Connected Communities

Immanent Authority and the Making of Community

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Executive Summary

Drawing upon the resources, energy and research of an inter-disciplinary group of early career researchers, the Authority Research Network, this project uses literature on 'authority', to theorise community production, empowerment and participation.

Community creation, vitality and empowerment can be conceptualised in terms of the *presence and performance of authority*. Authority is a specific type of power that functions through consent and structures of knowledge. Vibrant and empowered community requires a plurality of forms of authority, which means pluralism about what constitutes objective knowledge as well as conflicting views on what constitutes community life.

Modern societies have seen a change in the *salient forms* of authority*;* today the reference point of authority is often a source of growth, creativity and innovation rather than a point of origin, eternal-law or foundation. Spaces and practices of experimentation, as well as technologies that capture and perform common experience, are vital for the generation of participatory, empowered and vibrant community.

Future research on community empowerment should focus upon the conditions of production of authority and include studies of community performance, narration, history, imagination and community-led design. Participatory research should be directed towards fostering and recognising capacities of communities to produce knowledge through shared experimentation.

Researchers and Project Partners

Principle Investigator: Claire Blencowe; Researchers: Julian Brigstocke & Leila Dawney; Research Group: The Authority Research Network

Key words

Community-empowerment; participation; authority; knowledge; experience; aesthetics; performance; time; the common

Immanent Authority and the Making of Community

> "It is easy to deny the idea of community, and some may feel unhappy with it. But call it community values, family values or spiritual values, what they all have in common is something bigger than 'me'." (Speech delivered February 1993 by Tony Blair)

Amidst current debates around 'The Big Society', the nature of this 'something bigger' is again at stake. There is a widespread desire to reinvigorate 'community' as a source of creativity, conviviality and 'bottom-up' agency. More is being asked of communities, from establishing locally-run 'free schools' to directly electing police commissioners. As such a thorough interrogation of what community 'is' has become increasingly urgent. Yet the strong focus upon community in New Labour rhetoric, and the role community in particular 'top-down' techniques of governance, has led to a distrust about community-oriented discourse. That distrust focuses, in particular, upon the relationship between power and community. People are concerned not only about the power of the state *vis-à-vis* community, but also about hierarchies and violence *within* communities. Conversations regarding community empowerment frequently come to an impasse when the question is posed 'but *who* exactly will be empowered?' Whilst communitarian perspectives see State power as arbitrary in contrast to an 'organic' authority of community (and thus seek to move power from the State to communities) liberal critics see in 'community' a totalitarian or at least exclusionary programme of empowering collective-identities and norms to the cost of diversity, openness and individuality.

This review seeks to move these debates forward by focusing upon the *positive* role of power in the making of community as a creative, enabling, transformative site of civil life. We draw upon classic and post-structuralist political theory to develop a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between community and power. We argue for a conceptualisation of community creation, vitality and empowerment in terms of the *presence and performance of authority*. In this, we also make the case for the enormous significance of the arts, humanities and social sciences in fostering community participation, vitality and empowerment.

Authority can be understood as a *specific type* of power that functions through consent and structures of knowledge. Classic literatures point to the co-constitution of authority and community. Authority can only exist in the context of community and the exercise of authority enhances people's sense of the *reality* of community and connectedness. Where authority is lacking, community groups are fragile, insecure and incapacitated. Whilst 'authority' has often been associated with 'top down', 'traditionalist' or 'bureaucratic' productions of community, we draw attention to immanent, 'bottom-up', forms of authority. In this we aim to enhance understanding of the role of power in the *creation*, rather than the manipulation, of community. This is not to suggest that authority, or even 'bottom up authority', equals 'good power'. Like all forms of power authority can be immensely problematic, directed towards unjust ends, or experienced

as oppression. But it is to suggest that researchers, community practitioners and policy makers can move beyond the current debates and dichotomies surrounding community empowerment, by focusing attention on the specific practises and techniques of generating, performing and experiencing authority. Our project has highlighted *experimentation* and vulnerability as sources of authority, as well as techniques of capturing, sharing and performing the results of experimentation.

Activities and Outputs

The project was carried out by the principle investigator and two researchers, but drew upon the resources, energy and existing research of the Authority Research Network (ARN) – an inter-disciplinary group of early career researchers that have been working together on post-structuralist political theory since 2008. The project ran from March to September 2011 and included the researching of three literature reviews; a major symposium establishing the state of the art on theorising immanent authority and the making of community; an intensive theory retreat with the members of ARN; and the production of a special edition of *The Journal of Political Power* including contributions from ARN members and symposium participants (this material is now submitted and in review). A further journal article is in preparation for *Theory Culture & Society,* which elaborates upon the conclusions presented in this report. All of the resources from the project are available on our [website](#).

The [literature reviews](#) covered the following three themes:

- *Immanent Authority:* accounts of the character of authority and its relationship to community in the contemporary climate of rapid transformation and diversity, in classic and post-structuralist political theory

- *Authority and Experience:* arguments concerning the importance of 'experience based knowledge' in the traditions of qualitative and participatory research

- *Authority, Aesthetics and the Performance of Community:* accounts of the importance and character of performance in the generation of community authority, particularly in public spectacle, urban design, street performance, community arts, community organising and protest.

The [symposium](#) involved papers addressing the question of what authority is and how it is produced, followed by a workshop on using the idea of authority in research on communities. The day concluded with emergent responses to the project led by six eminent academics, representing the cutting-edge in thinking about authority in a range disciplines. Conclusions from the day fed into the intensive theory retreat, during which ARN members worked towards the conclusions presented in this report and the completion of individual [journal articles](#), which take the broad themes of the project into a range of specific empirical sites and theoretical questions, including: the making of authority figures; biological life and objectivity as conditions of authority; contemporary biotechnologies; aesthetics and authority in nineteenth-century Paris; the politics of lost authority; experiential authority in the politics of irregular migration; and the 'expert-by-experience' and service user involvement in mental health.

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Conclusions

Defining Authority

Authority is a specific type of power that is bound up with the production of community or collective organisation. The etymological roots of the term suggest that it is tied to the work of creation, beginning and growth. As a specific type of power authority can be contrasted with violence and force. It is exercised in the form of strong advice; it is 'council that cannot safely be ignored'. Authoritative relationships refer to inequalities in knowledge, with authority figures claiming an enhanced access to knowledge. Authority can only exist when there is recognition of something, some source of objectivity (true knowledge), that lies beyond the perspective and scope of individuals or interest groups. The difference between authority and the mere imposition of one person's will over another (force) is that authority refers to something beyond, outside of, particular interpretations, events and wills. We can think of authority as something that pulls community together, enabling us to feel the presence and reality of community, or common-ground. When we exercise authority we act as a part or representative of community; when we are subject to the authority of others we feel the weight of community guiding our actions, interpretations or judgments. Authority (or the external source of objectivity or true knowledge that authority makes manifest) is an intermediary between those subject to its power and a foundation upon which that power rests.

Authority as a form of power has been often been associated with the structures of *tradition;* with practices and values that celebrate the wisdom of experience, the sanctity of foundations and existent hierarchies. Drawing upon these associations some have argued that authority has been *lost* in contemporary digitalized societies wherein time is experienced as very rapid transformation and creativity and innovation are valued over wisdom, durability or eternal forms. It is noteworthy that such concerns have been expressed in Britain since at least the eighteenth century, and seem to be implicit in industrial urban cosmopolitan life.

Rather than accepting the 'loss of authority' thesis, it is more accurate and constructive to talk about a *change* in the *salient forms of authority.* In contemporary societies the reference point of authority is often a source of growth, creativity and innovation (rather than a point of origin, eternal law or foundation). For example, creative geniuses and artists are seen to be authoritative, as are entrepreneurs and markets, scientists and innovators, and biological forces. Arguably the nostalgic discourse concerning the loss of authority or community is itself a part of the authority and community production process in societies that idealize innovation, creativity and growth. The context of rapid transformation and technology places enormous significance upon aesthetic practices of *performing*, capturing and sharing creativity; as well as upon processes, techniques and spaces of *experimentation.* Community performance (or staging) and experimental knowledge production are vital sites of authority production for the generation of participatory, empowered and vibrant community.

A plethora of practices, technologies and spaces fit the above characterization and contribute to the production of the conditions of authority in contemporary societies. Our

review focused upon two key areas – public performance of community (public spectacle, urban design, street performance, community arts, community organising and protest) and participatory research practices orientated towards the valuing of research participants' knowledge *vis a vis* that of scientists or academic experts. Both lines of investigation have led to the conclusion that practices of experimentation, in which community makes itself genuinely vulnerable and open to transformation, are crucial to contemporary techniques of authority production.

Authority and Community Empowerment

Theories of authority can assist in developing a more nuanced approach to community empowerment. Authority is not necessarily 'good power', but it is a good place to start thinking about power as something that is complex, diverse and determined by *specific* material practices. In particular the literature on authority points us away from questions about 'who' has power, towards questions concerning what opportunities there are for authoritative relationships, statements and performance to emerge, focusing attention upon the *conditions of production* of authority.

The conditions of production of authority include what we might term 'technologies of objectification': practices that generate a shared sense of reality and just arbitration beyond particularities of perspective, interest or 'exceptional' events. This includes practices and techniques that refer to an originary, objective or outside point such as the law, God, life, nature, science, founding fathers, market forces and so on). Technologies of objectification include techniques of experimentation, observation or interpretation; remembering, ritualising or monumentalising; public performances of community and its creation, growth or design.

Normative questions about community empowerment should not be framed in terms of an opposition between power, on the one hand, and emancipation and equality, on the other; nor between power that is imposed upon a community from the outside (be that from the State, academia, God, or markets) and 'organic' power that comes from within. Indeed authority, which refers to something (some source of objectivity) beyond the present community, is frequently a condition of meaningful equality, emancipation and community empowerment. We should instead frame normative questions about community empowerment in terms of the relative *plurality* and *openness* of the conditions of authority. The thing that we should seek to avoid is not the existence of power in communities (either internal or external power), but rather the *monopolisation* of authority in the community. The monopolisation of authority in community takes place when only one way of thinking about what community, value and objectivity are is prioritised to the exclusion of all others, or is treated as beyond question. Such monopolisation of *the terms of engagement* in community life is profoundly alienating, undermining 'bottom-up', participatory and inclusive forms of authority and empowerment.

Fostering vibrant and empowered communities means creating and maintaining plurality and openness about what the community, or the common, actually is. For community to be vibrant and empowered it must be possible, not only to change a given community, but to challenge and contest what the community *was* in the first place. This includes

maintaining a pluralism about *objectivity* (which defines and represents the common ground) and about what it is that produces and enhances community. If community is to be a source of dispersed agency, authority and vibrancy, then we need to foster a genuine *diversity* of respected authoritative knowledges about the nature and value of community life.

Recommendations for Future Research

Participatory Research Methods

Our review has explored existing literatures on participatory research methods aimed at capturing and valuing the experiential knowledge of research participants *vis-à-vis* academic or scientific expertise. These include phenomenology, feminist methodologies, mutual aid and experts-by-experience. We have considered these approaches in light of theoretical thinking on authority, as well as our own research experience in service user involvement, irregular migration politics and impacts of biological science in society.

Earlier traditions of participatory research, such as feminist research methodologies and the expert by experience approach, have mounted a powerful challenge to the monopolisation of authority and expertise by scientists and ivory tower academics. This challenge has been immensely important. However the current distributions of knowledge and authority demand new approaches. The expert-by experience idea draws upon a false dichotomy between science and experience. One problem with this is that the knowledge of the expert-by experience can be undermined as attention is diverted from processes of objective-knowledge-production that take place in participatory and informal contexts.

Instead of focusing upon capturing different 'perspectives' and 'experiences' we suggest that participatory research methods should be focused upon recognising, celebrating and fostering processes of *experimentation* and testing in sites of mutual-aid and participatory research. This means approaching communities and research participants as *co-producers* of objective, valid, knowledge – not treating communities as repositories of 'authentic experience' to be 'harvested' by researchers. Participatory research should be understood in terms of an opening up of capacities of communities and community members, especially the capacities of participants to work on and through their own experiences and experiments in being together.

Substantive Areas

Experimentation, creativity, testing and contesting are necessary components in the production of authority and empowered community. They are, however, not *sufficient* conditions. Authority requires a secure anchor, a limit upon the pure play of contingency. For authority to be generated, creativity and experimentation have to take place within some kind of framework, through which the results of experimentation, testing and creativity are captured, recorded, shared. We have characterised such frameworks as 'technologies of objectification', practices and techniques which make individual or fleeting experiences into objects that can be shared across time and space, and which foster a shared sense of reality and objectivity.

Further research on community empowerment and vibrancy that is informed by a theoretical understanding of authority, will use participatory research methods to explore technologies of objectification that capture and perform shared processes of experimentation, creativity and making vulnerable. This might include: the performative practices of public art, exhibitions, theatre, protest, parades, festivals, testimony, public meetings, debates and assemblies; processes through which narratives of community are constructed, such as monuments and architecture, practices and techniques of testimony or witness, oral, historical, literary and new-media based narratives, paper and digital pamphlets and documents of community. Finally, we propose the development of research exploring and promoting *community led-design,* including projects directed at radically improving access to tools of urban planning, street design, architecture, public art, history and narration.

References and external links

Authority Research Network (ARN) Website: www.authorityresearch.net

Immanent Authority and the Making of Community project information and resources:
http://www.authorityresearch.net/immanent-authority-project.html

The literature reviews:

Brigstocke, J. Aesthetics, Authority and the Performance of Community, *Authority Research Network,* 2011

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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

> "*to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities.*"

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx