themselves’ (Sharma 2008: 17). ‘Women’s development’ and ‘community empowerment’, then, formed contradictory points of alignment between emerging governing rationales and participant’s political work.

Ambiguous spaces and problematic politics

The expansion of spaces of power linked to governmental projects and programmes took place alongside the progressive ‘professionalization’ of many community-based organizations. Such organizations were particularly

vulnerable to the ‘contract culture’ in which service-delivery contracts came to replace most forms of grant aid. Sukhwant Dhaliwal worked for women’s refuges in Manchester and London, in neither of which did she find an outlet for her campaigning style of politics:

Now [name of group] are incredible but for me it was all about service provision. I kept thinking the politics was coming, you know, I kept on thinking the politics was coming. To give them their due they had historically lobbied on social policy stuff, but they are pretty entrenched in service provision, I would say. But when I got to Southall Black Sisters there was a completely different culture. They talked about legislative reforms, they went and campaigned and lobbied for it.
(Sukhwant Dhaliwal)

This contrast is one that resonates through the literatures on the ‘professionalization’ of activist spaces and voluntary-sector bodies as they are drawn into new relationships with the state (Bondi and Laurie 2005; Braig and Wölte 2002; McDermont 2010). The transformations of governance (see Chapters 4 and 5) that took place in the 1990s opened up a ‘mixed economy’ of service provision, an economy generated through the marketization of public services and the change of funding regimes for voluntary and not-for-profit organizations from grant aid to contract. As organizations with a tradition of activist and campaigning work came to take on service-delivery roles, so they became subject to quality, accounting and management requirements against which their performance was monitored – and on which future funding depended. Informal activities became formalized, complex roles became narrowed down in the disciplines of service provision, and the relationship between volunteering and managing shifted. As Sukhwant acknowledged, many such organizations continued to engage in campaigning and advocacy, but the balance of their work shifted and the demands of meeting the requirements of the contract rendered them less attractive for volunteers and activists alike.

Sonia Khan describes a similar experience but in a very different institutional and political context. Early in her career she had worked initially as a volunteer and later as an employee of Free Form Arts Trust, an organization rooted in the 1960s ethos of community education, community arts and community engagement as routes towards empowerment:

So I spent four years in a community arts organization that had started off in the late 1960s; it was about bringing arts to the people. But it had evolved to match the times, so in the 1980s it did more around regeneration, then in the 1990s it was moving towards working on estates, supporting the statutory sector on social regeneration. And I have to say that as time went on in that job I got to feel that they weren’t what they had been, they had lost some of their edge. And that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, but they hadn’t worked out what they needed to be now. They had become more of an intermediary between community and the state, and in the end they weren’t community-based and

they weren't rebellious – and that was fine, but I felt they needed a new vision for the 1990s. The strategic leadership were pragmatic people who wanted to survive as an organization, to keep artists involved – it was a kind of professionalization, I suppose. (Sonia Khan)

The contrast between politics and professionalization is a theme to which I return in later chapters, but here I also want to note that the language used by Sonia (strategic leadership, vision, intermediary bodies, professionalization, rebelliousness) is itself not innocent language but draws both on political critiques and on managerial discourse.

The literature on the fate of voluntary and community organizations has tended to focus on such processes of professionalization. However, community projects were also highly vulnerable to three rather different processes that limited their power to generate politicized subjects and activist politics. The first was one of *co-optation and containment* as activist conceptions of 'empowerment' became articulated with governmental notions of active citizenship and responsibility. After Carole Harte had suggested that she saw her role as being that of producing active citizens, able to speak back to government, I asked her, as government is now full of the language of active citizenship, how she felt about her material now being part of official policy talk.

The saddest thing was when I heard the leader of the Tory Party quoting back my own words – I thought what's happening here?

I asked her what had happened.

Well, I think that they've listened to the words, and they have sort of – they are coming back and biting us on the bum with them, saying well we've listened, this is what you have asked for. But, oh my God, we didn't mean that. (Carole Harte)

The laughter that accompanied this explanation was dismissive and ironic, but there was considerable anger, too. Similar sentiments were expressed by Jane Foot, in her comment that '*New Labour has stolen our language*'. This can be viewed as a reflection on the ways in which governmental projects and programmes – especially those of New Labour, but also those promoted and funded by the World Bank – draw on social movements or international development practice and resignify them in accordance with what some would term a neoliberal strategy of rule (see Chapter 8 and Newman 2012b). Empowerment and active citizenship programmes, whatever their 'origins', tended to become oriented towards producing new kinds of governmental subject, able to take their place in 'reflexive modernity' in general and economic development strategies in particular.

A second process, overlaid on the first in complicated ways, might be termed *empowerment as symbolic action*. Empowerment and community development programmes can be viewed as constructing disadvantage and

exclusion as cultural processes that can be resolved by personal empowerment rather than through attention to structural and economic factors. Hannah Berry, reflecting on her work with women asylum-seekers, reflected that:

I can see actual positive benefits for individuals from what we are able to do. But these women [asylum-seekers] have got an active citizenship programme where they are not even allowed to be citizens. And all around me I see women who get their status only to have to go and work in Tesco's. The women are getting deported left, right and centre. But I also see them learning about how politics works in this country, and they are getting heard by people with power. We did this event and on the minibus on the way home there was a real buzz. (Hannah Berry)

The 'buzz' of women travelling on minibuses to speak to those in power resonates with the Carole Harte interview. But the work with women asylum-seekers points to the limits as well as the possibilities of empowerment work: such women were learning active citizenship while having no citizenship status. And it raises the question – empowerment for what? What forms of citizenship and what kinds of power are open to women whose economic and cultural capital within the UK was so low, even if they had avoided deportation? Carole faced similar contradictions – many of the women she worked with were likely to continue to experience domestic and street violence, to remain in low-paid jobs and to be among the most vulnerable to the effects of economic recession.

A third process is that of *erasure or abandonment*. The spaces of power opened up by government programme were temporary and fragile, and they offered highly contingent sites of employment (see Chapter 5). Most of the projects within which the participants quoted in this chapter worked have been subject to cuts and many have closed. While the GAP project and others indicated that women's empowerment had become something which statutory bodies were sometimes willing to fund, they occupied a highly precarious funding environment:

We were selected to get money, but a month later the Minister for the Third Sector cancelled the programme because he realized that electorally it would not look good to be seen to fund campaigns for Romany women and other unpopular groups. (Hannah Berry)

The women's advice and information centre that Carole coordinated closed in 2009 (she went on to work for a Voluntary Service Council in a different town), while the projects and programmes on which Jan Etienne worked did not continue after the coalition government came to power in 2010. But what is striking is that when some spaces were closed down, many of the participants moved on to others – up until a moment when someone had had enough, got ill or burned out, or when personal lives came to dominate over activist engagements for a while because of childcare and

other responsibilities. Yet others became involved in the later twists and turns of policy as governments turned to 'active citizens' and communities to take on responsibilities formerly provided by the state, making decisions, providing services, managing assets and promoting the well-being of their 'communities'. Community groups and organizations were invited to bid for contracts to deliver services formerly provided by the central or local state, health and education services, thus offering citizens an apparent 'choice' and breaking the 'producer dominance' of the public sector.

The processes of what many view as the professionalization and incorporation of community activism are currently being paralleled by emerging models of community organizing, represented in the work of London Citizens and other citizen organizations and assemblies. Drawing on the United States, and inspired by the work of Saul Alinsky, the model seeks to build on existing institutions (predominantly faith groups) and to generate new models of leadership:

It's about finding islands of social capital, putting them together by finding shared interests and then putting a positive alternative on to the table. So it's about doing public politics – putting people into the public arena, putting them into public relationships with each other, then generating the public performance of politics. But it's always very practically grounded. (Jane Wills)

The political work undertaken by London Citizens includes what Jane terms 'rescaling the process of identity making', subordinating issues of difference to a superordinate category that people can identify with despite differences; and 'reproducing the collective memory' of the organization at each assembly to overcome the problem of highly mobile populations. London Citizens has had considerable success in challenging government and local government, notably in the Living Wage Campaign. But as Jane reflects, its very success in mobilizing populations makes it vulnerable to co-option (Wills 2011).

Participants also became involved in developments linked to the idea of the local community as a source of assets that could, it was assumed, displace the need for state resources and institutional support. 'Asset based' community development, an approach originating in the United States, proposed a focus on mobilizing community assets rather than on meeting needs 'from above', challenging the relevance and value of professional and state interventions. One participant described a local 'community-mobilizer' scheme as a route towards enabling community members – mostly women – to 'run things for themselves' rather than being reliant on professionals being 'parachuted in' to the area. Asked to describe the work of community mobilizers, she described them partly as 'professional neighbours' and partly as resource mobilizers promoting educational development. The aim was 'resilience building':

It gives confidence to people who would not have challenged authority. I mean this woman was saying that in the course of the last few years one of her children has been diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and she's had quite a hard time

with getting that recognized, and the confidence that she's gained through working with the mobilizer enabled her to tackle that effectively, so the child now has proper provision. One way of getting proper provision is going to an agency and getting somebody to help you do it; but she's managed to do that herself.
(Kate Simmons, G3)

This has some similarities to Jan Etienne's description of how her work within a Neighbourhood Renewal programme was helping to build the confidence of women and to Carole Harte's work mobilizing women as active citizens. But there is a crucial difference: while these aimed to give women the confidence to 'speak back to power', the community-mobilizer scheme was oriented towards giving people the confidence to do things for themselves. Such initiatives are, of course, multi-vocal. They draw on radical ideas of associational democracy, women's empowerment and greater local autonomy. But they are readily aligned with developments that look beyond welfare services towards responsible communities: the installation of the coalition government's conception of community mobilizers across the UK was a key plank of David Cameron's ambitions for a Big Society. As Kate Simmons commented, the ill-defined notions of volunteerism presented by Cameron did not fit well with the well-organized, funded versions of community mobilization seen in the localities with which she was involved.

These inflections of community became increasingly prominent following the financial crash of 2008 and the attempt by many governments to cut services and reduce the size of the state, devolving responsibility away from government. Paradoxically the forms of local connectedness and agency propounded by government policies of localism and active citizenship bore remarkable similarities to those generated by the political movements and alternative practices of the 1960s and early 1970s, and by their continued development in marginal spaces alongside – and in uncomfortable alignment with – governmental programmes of intervention, containment and concern. Governmental discourse can be seen as once again stealing the language of feminist-inflected activism, not least in the valorization of local connectedness, mutuality and participation, seeking to re-inflect each with a communitarian ethos and to strip them from the politics that had generated them. These attempts are, however, not necessarily successful, as I will show.

Perverse alignments?

Participants across different generations worked for and against a succession of governmental projects that sought to constitute community as a governable space. Community became a resource for new forms of service provision and was saturated with discourses of empowerment, participation and active

citizenship. These in turn were reworked around notions of responsibility (for oneself and others) and (market-based) choice. The slips and slides towards communitarian politics, the recasting of governance regimes to favour so called 'faith' communities and the privileging of the 'local' community as the site of depoliticized forms of participative governance all make it difficult to imagine community as an autonomous space of political agency and antagonism. Despite the imaginaries of community as something 'other' (Joseph 2002), the arguments of this chapter suggest that such spaces cannot be viewed as autonomous spaces beyond the reach of dominant projects and protected from the imperatives of both state and market. Rather, they show how deeply implicated community activism and governmental projects and programmes have been, not only in the UK and some other European nations but also in the development projects promulgated by the World Bank, NGOs and other agencies. One consequence has been what many view as a professionalization of activism; the translation of activist commitments into a series of technical skills that need to be acquired and performed in order to secure funding, contracts and stakeholder legitimacy. However, this does not necessarily erase activist commitments: as Larner and Craig report on their work on partnerships in New Zealand: 'This gaining of professional and technical expertise was complemented by hearty political engagement, powerfully motivated by anger over the impact of neoliberalism' (Larner and Craig 2005: 409).

This continued capacity for anger and engagement is often sidelined or ignored in the literature on the governmentalization of community, depicted as a singular process in which 'authentic' expressions of community are subordinated to new regimes of power:

What distinguishes the contemporary spaces of community [is that they] have been objectified by positive knowledges, subject to truth claims by expertise and hence can become the object of political technologies for governing through community. And these political technologies involve the constitution of new forms of authority of this new space of natural associations, and the instrumentalisation of new forces in the government of conduct. (N. Rose 1999: 188–9)

From this perspective the emphasis on community engagement in successive government programmes can be viewed as a way of tutoring citizens through forms of participative governing, rendering potentially unruly populations compliant through the production of new forms of self-governing subject. These strategies of rule have been widely criticised (N. Rose 1999; Newman and Clarke 2009: ch. 3; Cruikshank 1999). Less visible are questions of ambiguity and tension. What comes into view through the interviews is the multiplicity of different governmentalities, rather than a singular form of rule. While 'participation' and 'empowerment' are common discourses, they are articulated with other rationalities – development, containment, inclusion, choice, localization, resilience and, most recently, new conceptions of 'the social' (of the 'Big Society') as displacing or supplanting state welfare.

Such discourses may at times be linked to the turn to the market and the valorization of entrepreneurial selves; at others (or rather, in other voices) they may be articulated with a Freirian pedagogy through which political subjects may be produced through processes of ‘conscientization’; and yet others may draw on development discourses that look to Latin America and the global south for inspiration. But they may also become bureaucratized, part of the instrumental rationalities of a managerialized politics of the global north, especially the United Kingdom, or inflected with the social capital focus of some versions of US politics.

How can we understand the ways in which these different perspectives, projects and practices are combined? Masson argues that community policy should be viewed as ‘a co-construction, or more exactly as a compromise, the result of collaboration as well as of conflicts and tensions between community/women’s and governmental actors’ (Masson 2009). This gives it a ‘hybrid’ quality that cannot be encompassed in general narratives of cooption of social movements or the governmentalization of community. Such narratives, she suggests, are both politically immobilizing and theoretically problematic. Similar hybridities are evident in the United Kingdom. We can trace across the accounts the problematic alignments between ‘professionalized’ spaces and ‘authentic’ spaces of activism and campaigning; between ‘grassroots’ and ‘policy’; between participative politics and managerial logics.

Each of these examples of hybridity suggests the problems of aligning elements that are understood as diametrically opposed. That is, they are constituted as binaries (authentic space/governmentalized space, invited space/popular space, professional/political, ‘elsewheres’ such as Latin America and ‘here’). But more than two elements may be at stake. In her study of *Mahila Samakhya*, a gender and development programme in India, Sharma points to four empowerment frames, which ‘stem from different ideological perspectives and arose out of diverse spatial locations and historical moments’ (Sharma 2008: 22). In the Indian context these included a feminist strategy to engender social transformation; a Freirian liberatory struggle against oppression; a Gandhian order of moral self-rule; and a neoliberal project that fosters individualized conceptions of market empowerment in order to solve poverty and reduce big government. These alignments, she argues, serve to give neoliberalism, and the World Bank itself, a ‘social and ethical spin’ (Sharma 2008: 20). We can see, then, how empowerment strategies in India encompassed both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic frames, but all sought to mould behaviour and so all must, Sharma argues, be viewed as governmental projects. But they diverged in terms of the social subjects they wished to create and the kind of society they sought to establish, and so did not determine the subjects summoned to power: ‘Even as development attempts to create and regulate disciplined individuals and collective bodies, it also breeds subversive tactics and unruly subjects who protest their subjectification and subjection,

who test the state and unbound it from presumed limits, and who resignify development' (Sharma 2008: xxxv).

The value of Sharma's work is that, by drawing attention to four different ideological projects, she helps challenge the 'in or against' duality of activist politics confronting governmental power. In the context of the United Kingdom we might point to forms of community activism inspired by Freirian notions of empowerment; to critiques of professional power and the shift, within many professions, towards notions of participation and co-production; to the movements demanding greater devolution and local control; to feminist practices of cooperative and collaborative working; to democratic movements advocating more associational or deliberative forms of engagement; and to communitarian ideas of interdependence and reciprocity. Each has offered ideas and resources that have been drawn on by governmental programmes that might be termed neoliberal in their intentions. 'Empowerment' and 'co-production' slide inexorably towards governmental notions of responsible, active citizenship, and of welfare users taking greater responsibility for their own health, care and well-being, but also offer discursive framings for counter-hegemonic projects. Associational and deliberative forms of democracy offer new ways in which the state can draw citizens into participative and pedagogic relationships, but also spaces of politicization (Barnes *et al.* 2007). Devolution and localization might be viewed as helping constitute the public sphere as a series of bounded spatial entities separate from the wider polity and amenable to self governance,⁷ but also summon new actors to the politics of negotiating new state forms. Cooperative and collaborative working are integral to the effectiveness of governance regimes based on networks and partnership, but are also integral to social movement politics. And the notion of community itself can empower new constituencies: the emergence of 'faith' communities reminds us that community encompass projects of the right as well as the left, religious as well as secular; they are readily aligned with communitarian politics (Fraser 1999; Fukayama 1999; Robinson 2008) and traversed by patriarchal/paternalistic politics of gender.

It is this hybridity of community, as Masson argued, that produces ambiguity. It enables activist struggles to be resignified by government, but this does not mean that the original meaning is erased. The spaces of power opened up by participants in the governmental turn to community were those in which multiple rationalities and resources had to be assembled. This generated the need for forms of work involving translation (working across different systems of meaning) and alignment (bringing together different political projects). In the United Kingdom community projects had to be aligned with funding regimes; new technologies of participation had to be aligned with traditional political spaces of representative government; local innovations had to be aligned with central government targets and evaluation regimes; politicized

forms of agency had to be aligned with logics of governance that privilege managerialist conceptions of effectiveness; and so on.

But the multiplicity of different ideologies and projects condensed in governmentalities of community also opens up spaces of contestation and contradiction. The extracts in this and the preceding chapter show how participants have worked the borders between activist commitments (inspired by both feminism and community politics) and governmental projects and programmes. By being drawn in to such programmes they became responsible for delivering governmental agendas and developed professional skills that potentially distanced them from those they sought to represent or mobilize. But they did not thereby necessarily become depoliticized: the women referred to in this chapter all spoke of continued activism and sustained strong political identities. They continued to look to what they often term the 'grassroots' where, in Carole's terms, 'reality bites', for inspiration. They may sometimes have felt defeated as programmes become undeliverable (Tricia, Jane). They may have become depressed about the compromises that had to be made as community based agencies turn to service delivery (Sonia, Sukhwant). Working the spaces of power can be painful, can lead to disappointment and to the experience of having one's voice – the very words one speaks – taken away and made to mean something different. But participants were not just passive pawns in the governance game. Moving into 'invited' spaces of governance enabled them to lever resources and to extend the reach of their influence. And they brought considerable political, as well as professional, skills. At one point Carole invited me to become linked to a virtual organization she had set up that had no formal ties to any voluntary or statutory body, and that offered a private forum in which views could be shared, ideas formed and strategies developed. Its privacy and anonymity operated as a smokescreen behind which participants could regroup and strategize. Carole, and others, became highly skilled at working the borders between governmental power and political agency.

How far might the production of community as a locus of gendered action prefigure wider possible transformations of social and political life – including those imagined by notions of well-being, the good society and even of the Big Society? Jane Foot, who appeared earlier as a 'community entrepreneur' forging new ways of conducting politics in and through community in the 1980s, later became more of a policy entrepreneur, using her skills to engage in policy research and advice. In a phone call in October 2010 she bewailed the fact that:

So much of what I have done is now happening again – it makes me want to reprint all the reports of the CDP and other projects I was involved in. We are just back in the 1980s again, engaged in the same arguments. (Jane Foot)

The governmental context in which she operated was very different to that of the 1980s, but Jane could see many resonances between the Thatcher

governments and the 2010 coalition government determined to reduce the size and reach of the state and to install forms of self help and mutualism that would enable a Big Society to flourish in its place. At the time of the phone call Jane was active in promulgating an 'assets-based' approach to social and civic renewal, health and well-being, and was attempting to align this approach with an implicitly socialist conception of the role of the state in redressing inequalities. She reiterated the need to keep the idea of being simultaneously 'in and against the state'⁸ in view: resistance to the current period of cuts and the shrinking of public services and public institutions should not take the form of defence of the status quo.

Jane, Carole and all of the women quoted in this chapter offer a rich repertoire of resources for alternative forms of policy and practice. The extracts indicate not only that radicalism was alive and well, but also that governmental programmes could offer resources and spaces of agency that were able to support alternative political projects; and that government itself can be challenged by new models of community organizing. What is less certain is what might come next. Neither governmental projects nor activist commitments are unchanging; each draws on, borrows from and adapts to the other, and each is configured through wider social and political transformations. Many of the accounts in this chapter show how government projects and funding streams offered spaces of power that women could lever to enable those experiencing poverty and disadvantage, exclusion and marginalization to 'speak to power'. The current political shifts in the UK towards a smaller state buttressed by an image of self-provisioning communities is likely to not only reduce these possible spaces of power but also to intensify inequalities and social divisions. I take up this theme towards the end of the book but first I want to turn to a different set of potentially perverse alignments: those between activist projects and the transformations of policy and governance that took place in Britain in the 1990s and beyond.