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INTRODUCTION

Local autonomy is a perennial issue in the study of sub-central government. Indeed, it is almost impossible to discuss the relationship between central and local government or the political context of local government more generally, without substantial reference to notions of local autonomy (cf. Sharpe, 1970; Page, 1982; Goldsmith, 1986; King and Stoker, 1996, *inter alia*). Concepts of local autonomy have been used normatively, to defend local government (Layfield, 1976; Jones and Stewart, 1983) and empirically, as either a measure of constitutional change (Chandler, 1988; Rose 1990) or as a device for comparing local democracy across nations (Page and Goldsmith, 1987; Wolman and Goldsmith, 1990; Page, 1991). From de Tocqueville onwards, there has been a strong normative argument within political theory that local self-government is a fundamental component of broader democratic structures and practices (de Tocqueville, 1968; Mill, 1991; Weir and Beetham, 1999 *inter alia*). It is difficult to avoid the conclusion, therefore, that local autonomy is a fundamental concept in political science, linked to both the theory and practice of democracy more generally.

Despite the attention that local autonomy has received, however, few (if any) studies have sought to directly analyse the relationship between local autonomy and democracy. Indeed, for many there is an implicit assumption that the two terms ‘local autonomy’ and ‘local democracy’ are synonymous. A conflation of the two terms is often based upon the premise that democracy, in its most simple form, means ‘rule by the people’ (Held, 1996, p1) and that local self-government is a natural expression of this rule. It follows from this premise that in order to have ‘local democracy’ there must also be ‘local autonomy’. Consequently, the two terms become interchangeable. However, such a conflation assumes a bilateral relationship in which more of one equates to more of the other. More significantly, this conflation leads to the assumption that a loss of autonomy will automatically lead to a loss of democracy – an argument that is regularly applied in studies of central-local relations (Page, 1982). This paper argues that such a conflation not only over-simplifies the relationship between local autonomy and democracy but that it also disguises deep ambiguities in the relationship between local democracy and broader democratic practice.

The normative analysis undertaken here has significant policy implications, for despite the attention given to issues of local autonomy, current policy debates around local government and, more importantly, current policy implementation, are founded upon an ambiguous understanding of local autonomy and its relationship to democracy. This ambiguity is particularly evident in the United Kingdom, where the new Labour Government, elected in 1997, has explicitly sought to enhance local democracy and has embarked upon an ambitious programme of devolution and decentralisation. Included within this programme of reform are several schemes that aim, both collectively and selectively, to grant local authorities new powers and new freedoms: in effect, more local autonomy as part of a broader programme of democratic renewal (see Pratchett, 1999). Yet, at the same time, local authorities are subjected to a raft of central government legislation and directives, an ever-expanding inspection regime and changes to their financial resources, all of which appear to undermine, rather than enhance, local autonomy. Current attempts to modernise local government in Britain, therefore, reflect the persistent confusion and ambiguity which plagues studies of local autonomy and local democracy. Consequently, this paper provides both an analysis of the normative relationship between local autonomy and democracy and a critique of current policies that seek, albeit sometimes unintentionally, to alter this relationship.
Both local autonomy and local democracy suffer from definitional ambiguity in the way in which they are used. If the relationship between them is to be properly understood it is necessary, first, to distinguish between them. This distinction is the focus of the first two sections of the paper. The first section following this introduction briefly examines contemporary discussions of local democracy and the assumptions that are made about its role in a broader democratic polity. The second section analyses different theoretical insights into the concept of local autonomy and develops a definition of local autonomy that is distinct from local democracy. Having developed a clear distinction between them, the third section considers the relationship between local autonomy and democracy and the limitations to this relationship. In particular, it argues that the bilateral relationship that is normally assumed to exist between local democracy and local autonomy is overstated in most analyses and that there can be considerable variations in one without significantly affecting the other. Finally, a concluding section analyses the tensions that exist between local autonomy and a broader democratic polity.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY

Normative political theory holds a special place for local democracy. Orthodox justifications for local government (Stoker 1996a) include pluralist arguments that institutions of local democracy provide for a diffusion of power within society (Hill, 1974; Phillips, 1996), arguments that local democracy supports diversity and difference in the face of an otherwise constrictively uniform set of central policies (Jones and Stewart, 1983) and arguments of local responsiveness (Sharpe, 1970). Such justifications are embodied in the European Charter of Local Self-Government, where it maintains that decision-making for public policies should, wherever possible, be exercised ‘by those authorities which are closest to the citizen’ (Council of Europe, 1985, article 4.3). In short, there are strong normative justifications for local democracy and local government.

More recently, however, there has been a revival of interest in the role of local democracy in facilitating and encouraging political participation as part of a broader democratic polity (Stoker, 1996b). This argument has its roots in nineteenth century political thought and maintains that local institutions of democracy are the most accessible locations for political skills to be acquired and practised. As J. S. Mill argued in 1861:

But in the case of local bodies, besides the function of electing, many citizens in turn have the chance of being elected, and many, either by selection or by rotation, fill one or other of the numerous local executive offices… It may be added, that these local functions, not being in general sought by the higher ranks, carry down the important political education which they are the means of conferring, to a much lower grade in society. (Mill, 1991, p413)

For Mill, therefore, local institutions of democracy provide an opportunity for political skills to be developed among a much broader range of people than centrally organised institutions. It is for this reason that Stoker argues:

Above all, local democracy can rest its claim on being the most accessible avenue for political participation. It is in local politics that people feel most competent and are most immediately engaged. (Stoker, 1996b, p188).

This argument of political accessibility and engagement is borne out empirically. In their study of political participation in Britain, Parry, Moyser and Day found that:
...as many as 44% of all targets of people’s main action on their prime issues are to be found in local government, compared with only 15% in central government and a further 11% either in other government or quasi-governmental institutions (Parry, Moyser and Day, 1992, p268).

In their study of participation in the USA, Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) found even higher levels of political participation at the local level, although their definition of local in this context also included State government. Empirical evidence, therefore, strongly supports the normative assertion that the local arena facilitates and encourages political participation. It is for this reason that Stoker (1996b, p194) concludes that ‘local government… should be valued (above all) as a site for political activity’.

These arguments are more than simply a concern with the vibrancy and vitality of local democracy. On their own, they make a case for local democracy based on the preference of individuals to engage with local rather than national institutions of democracy. However, the other part of this argument links the opportunities for local political participation to the effectiveness of democracy at the higher level. In short, the argument is that for democracy to be effective there must be multiple channels of engagement and multiple opportunities for democratic participation. As David Held argues, ‘direct participation and control over immediate locales… can most realistically advance the principles of participatory democracy’ (1996, p269). In other words, local democracy provides more than simply the opportunity for individuals to influence those decisions that affect their immediate social and economic environment. Local democracy also builds and reinforces notions of participatory citizenship because it is the primary venue in which most people practise politics. It follows that, without some form of local democracy, the opportunities for developing democratic values and skills that can be used at broader institutional levels would be severely limited. Consequently, local democracy provides the foundation for strong national democratic institutions and practices. According to this argument, without a vibrant participatory democracy at the local level, democracy at the broader level cannot flourish. As Weir and Beetham state:

Local participation does more than create self-confident citizens, and share out political power; it also contributes to a culture of democracy throughout society (Weir and Beetham, 1999, p243).

It is partly for this reason that, as part of their criteria for assessing and comparing democracies, Weir and Beetham’s democratic audit criteria include a measure of the existence and vitality of sub-central democracy (Weir and Beetham, 1999; see also, Beetham, 1999; Beetham, 1994). For them, a democratic society underpins democratic processes. Sub-central or local democracy is a cornerstone of a democratic society.

The role of local democracy, therefore, is more than simply that of local self-government. Local democracy is also an essential feature of a broader democratic polity in which democratic participation is a feature of many different aspects of society, from informal associational activity through to employment practices (Pateman, 1970). Seeing local democracy as a fundamental component of a broader participatory democracy has important consequences for the understanding and application of local autonomy.
LOCAL AUTONOMY

Local autonomy is often considered to be synonymous with local democracy because without some degree of freedom for self determination, communities are unlikely to cultivate democratic practices. Although the argument above has asserted a broader role for local democracy, there can be little dispute that local democracy is, fundamentally, about local self-government. This is the primary rationale for its existence. Institutions of local democracy are places where politics is practised (Stoker, 1996b). In other words, these institutions are venues for competing values and priorities and for the collective resolution of such conflicts. If competing values and preferences are to be articulated and conflicts resolved, then the institutions of local democracy, and those engaged in them, must have a degree of power and authority to act: that is, some degree of local autonomy. It is for this reason that Jones and Stewart (1983), the democratic audit (Weir and Beetham, 1999) and the European Charter of Local Self-Government (Council of Europe, 1985), all emphasise ‘regional and local freedom from central government interference’ as a fundamental component of local democracy. Local autonomy, therefore, is an issue of sovereignty: if not sovereignty over everything within a territory then at least sovereignty over certain spheres of activity.

It is the issue of sovereignty that makes local autonomy problematic, for within unitary states such as Britain, sovereignty is vested in one authority only, that of Parliament. It is impossible to discuss local politics in Britain without acknowledging that it exists in its current form and with its current powers because Parliament allows it to (Wilson and Game, 1998; Byrne, 1992; Stoker, 1991). Thus, the principle of ultra vires and the conceptual, as well as legal, constraints that it imposes upon local authorities, is important to understanding the limits to autonomy that exist within the British system of government. Even in federal systems, sovereignty is often carefully proscribed such that local self-government is greatly weakened by reference to higher authorities. The best example of this is Dillon’s Rule in the USA, which asserts that local government is a ‘creature of the State’ and, following a Supreme Court ruling of 1923, can have its powers and structures modified or withdrawn at the State’s discretion (Brown, 1993). In other words, local self-government in both unitary and federal systems (that is, at the truly local as opposed to regional or state level) occurs only because a higher level authority delegates some of its sovereign powers and responsibilities. These powers and responsibilities can be withdrawn or altered at the whim of the sovereign power. As Page defines it:

To be local implies some control over decisions by the community… However, these notions of local government as control by the community contrast with the fact that local government is essentially a subordinate institution… In principle its structures and powers are subject to higher laws and can be changed by them. (Page, 1991, p1)

The issue of sovereignty, therefore, makes local autonomy a relative concept. Because local autonomy implies a degree of sovereignty over particular policy issues, if not over a territory as a whole, there will always be a tension between national and sub-central units of government over who has authority in particular spheres.

Within the rich range of literature that exists on inter-governmental and central-local government relations (see especially Stoker, 1997) there are many different approaches to the issue of local autonomy and sovereignty. Marxist inspired analyses of the topic have tended to focus particularly upon the role of the local state in relation to national government (Cockburn, 1977). Thus, Saunders ‘dual state thesis’ distinguishes local government’s focus
on the politics of consumption from central government’s concern with the politics of production (Saunders, 1984, 1986). This approach implies that local autonomy is constrained by capitalism’s overarching concern with production and that local issues will always be subjugated to the national government’s concern for maintaining and improving the means of production. In contrast, the power-dependence model that underpinned much of the ESRC’s (Economic and Social Research Council) central-local relations programme (Rhodes, 1981; Goldsmith, 1986), characterises relationships between different levels of government as being contingent upon the possession and exchange of resources. When applied to analyses of policy networks (Rhodes, 1988; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992), this approach has particular implications for concepts of local autonomy, because it suggests that there will be significant differences in policy approach between policy areas. Consequently, power-dependence theories recognise that local autonomy may vary in both its style and extent across different policy areas. Levels of local autonomy and discretion, therefore, may alter over both time and issue, within the same constitutional system of governance.

While these broad theories provide a useful context for studying local autonomy, however, there are three particular approaches that merit attention here, because they focus explicitly upon local autonomy, its limitations and its potential. First, there are those who define and analyse local autonomy in terms of ‘freedom from’ higher authorities. Second, there are those who define local autonomy in terms of the effects of local governance and its ‘freedom to’ achieve particular outcomes. Finally, there are insights from political geography that define and analyse local autonomy in terms of place and the ability of communities to construct their own sense and meaning within localities. Each of these has different implications for the way in which local autonomy is perceived to relate to local democracy.

**Freedom from**

‘Freedom from’ approaches to local autonomy are based in constitutional and legal understandings of central-local relations. In many respects, this approach represents the classic political science approach to the topic and defines local autonomy in terms of the degree of freedom that local authorities have from central government. Consequently, the focus on local autonomy is largely top-down, examining the extent to which national governments are prepared to delegate power and authority to sub-central units of government. Different authors address this notion of ‘freedom from’ in different theoretical and empirical ways. All, however, conceptualise local autonomy as being primarily about freedom from higher authorities.

Clark (1984) provides the most developed theory in this context. He draws upon the ideas of Jeremy Bentham to develop a theory of local autonomy based around the dual principles of initiation and immunity. According to Clark, initiation is essentially permissive and refers to the ‘power to act, whatever the circumstances, provided that prior rights to do so exist’ (1984, p197). Immunity, by contrast:

...is essentially the power of localities to act without fear of the oversight authority of higher tiers of the state. In this sense immunity allows local governments to act however they wish within the limits imposed by their initiative powers (Clark, 1984, p198).

By distinguishing between initiation and immunity Clark is able to develop a fourfold typology with which to compare different local authorities, the most autonomous of which have both powers of initiation and immunity from over-sight while the least autonomous are heavily constrained in both respects. This theory has attracted considerable interest
(Goldsmith, 1995) not least because Clark’s application of it tends to point to low levels of autonomy in most systems of local government.

Empirical applications of the ‘freedom from’ type approaches to local autonomy have been both country specific and comparative. Within the UK, Jones and Stewart (1983) have pointed to the centralising tendencies of successive governments and the negative effects that this has on various dimensions of local autonomy. At a comparative level, Page and Goldsmith (1987), Blair (1991) and Page (1991) have all adopted a focus on local autonomy in the context of ‘freedom from’ higher authorities. Variations on this theme have been service specific. For example, Kröger (1996) compares child day-care policies in Scandinavian countries and finds a significant absence of local autonomy in the different countries, despite a strong tradition of local self-government.

More developed theories of local autonomy also consider the local state in relation to neo-Marxist arguments of relative autonomy, examining the extent to which local government has autonomy from broader capitalist forces, as well as from other state institutions (Cockburn, 1977, Gurr and King, 1987). The conclusion from all of these studies, however, is that local autonomy is greatly constrained by a range of political and economic factors.

While the range of theoretical and empirical approaches to local autonomy as ‘freedom from’ higher authority is broad, however, their conclusions and implications tend to be very similar. Two factors stand out. First, there is a common focus upon the constitutional/legal position of sub-central government in different countries and the way in which this affects opportunities for local autonomy. This focus leads to a concern with a range of different central-local relationships: the division of functions between tiers of government (Goldsmith and Page, 1987); the legal basis of such divisions (Pierre, 1990; Page, 1991); and the financial regime which underpins such relationships (Layfield, 1976; Jones and Stewart, 1983; Blair, 1991). While all of these are considered important, however, it is the financial independence of local government that is often deemed to be the most significant. Indeed, financial autonomy (that is, the right to raise revenue and set spending priorities independently of central government) lies at the heart of competing ideological commitments to local autonomy, from Margaret Thatcher’s failed attempts to increase local government accountability through the poll tax (Butler, Adonis and Travers, 1994), through to the ‘localists’ argument for financial autonomy as the basis of local-self-government (Jones and Stewart, 1983). In short, the argument of financial autonomy rests upon the notion that legal, political and organisational autonomy is meaningless without the resources to realise the benefits of such autonomy. This argument persists in current debates about central government policies towards local government (cf Richards, 1997; Hale, 2001).

Second, the focus on financial constraints leads to a common concern with the centralising tendencies of different national governments. If financial autonomy is seen as being the key to local autonomy more generally, then there is an inevitable tension between central government’s concern with overall economic management and local government’s demand for policy discretion (Goldsmith, 1986). However, it is not only financial autonomy that features in studies of increasing centralisation. Michiel de Vries (2000), for example, charts the changing interest in decentralisation policies in four European countries and concludes that any support for decentralisation is largely due to self-interested local elites rather than a normative or ideological disposition towards local self-government. Thus, centralisation is a natural tendency when there are no strong arguments being advanced to the contrary. Indeed, in defining local autonomy in terms of ‘freedom from’ higher authorities there is, inevitably,
a systemic concern with centralisation. If attention is focused on a relative level of independence from central government then it is inevitable that the primary concern of any study will be the limits of such independence. This is a problem for such studies, because it accepts the normative value of local autonomy without examining its consequences.

Defining local autonomy as ‘freedom from’ higher authority, therefore, is problematic for local democracy because it accepts the assumption that local autonomy and local democracy are bilaterally linked. Implicit in the findings of all of these studies is a derogatory use of the term ‘centralisation’ and a tacit argument that any loss of local autonomy is a threat to local democracy. While this may be the case in many circumstances, the conflation of local autonomy and local democracy ignores the potential distinction between the two concepts and the argument that changes in the nature or extent of local autonomy may have no bearing upon democratic practices and vice versa.

**Freedom to**

To some extent, this problem can be addressed by focusing upon the outcomes of different constitutional and political arrangements for sub-central government. This is the approach adopted by Wolman and Goldsmith in their comparison of local autonomy in the UK and the USA (Wolman and Goldsmith, 1990). Their unique contribution to the study of local autonomy is to redefine it in terms of its impact and consequences for localities:

> By local autonomy we mean much more than the traditional concern for the ability of local governments to act unfettered by constraints from higher levels of government, a concern dominating the literature of intergovernmental relations and local governments in the United States and Britain... Instead, we ask a much different and, to our minds, more fundamental question: Do local governments in urban areas have autonomy in the sense that their presence and activities have independent impacts on anything important? Does urban politics matter? (Wolman and Goldsmith, 1990, p3)

This redefinition of autonomy is similar to Clark’s concept of initiation, in so far as it deals with the rights and obligations of local authorities to undertake particular activities in the interests of their citizens. It goes further than Clark’s, however, because it focuses attention not only upon constitutional and legal freedoms from central interference but also the consequences of such freedoms. In other words, it addresses the outcomes of providing local government with the ‘freedom to’ undertake particular initiatives. Thus, their redefinition of local autonomy concentrates upon the residual ability of local authorities, when all extraneous economic and political variables are taken into account, to affect the well-being of their localities. Consequently, they are able to compare local government in Britain and the USA not simply on constitutional grounds but also on the basis of the different impacts which local political processes have, potentially, upon their areas. This approach is a novel one, which lends a new dimension to the study of local autonomy. However, it is disappointing in so far as it leads to similar conclusions to earlier studies. By treating local autonomy as a residual phenomenon – that is, as the scope left to local government after the ‘primary determinants’ (p24) have been taken into account – Wolman and Goldsmith discover that local autonomy is heavily circumscribed by central governments and other broad socio-economic factors.

The ‘freedom to’ approach is important in the context of the relationship between local autonomy and democracy, however, because it acknowledges variations in local autonomy within particular systems of government. It suggests that although local government exists
within broad constitutional, economic and political constraints, individual local authorities can, nevertheless, effect very different outcomes for their localities. In other words, it emphasises difference on the basis of local political arrangements and practices. Consequently, studies of local autonomy might expect to find different policy outcomes in different localities because of the way that each local authority interprets its rights and obligations in relation to local problems and preferences. This focus on differences is important for concepts of local democracy, because it is a primary justification for local self-government (Jones and Stewart, 1983).

**Constructing a sense of place**

Where Wolman and Goldsmith end is where much of the political geography literature on local autonomy begins. This approach conceptualises local autonomy as being a bottom-up phenomenon (Lake, 1994), in which localities seek to construct their own sense of place through political and social interaction. Local autonomy, from this perspective, is not freedom in relation to particular legal or other constraints but is, more broadly, the capacity to control the social construction of place. While this approach does not deny the importance of the nation state in circumscribing action, it argues that localities ‘are made powerful or powerless not by a sovereign, but by those who represent them through events in social life’ (Brown, 1993, p264). Consequently, it places much more emphasis upon the activities of communities in defining their own autonomy. From this perspective, the degree of local autonomy found in any given locality depends upon what that locality is striving to achieve and what it is seeking to be autonomous from. In direct contrast with the localist tradition of Jones and Stewart, this approach concentrates not upon the potential of areas to be different but upon the way in which they seek to define their own differences.

Focusing upon the local construction of place does not deny either the role of the nation state or other factors in shaping the opportunities for local autonomy. Indeed, much of the work in this area builds from an understanding of power relations between localities and their broader environment:

…the autonomy is not a discrete commodity that is possessed or not possessed by individuals or localities. Instead autonomy is a set of power relations. A locality therefore cannot have autonomy, since autonomy can only be realized through the social, political, and economic relationships that those within the locality are engaged in with the extra-local world (DeFilippis, 1999, p976 original emphasis).

It is from an understanding of such power-relations, and the way in which different places seek to construct different meanings for local autonomy, that Lake (1994) develops a critique of the potential and limitations for localities to negotiate autonomy in particular areas. Lake concentrates upon the rational-technical discourse that dominates central government relations with localities. This discourse, he argues, ‘provides the state with the appearance of neutrality from which to balance conflicting structural demands’ (p439). He contrasts the rational-technical discourse of central government with the discourse of participation and negotiation at the local level and demonstrates how the state places a number of structural barriers to the realisation of this alternative discourse. The discourse of participation and negotiation, he suggests, is the way in which communities can construct their own sense of place through relations with the state and other actors. By applying rational-technical discourses within such negotiations, however, the state can erect barriers to local autonomy and assert its authority. The hegemony of rational-technical discourses in central-local relations, therefore, provides the state with considerable power and undermines attempts to
achieve local autonomy. Lake concludes, therefore, that ‘ultimately, the debate over local autonomy is a debate over the respective power of alternative forms of discourse’ (p439). To achieve local autonomy, in which communities are empowered to construct their own sense of place, would require a radical shift away from rational-technical arguments for certain policies and an acceptance of local variation on the basis of participation and negotiation over specific issues.

Understanding local autonomy in this way has great appeal for the study of local democracy, because it brings participatory democracy at the local level into the analysis. If local political institutions are the means by which social relations within a locality are consolidated, and the conduit through which relations with extra-local bodies are conducted, then the role for local democracy is established. In other words, if local autonomy is primarily about empowering local communities to define their own sense of place, then political institutions, and particularly democratic institutions, lie at the heart of any attempt to justify or enhance local autonomy.

Democracy is also brought into the analysis in so far as it characterises power relations, and their obvious tensions, between the centre and localities as being fundamentally about a conflict over discourse. While localities, under this definition, are seeking to establish autonomy through a political discourse of democratic participation, the centre is able to predominate by recourse to rational-technical answers to essentially political problems. This argument has profound implications for the development of democracy at the level of the nation state because it implies that national governments are likely to be inevitably resistant to the democratic participation which they seek to foster.

The problem with this approach lies in understanding the definition of place in this context. Political geography has a much more fluid conception of place that is not necessarily coterminous with the jurisdictional boundaries of local government. In many respects, this bottom-up approach asserts that communities, if they are to construct their own sense of place, must first define themselves as communities. This contrasts with traditional constitutional approaches to public administration, and indeed reality, which acknowledges the rights of sovereign states to define and redefine the functional boundaries of sub-central government. This contrast does not invalidate the notion of local autonomy as the social construction of place but it does raise an important problem: if local autonomy is not about the relative independence of centrally defined institutions of sub-central government then at what level is local autonomy appropriate? If local autonomy is concerned with the social and political construction of place then it may occur at very local levels, beneath that of traditional local government. For example, many of the ‘urban boxes’ that are emerging in UK cities may be seen as micro-communities within traditional local authorities. The problem really is that, within the liberal tradition of political thought, autonomy is essentially about the freedom of the individual, in contrast with democracy, which is essentially about collective decision-making. Once the analysis of autonomy moves away from a focus on the organisations of local government, it becomes an ambiguous and mutable concept that has limited value in understanding the realities of democratic practice in localities.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND LOCAL AUTONOMY

So far, this paper has argued for a stronger distinction to be drawn between local democracy and local autonomy than is usually the case. Local democracy, it argues, is primarily about
local self-government but, importantly, is also a feature of broader democratic practices. Healthy local democracy is a prerequisite for, and helps to sustain, the institutions of democracy at the level of the nation state. Local autonomy, on the other hand, is conceptualised as being a degree of independence or ‘freedom from’ the nation state, a level of ‘freedom to’ achieve local preferences and to meet local needs and, most challengingly, the extent to which local communities have the capacity to define and articulate their own sense of place. According to this definition, therefore, local autonomy is more than simply a relative measure of the financial, organisational or political independence of local authorities within a nation state, it is also a feature of the political and social relations that make each place different. While local democracy is about self-government, therefore, local autonomy is about difference: difference in both the political processes that enable communities to articulate their own sense of place and in the outcomes of such processes.

The problem with most literature on local autonomy is that it fails to distinguish adequately between the two terms. Treating local democracy and local autonomy as synonymous with one another automatically leads to a bilateral model of causation, in which increases or decreases in one variable automatically affects the other. However, in exploring these definitions this paper argues that the link between local democracy and local autonomy is more complicated than the traditional bilateral model allows for. More of one does not always lead to more of the other. Equally, an absence of one is not always bad for the other. Such conclusions are not meant to argue that there is no relationship between the two. Clearly, there is a strong theoretical and empirical relationship between autonomy and democracy. As has already been noted, without some degree of freedom, notions of democracy as self-government are meaningless. In this respect, diminishing local autonomy and increasing centralisation inevitably affects local democracy. However, in distinguishing between democracy and autonomy it becomes apparent that the patterns of causation are not as fixed as traditional assumptions would support. A more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between local autonomy and local democracy can be established by building upon three principles that emerge from this distinction.

First, local autonomy is a normative concept rather than a tangible goal that can be achieved either constitutionally or politically. Within sovereign states, full local autonomy is impossible to achieve because this would require a transfer of sovereignty. At best, a degree of local autonomy can be achieved through a devolution of powers and a recognition, by the centre, that communities have a right to establish different political processes and to have different outcomes that reflect their own needs and preferences. The consequence of this is a recognition that local autonomy will look different in different places, even within the same nation state. Furthermore, such differences may both reflect and affect patterns of local democracy. Consequently, degrees of local autonomy may vary by function and across policy areas as well as between areas. Differences in local autonomy, therefore, may be a consequence of radically different political cultures and democratic practices between areas or they may be a consequence of subtle differences in relationships and contacts between the locality and the centre. For example, in some policy areas local authorities may use political resources to seek a degree of autonomy from the centre. In other areas, however, autonomy might be achieved through quiet, technical negotiation. Similarly, losses of local autonomy may vary across areas and be subject to very different pressures at different times. The key point here is that local autonomy is not a single entity which can be measured and altered on one scale. Rather, it is a complex concept which varies in subtle ways across policy areas according to the relationships that underpin those functions.
Second, because local autonomy varies across policy areas as well as across time and between different territories, its value to local democracy also varies. Autonomy in some policy areas is likely to be much more important to sustaining and developing democratic practices than in others. Moreover, the issues around which local autonomy is or is not important are likely to vary across time and place. Local autonomy only matters when communities want more local democratic control over particular policy issues and central government is reluctant to devolve such power. If local autonomy is regarded as being the construction of a sense of place then the way in which local political institutions define those issues over which autonomy is important is likely to vary between places. While there are likely to be some core themes of autonomy that are common across areas, especially those relating to financial autonomy, local definition of priorities is likely to lead to a different understanding of autonomy between areas. This argument has significant policy implications, because it implies that local autonomy should be locally negotiated on specific issues rather than being the subject of national debate over broad policy areas.

Third, given the subtle ways in which local autonomy might vary within areas and across time, the link between local autonomy and local democracy must be seen as conditional rather than absolute. More local autonomy will not necessarily lead to greater local democracy. Indeed, without having institutions of democracy that are already active within localities there is a danger that devolving greater freedom to local governments may simply strengthen the power of local elites and militate against the development of greater democratic participation. Similarly, more democratic participation is not necessarily dependent upon localities having more freedom for self-determination. The social construction of place may well be as much about the political processes that articulate needs and preferences as it is about the overall level of autonomy. Democratic and political processes are affected by a range of factors, only some of which relate to the level of autonomy accorded to particular institutions. In this respect, arguments for greater local autonomy are based upon an overstatement of the value of local autonomy in engendering democratic participation.

CONCLUSIONS: LOCAL AUTONOMY AND DEMOCRATIC TENSIONS

Local autonomy poses tensions for broader democratic structures and practices because it challenges the sovereignty of nation states. The earlier discussion identified strong justifications for local democracy based not only upon liberal concepts of local self-government but also on the argument that local democracy fosters democratic practices throughout society. National democracy can only flourish if it is underpinned by strong democratic foundations within localities. To the extent that this argument is sustainable, it provides a normative justification for high levels of local autonomy. If democracy is to thrive within localities it requires autonomy not only in terms of ‘freedom from’ higher authorities but also in terms of ‘freedom to’ undertake particular initiatives and for communities to be able to construct their own sense of place. As has already been observed, local autonomy requires an acceptance of difference between areas in terms of both democratic processes and political outcomes.

The problem for democracy at the level of the nation state is that differences in democratic processes and political outcomes are often unpalatable. The use of Isaiah Berlin’s distinction between ‘freedom from’ and ‘freedom to’ is useful here, not only because it provides a helpful analytical distinction between types of liberty but also because its use draws parallels...
with the autonomy of the individual. Autonomy is about liberty, whether of the individual person or the individual organisation. By contrast, democracy is a collective process through which conflicts and differences are articulated and resolved. Tensions exists because, in allowing for a degree of local autonomy and local democracy, nation states automatically generate multiple levels of collective decision-making. The democratic collective at the level of the nation state, as represented through elected governments, will inevitably seek to pursue a discrete set of policies across the whole of its sovereign territory. Even where differences between areas are acknowledged, central governments can be expected to try to structure these within a broad framework that suits its national priorities. In this context, local expressions of difference and autonomous attempts to create specific local identities can be perceived as threats to the sovereignty of national government. Consequently, local autonomy and democracy can be in conflict with the institutions of national democracy.

National governments are caught, therefore, in a paradox. On the one hand, strong local autonomy is essential to maintaining the local democracy practices that underpin broader democratic cultures within the polity. On the other hand, local autonomy threatens the viability of democratically supported national priorities. Too much local autonomy, in this sense, can destabilise the national institutions of democratic government. This argument only holds, of course, in as far as local democratic practices are dependent upon a degree of local autonomy. However, as the earlier discussion recognised, while there are limits to the dependence between these two factors there is, nevertheless, a clear but complex relationship between them. There is an inevitable dilemma between local autonomy, local democracy and the maintenance of a broader democratic polity.

By distinguishing between local democracy and local autonomy, it is possible to analyse the relationship between them in a much more sophisticated way. Such a distinction enables the variations in local autonomy between policy areas to be recognised and separated from a generalised account of local democracy. It also enables the limits of the relationship between them to be acknowledged, suggesting that local democracy is not always dependent upon high levels of local autonomy. Finally, it also enables tensions between centre and periphery to be recast in terms of challenge to sovereignty. Each of these has important implications for the modernisation of democracy within nation states. For all of these reasons, understanding the relationship between local autonomy and local democracy is essential to understanding the development of democracy more generally.
REFERENCES


Stoker, G. (1997) Full ref missing


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1 The term ‘urban box’ is used here in relation to the gentrified renovations that are occurring in cities such as Birmingham, creating self contained and largely self-regulating communities within a single urban development. Examples include the renovation of the Dunlop Forte factory and the ‘Mail Box’ in Birmingham, both of which will include a range of leisure and recreation facilities for residents as well as traditional services.