

THE STATE OF US BLOG 1

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The Alternative UK first alighted upon Plymouth as a result of [Flatpacker](#) (then Mayor) Pam Barrett of Buckfastleigh urging us to go and visit. We were looking for a place to start exploring how to bring people together post-Brexit and had been drawn to the South West of the UK by Transition Towns - particularly Totnes and environs - as a model of holistic organising. But Pam encouraged us to go to a more diverse space, with more working class input and less defined in its identity.

Plymouth was known as a place of opportunity after it became the UK's first "social enterprise city" almost ten years ago, from that a number of the bigger non-governmental funders were attracted to the city – Power to Change, Esmee and Rank – in a period when a whole heap of other policy shifts and initiatives were being implemented.

At the same time, the communities of Plymouth proved stubbornly difficult to cohere, with parts still showing up in the bottom 10% of the national deprivation index.

Pam introduced us to [The Real Ideas Organisation](#) because she knew we saw the role of creativity as central to place-based flourishing. Real Ideas were well known for the work they had been doing reclaiming old buildings and turning them into community hubs. Through Real Ideas' community network of activist entrepreneurs, we met local actors of all kinds – POP Plymouth, Pembroke Street Estate, Nudge, Zebra, Stonehouse Voice, refugee groups... Just about all those we might describe as the 'usual suspects' - like ourselves - already deep in community organising.

On the edges of those peer groups were the people who shared similar values – and were often the recipients of the services - but had not yet taken part in the conversations needed about community development. Through a bit of 'deep hanging out' we found the naval community, the hospital workers, the smaller cultural activist groups. Beyond that were people who were not thinking about values specifically, who might be oblivious to our conversation and not interested to join. All of these sections of the local population were in our sights as participants in a future gathering.

Eventually A/UK were in a position to begin our collaboratory work – a sequence of events under the headlines of the Friendly, the Inquiry and Action ([see here for reports](#)). The last event led to the conceptualising of what we now refer to as [Citizen Action / Community Agency Networks \(CANs\)](#). A CAN is at once a prototype that we imagine building and, at the same time, a generic term to describe similar patterns emerging elsewhere. They're like fractals of a new socio-economic-political system waiting to be born, but struggling to find form.

It was a surprise (and a confirmation of our intuition) to discover later that many others had alighted on the same term – from the [Coalville CAN](#) to the [Cape Town CAN Network](#). These were assembled from the same elements that we found in Plymouth.

With COVID, our trips to Plymouth came to a halt. Yet we did hold an on-line collaboratory in partnership with the [Local Trust](#) in March and April of 2020. This revealed an important development for our understanding of what was needed for the future. Namely, the phenomenon of [mutual-aid networks](#) which sprung up autonomously, like mini-CANs, all over the country.

These mostly neighbourhood networks, building themselves via WhatsApp and Facebook, stepped up to do the work the local council was not designed to do. They relied on the proximity and friendly relations of people sharing the same streets to bring forth the intelligence that could keep them all safe.

Less than six months into the pandemic, the neighbourhood carers in our online sessions were already talking about not 'giving their power back' to the council – although it was not clear yet what they would require to keep going. More recently they have lost some of their energy, lacking any entry point into the wider community networks – the soil in which to grow.

Given the fluidity of the Covid moment - the shifting power dynamics within cities in relationship to the wider regions and towns (see here for [Editorials on The Shift](#)) - we were excited to hear that Real Ideas was hosting a four-part conference, to take stock of developments.

Co-produced with the New Economics Foundation (NEF), Plymouth Social Enterprise Network (PSEN), Power to Change, Coops UK, Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), and Stonehouse Voice (SHV), the event was entitled [The State Of Us: Powerful Communities and Economic Democracy](#).

The conference took as a framework the work of [municipalist movements across the world](#) and asked whether Plymouth was part of that growing tradition? In her opening comments co-chair Frances Northrop, Associate Fellow at NEF, made some important distinctions:

“For me, the idea of the municipal has been a little bit hijacked by its institutional aspects – the state actors. But the definition of municipal is more closely linked to place itself. We're told that the economy is 'done by other people to us' – that it's about big corporations, the banks, the anchor organisations where we live. Yet we know that our own experience of the economy is in our everyday lives: we are consistently a part of the economy.

“Over the past year it's been proven that the real economy is the people who are inside the informal economy, either paid or unpaid, people who are undervalued, like care workers, people working in retail, hospitality, couriers, delivery drivers. Also, people like us who are broadly dismissed as the community sector or civil society - but are the people who pick up the pieces when the (formal) economy doesn't work.

“Because it doesn't work for people. I'm really interested in how you redefine the new municipalism to reflect that. How do we develop a more equitable (structure) with more horizontal organising, that (builds) solidarity internationally. That would enable us to build the new institutions that we need, as well as reforming the existing ones.”

As Ed Whitelaw - Head of Enterprise and Regeneration at Real Ideas who co-chaired the event with Frances - remarked: "this ambivalence suggests something more like dual power, where we would be working both with, beyond and against that state".

Over the four sessions, The State of Us looked at Plymouth in its global context through four lenses. Firstly, The State of Work: which brought together social enterprise, cooperative and union activists to explore how people are seeking to build power within, through and beyond the workplace.

Secondly, The State of Places and Spaces: focusing on the unequal distribution of ownership and access to land and property as one of the critical areas of structural inequality and exploitation in the UK. With a particular focus on local, migrant and worker-owned businesses, this explored how citizen-led community and social enterprise counter this and the role local institutions can play as partners.

Thirdly, The State of Resilience (Making and Production) asked how we can ensure sustainability is at the heart of the struggle for autonomy. We also asked how community enterprises and initiatives are making this happen despite their challenge to economic growth.

Finally, The State of Us Plenary explored the experience of more developed new-municipal movements. How could they identify new areas of activity, new groups, collaborations and networks? As well as initiate practical next-step actions to widen community power and economic democracy?

The conference was a cornucopia of initiatives, approaches, tools and practices – we recommend chasing down the video recordings which will be posted on the Real Ideas website. [ref] There is always a danger with such rich pickings that it becomes difficult to imagine how they might cohere, to become a stronger force collectively.

But with a week in between each event, it became easier to see distinct patterns in the responses to the current moment and begin to see what they had in common and where they brought diversity. Not just in the established categories – culture, gender, economic capacity – but in different forms and styles of agency.

Like different parts of a body – legs and arms, organs, brain and heart – each 'form of agency' has a distinct role that has to be allowed to work on its own terms. Yet in a conference like this, our job would be to see in what ways they were interdependent and what kind of infrastructure, thinking or action is needed to help the whole body flourish.

At the same time, it was necessary to see how this place based group of actors were interacting with the bigger – or dominant – socio-economic system, at national and international level. Without some idea of where power lies and how it can be helpfully transferred to and owned by the people of Plymouth, it would be hard to progress. Even if there is a shared goal, or desire for equality, not everyone has the same access to power.

Some are being paid, others aren't; some are actively curating, others are being curated. Unless there is self-awareness and a willingness to acknowledge privilege, the dynamics can cause resentment. To conjure up a flat landscape in a territory that is full of mountains and valleys, prevents trust from arising. It's better for the best equipped mountaineers to help those less able to get to the summit – even if it means sharing or giving away their tools occasionally.

By the end of the conference we could see at least four distinct voices with different ideas of power. Often a speaker used more than one voice, so these are not rigid categories. Nor are they judgments – each of the voices seem vital to the health of the place:

1. The social justice actors – those who think of their work as a challenge to the establishment with a mission to reform it
 - Emily Scurrah from [NEF](#) asks the important question, “how do we bring cooperatives and unions together? There should be no differentiation between ‘a worker’ and a person living in a community. It’s our Utopian vision for worker centres in communities, especially for atomised workers: a place to come together, get a political education, get advice, welcome immigrant workers, navigating social security etc. As David Graeber said, “we have to call out bullshit jobs”.
 - [Nirushan Sudarsan](#), of Bute Town, Cardiff, [already known](#) for the deep roots of its vibrant black community, describes how “the city does not listen” to the well thought out plans for better spaces for community development. “Protestors should have the same weight as developers – they know better what is needed for thriving. While they try to bridge with the council, their voices are always heard last – when it is too late to be effective.”
2. The Prototypers - those who work sometimes in partnership with the state, sometimes as a bridge from the community, translating organic initiatives into language demanded by politicians and funders but always with a view to reinventing the whole system
 - Real Ideas”s Lindsey Hall wants “to make People’s ideas Real...it’s about developing responsible freedom. Holding to an inclusive growth charter with bold commitments we are asking everyone to make”.
 - Hannah Harris, [Plymouth Culture/Fab City Plymouth](#) poses the important question of “where does culture meets planning? Where does allyship sit – inside, alongside or outside the state? Fab City offers [a full stack model](#), layering different forms of agency, that allows localities to build on core principles, in their response to the climate crisis. But culture is the driver”.
3. Entrepreneurs – these are creatives seeking fulfilment through problem solving. They might include small businesses, innovators or social enterprises, but also artists
 - Dorothy Francis, from [CASE \(Co-operative and Social Enterprise Agency\)](#), broke from her secure job working in the Post Office to go to Uni – but never got there. While training to be a social worker, a light went on in her head. She set up a bookshop as a coop and now has meaning and purpose – but more than that has plugged into a new

world of power. “As a black woman I was denied democracy, ownership, the means to control my own life – this kind of work has helped me to do that”. She now runs CASE as an agency to help others do the same.

- Hannah Sloggett of the [Nudge Community](#) is exploring a key aspect of economic democracy and power: the community ownership of land and assets. Hannah tells how she and partner Wendy Hart set out to shift perceptions of their Stonehouse (Plymouth) neighbourhood, where 25% of their buildings stood empty and had gained a reputation for danger. Nudge’s work unpicks the complex issues that hold the neighbourhood back - including ‘how to be brave’; how to listen properly and draw people in; how to create value for the community that isn’t simply high specification refurbishment. Now they are experimenting with different forms of ownership. Sometimes they look like property developers – but they remain driven by the desire to maximise community benefit. “We’re interested in collective strength. It’s easy to look outside your community but better to look inside. How many community businesses now own land? If we pull together nationally we can be guarantors for each other, share how to sweat our assets.”
- Tomas Diez from [FabLab Barcelona/FabCity Network](#) (originally from Venezuela) speaks down the line from Bali, Indonesia, as part of the Meaningful Design Group. Tomas introduced ‘pace layering’ - an approach which acknowledges that fashion, commerce, infrastructure, governance, culture and nature all change at different speeds. Yet the pandemic changed everything at once. “How do we intervene in the world?” Tomas asked. “It’s all about access to knowledge and tools, which is another key aspect of power - the democratisation of skills. Fab Labs give you access to MIT-level teaching but builds capacity on the ground – that’s cosmopolitanism. First there were 10 FabLabs, now there’s 2000 in Brazil: of the 12 in Sao Paulo, most are in the favelas. But we are tiny compared to Amazon. We must be aware of the different conditions in which the power of resilience emerges. When Cuba was cut off from the world it learnt how to turn washing machines into cooling systems. We are all producers as well as consumers of information.” Tomas launched Fab Cities in 2014, the day Barcelona committed to producing everything it consumes. Now there are 34 Fab Cities, with Plymouth being the 34th, launching its [forum](#) on the 29th July

4. Community developers – those deeply embedded in community offering relational responses to emerging needs, often struggling to progress

- Victoria Alvarez works at the forefront of community ownership. Along with her Latino friends, Victoria has transformed local buildings to create a vibrant local market in North London known as the [Latin Village](#). She describes how the Latin community is only seen as cleaners. “As mostly single Mums, we wanted to feel at home here and create an identity for our children to grow into. But it’s the job of the council to make community miserable – they represent developers, not us. We reach out to all the generations and have to continually reinvent ourselves, even as we defend our work in court. We are an ecosystem

that is here to stay”. Her group is now proposing a community hub on Tottenham High St to support small businesses and heal mental break down.

- Jaqueline Slade is running a park-based children’s theatre company called [Stiltskin](#) in Plymouth. With her husband, they’ve spent the past 21 years “interrupting people’s lives”. At first they acted to make the community self-aware: “people didn’t know Plymouth had seven beaches of its own”. Later they created massive street puppets for festivals and, more recently, converted a disused WWII mustard gas decontamination unit in Devonport Park into the celebrated Soap Box children’s theatre – a effective partnership with the local council, bringing a democratic conversation to the future of parks and public green spaces. During Covid the building stayed closed but the park around it grew as a social space for engagement at every level.
- Mona Bani introduces [May Project Gardens](#). This started nine years ago as a permaculture community garden at the back of council housing in Morden, London – which they are now trying to buy as a common asset. They’re successful in connecting people to the land and to each other. Then they build on that social capital – bringing community ownership and organising together. They learn from many unaccompanied minors arriving in the UK from around the world who know more about rural development than we do. They’ve won awards for [hip hop gardens](#) that capture diverse cultures without criticism. “This is recreating from the margins, building new extensions to life”. They’ve recently launched [Un-Televised media](#) to bridge the gap between the grassroots and the media and help them spread their methodology.
- Jane Hembrow and Susan Moores describe [Plymouth Scrap Store CIC](#), which “saves loveliness from landfill”. They emphasise the playfulness of a journey that starts with “what can I do that makes a difference?” and ends with “creating power”. Starting with small grants they are now a community interest company, processing 6000 bags of ‘rubbish’ every year. A great example of the important role of community power in tackling climate change and waste.

Each of these four voices is equally valuable and interchangeable. Together, they make up an eco-system of change. Too often they find themselves competing for the narrative, asking each other to see it from their perspective. Think Extinction Rebellion meeting Transition Towns – sharing goals but very different in their practices, even their relationship to time. But transformation becomes possible when these different voices acknowledge and respect the diversity of input - something that needs to be held in all its multi-speed complexity, each able to self-organise and contribute. In many ways that is already happening in Plymouth, which is why it is so ripe for becoming constituted in some form.

In the final part of the series, the focus was more on forms of economic autonomy and community organising. In the Alternative UK, we would call these structures CANs; already responding at multiple levels, but more bottom up than FabLabs and therefore attracting and engaging more disadvantaged groups. Each form contained all four voices we’ve mentioned, but they showed subtly different orientations. Here they are, possibly in order of the distance they keep from the state, as they develop:

- Elena Tarifa, from Barcelona [En Comu](#), talks about the “power of organised citizens” (not a term used by any of our community organisers above). Rooted in a cooperative culture, Elena described the journey from the original movement of ‘indignados’ to 15M and on to En Comu - a journey which brought forth Ada Colau as Mayor of Barcelona. The movement has a connection to (but is not defined by) the political party [Podemos](#) which has been part of the Spanish government for over two years. En Comu identifies its actions as municipalism; they see cities as the place where democracy can be reclaimed. Municipalists don’t see state level action as capable of addressing our real problems today, but are always involved in designing electoral programmes, participatory tools and giving control back to people. The culture is feminine – relational, inclusive, communal – and believes that change comes from radical sharing of responsibility and outcomes. Barcelona is part of the Fearless Cities Network, practising radical municipalism.
- Thobile Chittenden from the [Makers Valley Partnership](#) in Johannesburg, is part of the [CANs network we've blogged about here](#). “We’re not waiting for government anymore”, Makers Valley announced - which kicked us off into a description of a fourth sector economy, driven by social and creative entrepreneurs . They distance themselves from old-style businesses that are still growth-oriented – “it’s not about incubators and accelerators, it’s about regenerators”. They pursue urban farming, establish decentralised community kitchens, and deploy new currencies for swapping skills and time-shared spaces. Under these systems, kitchens can be used for baking at the beginning of the day, as soup kitchens in the middle, then smart dining in the evening. Behind these initiatives is a growing infrastructure (running on potato peel fuel) which offers community supermarkets where you can choose ingredients in return for services, rather than standing in line for a meal. “Ironically, people think we are a political party because we have a newsletter and are developing a membership model. And it’s true we want to occupy that space where people think of themselves as active citizens. But no parties – we are just playing in that space.”
- Kali Akuno from [Cooperation Jackson](#) had a strong focus on economic autonomy. “Our programme and vision was a response to a structural crisis. Built on centuries of tradition of cooperative economics and in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, our programme builds community capacity to serve its own material and social needs, without letting the government off the hook. We cannot be dependent on the government because they can choose to overlook their responsibilities – not just allowing suffering, but often enabling it.

“Covid brought a shifting landscape that may be permanent – who knows when the next pandemic is coming? On top of that, the environmental catastrophe brought an historic freeze to these parts – a polar vortex that lasted three weeks. Our municipality’s main problem is

that a conservative state government can block funding. Right wing movements can deny us federal benefits. We have to build outside that model, mobilise on a new level to create the infrastructure in the most innovative ways. And in doing so we often come up against regulations we have to be creative with.

“Our job for the next four years – the next decade – is to cultivate a low-level ability to respond. Response-ability. While the state is meeting competition with China, we are meeting the needs in our community and that has to be autonomous. Our aim is to develop community-owned land, our own water storage system, our own utilities. We want to build a system of direct governance which the state won't provide.

“Since Covid we've had far more People's Assemblies and get a better feel for our own agency. But how do we translate that energy into common institutions? Will there be a clash further down the line with the far-right? Can we move the white working class onto our radar? Do we have enough time to prepare? Black people are used to doing things on their own and have low expectations of the state: we are individually and collectively self-reliant. People helping each other is the counter to the 'you're on your own' narrative. Politically, this is becoming a federation of autonomous organisations who hold the state to task”.

Plymouth may not yet be in such a dire situation as either Jackson or Johannesburg, who are at the point where they have to innovate or die. Yet the emotions, dynamics and mix of inputs are familiar – that of community power and the organising of economic autonomy.

Dr Matthew Thompson from Liverpool University introduced the history of municipalism, as defined by Murray and Debbie Bookchin. It first unfolded in the coops and communes of 1870s Paris – where a new kind of citizenship was born. It gave rise to a communalism that replaces the current notion of the nation state and points at the early formation of a dual power system, where citizens are more aware of their autonomy and power in relation to the state.

As it stands, there are three kinds of municipalism emerging globally. The managed platforms like Barcelona, occupying the state at scale. The autonomist movements that, more like the African CANs, are forging ahead regardless. And the independent movements like Coop Jackson that could be seen as beyond and sometimes against the state, holding it accountable for its failures.

Where did this leave Plymouth? As a reasonably well developed mixture of all three. In his role as chair Ed Whitelaw asked many of the pertinent questions. “Municipalism is really the politics of place and proximity – everyday democracy. People talk about the idea of self-love and social love, yes. We all want a meaningful job that creates some income and meets our needs, but also we need to have, as human beings, a wider sense of purpose. To be creating value, to be

valued in our communities, and to be recognised for that. How can we grow that and give it greater form?”

The big question for the prototypers – the new system builders with organising capability – has to be: Can it be designed from the top down? Or can it only be emergent from below? Our own sense at The Alternative UK is that people’s creative power needs a container – an incubator, a womb. The mutual-aid groups were lacking these broader set of networks. As Hannah Slogett describes, each ‘place ’ needs to be self-consciously developing, getting traction and interacting with others. Working autonomously towards the same goal, the flourishing of that place. That would include the ability to generate its own cosmological economy arising from the work of the cooperatives, social enterprise, community businesses and commoning practices. It might also include a new currency and other bits of infrastructure that are typical of a Fourth sector economy.

The strength of a CAN – whoever designs it – is that it can distinguish itself from the state and move into generative partnership on its own terms. But to do that, it needs some form of constitution – a set of agreements with all those participating – that allows it to run well, with shared interests. Once that is in place, it can offer membership and participatory actions, even decision making. But it can also offer easier ways of taking part for those who have no interest in co-creating. This can be festivals and choirs, learning clubs, food growing – or even just picking up free stuff from the organised excess of the city.

Out of all this, the most important offer is probably, at this time, the offer of belonging. Not just for those who are lonely or lacking connections in the place they live. But crucially for everyone who wants to see some tangible change happen in their lives. As CANs of all kinds move into national and global networks, they will offer something genuinely different to the chaos of the mainstream.

Is this municipalism 4.0 or is it something new again? Either way, municipalists the world over are a great source of socio-economic-political innovation, with many tools, methods and stories to share. At the same time, Plymouth is in a subtle and generative relationship with others forms of system building on its doorstep – the kind of work that Totnes and the Devon Bioregional Learning Centre are articulating. Would they call their work municipalism? Maybe not, although all could fall within the broader idea of CANs, operating in expanding networks.

With so much to draw on, Plymouth is clearly pioneering its own new model - and not one that is waiting for the state to define it. In that sense, The State of Us proposes something more radical than communities re-organising themselves within the national structure. It points to a change in that structure, one which can enable a parallel polis, to which the state is a partner.

Is it time now to name that “Plymouth Model, to constitute it and operationalise it, so that more diverse groups can sign up to its goals and vision? We believe this can become a very real and generative vehicle for people power.

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