

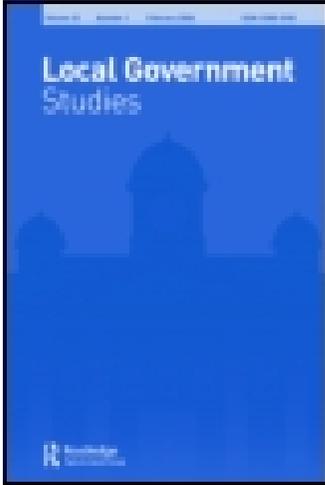
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Negotiating Cohesion, Inequality and Change: Uncomfortable Positions in Local Government, by Hannah Jones

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Book Review

Negotiating Cohesion, Inequality and Change: Uncomfortable Positions in Local Government

Hannah Jones

Bristol, Policy Press, 2013, ISBN 9781447310037

Hannah Jones is one of a very few people who has managed to bridge the divide between academia and practice in this subject area. This alone almost guarantees a new and interesting perspective. Jones is now an assistant professor of sociology at Warwick University but bases a good deal of her book on her experience as a policy adviser in the London Borough of Hackney. Jones is aware of the uniqueness of Hackney in local government and other terms and one chapter is therefore devoted to ‘narratives of other places’ – Peterborough, the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and, inevitably, Oldham. This approach leads her to her most notable conclusion: local policy practitioners are more than capable of employing ‘sociological imagination’ rather than slavishly following centrally directed policy imperatives.

For anyone who has worked in local government for any length of time, this conclusion may not be any sort of revelation, but for those academics who have contributed to debate on this area it will represent a considerable challenge. Most of the academic discourse around community cohesion and inequality has almost completely ignored the way in which policies are interpreted at a local level. Indeed, as Paul Thomas (2011) has noted ‘much discussion of community cohesion has been completely free of empirical evidence, resting instead on analysis of national governmental reports and accompanying national political discourse that sheds little light on events on the ground’ (Thomas 2011, 4). Jones comes to pretty much the same conclusion suggesting that community cohesion was seen by academics as a political construct in which their views ‘depended on archival discourse analysis of policy documents which stops short of ...how policy is understood, practised and lived’ (32).

This is a particularly important point as the academic critique of community cohesion from its inception in 2001 (Cantle 2001) was trenchant and developed into an ideological blindness that failed to consider how cohesion practice was transforming the way in which ‘difference’ had been conceived and instrumentalised. Indeed, I have argued (Cantle 2012) that the academic analysis of the policy documentation was itself deficient and failed to recognise the way in which community cohesion policy had been constructed to build upon and support the equalities agenda. Jones recognises the ‘alignment’ between community cohesion and race equality in policy documentation (37/38). However, Jones is much more concerned with the way in which centrally constructed policies and guidance are interpreted in many different – and sometimes contradictory – ways on the ground, through the use of sociological imagination.

Jones relies on the C. W Mills definition of sociological imagination – ‘the capacity to shift from one perspective to another...to range from the most impersonal and remote transformation to the most intimate features of the human self – and to see the relations

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between the two' (Mills, 1999 (1959), 7: quoted by Jones, 164). The central focus of the book is therefore on 'examining the emotional work that takes place at the level of the policy professional when negotiating cohesion, inequality and change' which are 'to a great extent also concerned with their negotiation of their own sense of self' (17). Jones directly challenges academic thinkers who believe that they 'have unique access to tools of social analysis' and argues for a 'form of public sociology' (15) which is made outside universities. She suggests that academics alone should not define social relationships and that a shared 'folk knowledge' (21) is a legitimate way of seeing community cohesion evolving over time and place. This perspective also challenges long held principles of local government: that policy should be evidence-based and free of emotion and that policies are decided by the elected members rather than professionals and practitioners.

The Jones definition of a 'policy practitioner' is somewhat unconventional in that she uses it to describe 'local government officers and politicians, civil servants, members of think tanks, employees of other public sector bodies and local community organisations' (5), rather than accepting the more traditional definition. This would distinguish policy makers, as elected councillors, advised by senior and strategic officers, from practitioners, as those charged with implementing the pre-determined policies. Of course, as in any field, there is always an iterative process between the policy makers and those responsible for implementation. But Jones marshals the views of her interviewees to suggest a much more robust process in which their attitudes to work is strongly influenced by their own local and personal experience. It is not clear from the material provided, though, whether the interviewees are simply expressing the way they see things or whether local policies have actually been determined or changed as a result of their personal views.

The difficulties faced by all local actors in negotiating cohesion policies and practice is however, amply demonstrated, in particular by the discussion of the *Prevent* policy in Hackney. Many local authorities had difficulty in accepting the Government's view of tackling extremism in Muslim communities and it was perhaps only because of this resistance (and of that of the Muslim communities themselves) that the Government slowly began to change its approach. Whether these and other changes are the result of the application of 'sociological imagination' or because of a much more practical need for local politicians and officers to find a way of coping with the many competing and contradictory demands upon them, is difficult to judge. Certainly, a strong impression is formed that the local actors were very familiar with their own and very different local contexts and were determined to use cohesion policy as a way of developing 'what works' best for their community – and were also keen to ensure that it was an instrument of fairness and social justice.

The book deserves to be read, in particular by those academics who developed an 'evidence free' critique of cohesion and by central policy makers, both of whom paid little or no attention to local action. It may help them to understand what most local government officials know already, that they have to cope with very undifferentiated and, occasionally ill-conceived, 'top-down' policies, whilst trying to build 'bottom-up' community support. But Jones succeeds in demonstrating that local government is not a compliant and passive recipient of such policies and constantly works with local communities to try to reinterpret them and make them work. The present coalition Government has partially resolved this conflict by choosing to have no cohesion policy at all, (though it has continued under the Welsh Government), but given the importance of these issues and the vibrancy of local debate, it is hard to believe that this policy vacuum will survive for much longer. Let us hope that when a future government does re-engage, it reads this book first.

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