

Political thought in a student housing Co-operative

Academic Essays

ABSTRACT

This ethnography came out of a project by pre-honours Social Anthropology students, studying the space of the Edinburgh Student Housing Co-Operative in the beginning of 2020. I spent time renovating the basement with members of the Co-Operative and spoke with them about the political leanings of members, as the public perception of the Co-Operative is that it is based on socialist ideologies. I describe my time at the Co-Operative and discuss the methodologies I used to gain data. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the role politics plays in the decision to become a member of the Co-Operative.

keywords: politics, space, Edinburgh, student housing

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The Edinburgh Student Housing Co-Operative is an attempted model for direct democracy aiming to remove power from housing corporations and give power to the tenants. Whilst it is effective in removing power from landlords, there are issues with the success of direct democracy. 'Direct democracy' has various definitions; however, for this argument Christians' (2009, 103) general definition of "a system in which people participate in direct governance govern directly" will be used. Reasonings for living in the co-operative are highly subjective, and so to reduce all motivations to personal political beliefs would be, fundamentally, a lie. Yet, it is undeniable that many members focus political activism, and this impacts their experience of living in the space. This ethnographic report centres around the social structure of a Student Housing Co-operative (henceforth referred to as 'the co-op') in Edinburgh. This building was renovated in 2014 from derelict university accommodation, and the participants in this ethnography are students from various socio-economic back-

grounds living in the co-op. We smile and exchange goodbyes as the woman catches up with her husband and children.

Visiting the Co-Op

The concrete steps leading up to the main entrance of the co-op have posters advertising co-operative living and signs supporting local causes, such as the UCU strikes. The general sense of activism follows through into the main stairwell of the building. The walls are painted yellow, yet this can barely be seen under the politically charged graffiti, and there are printed signs reminding occupants that it might be their flat's turn to clean the communal stairwell. Helena, the team member allowing us access to the building, greets me at the door of her flat. The corridor is similar to other student accommodations, but there is a clear sense of individualism through writing on the doors of each flat.

Helena invites me into her room whilst we wait for another group member, Sophie. The walls are painted sage green, which Helena tells me she did herself. I ask how many items she built, and she shows me a wooden bookcase and the wooden base of her bed. The room is small and homely, with handmade ivy decorations hanging across the ceiling like bunting. Helena explains that the only furniture which came with the room was a desk/drawer combination and the radiator. The carpet is the same as standard university accommodation, but Helena has personalised the room by covering the carpet in a large, patterned rug with a geometric design. When Sophie arrives, Helena leads us out of her flat and down two flights of stairs to the basement. She explains that the basement is renovated from an old car park; as such, the space is



Figure 1:
Poster in Entrance Door. Own work.

extremely large with concrete pillars supporting the ceiling. The walls are covered in white painted wooden panels, and Helena points out the handmade wooden tables and worktops. There is also a kitchen area with a sink, dishwasher, and fridge, all of which were installed by members of the basement team. The tables are scattered with construction tools (e.g., drills, saws, nails) and light floods in from windows at street level and the large glass doors facing the back yard of the co-op. Gaelic folk music plays softly in the background, and there is a strong scent of sawdust in the air.

We are introduced to Kate, a student living in the co-op and working on the basement team, and Kate recommends that before we start work, we should view the basement in “28”. Helena

takes Sophie and I out of the basement through the glass doors, and we walk past a bike rack in a self-built wooden storage system decorated with painted flowers and leaves. There is also a small garden on the top of the bike shed, and Helena tells us about the irrigation system built by co-op members to care for the plants. We leave the back garden space and walk up the road to the second half of the co-op. This building is smaller with only seven flats, and the basement itself is in a significantly greater state of disarray than the main basement. I can't get more than a few steps into the space before having to climb over broken pieces of wood, old bathtubs, large painted signs for protests, and other miscellaneous "junk," as Helena called it. When I returned to the main basement it seems instantly more impressive given what "28" had looked like.

Upon returning to the basement Kate assigns Sophie and myself the job of poly-filling cracks in the walls, which have appeared over time due to the fluctuations in temperature making the wood expand. Sophie and I are directed towards the pack of 'polyfilla', and when we begin creating the paste, Kate continues fireproofing the walls. We all work in relative silence for the next hour, with the soft sounds of the radio playing in the background. During this time approximately five people come through the basement and out of the glass door. It becomes apparent that the people wearing overalls and asking Kate where "Mike" is are also involved in the basement team. There are also a handful of people who borrow tools for personal construction projects; for example, one member is building a shelf. There is no sense hostility or resentment by the basement team for non-team members using the tools, and

there is an implicit trust that items will be returned.

Kate comes over to Sophie and me, and we have an informal, unrecorded discussion about the construction and how co-op members have reacted to the basement project. The project has been going on since the opening of the co-op, and Kate tells us about the controversy around paying members since this goes against egalitarian values of the co-op. She describes how she has found the experience rewarding and when asked by Sophie which aspect was the most challenging, she proudly shows us the first ceiling tile which her and Helena built. The process took approximately four months, and the final tile was laid next to the first. Kate discusses a sense of pride at seeing the result and having memories associated with the space. Following this idea of memory, I ask her what else strikes her as memorable in the space. Kate then tells us about a time capsule which the basement team buried in a hole in the floor before filling it with cement. In this they placed "things to confuse future archaeologists," such as tampons, ornaments of cows with the heads of people, and nude photos of some team members.

Methodology

I used various interview methods but found informal, unrecorded interviews whilst conducting participant observation to be most effective. This is because I was able to talk with the participants in a relaxed context and there was significantly less discomfort for both me and the subject. An example of this would be the natural flow of conversation between myself, Sophie, and Kate during construction, as opposed to the more formal sit-down interview I later had with Kate. I



Figure 2: Stairwell Walls. Own work.

found that the use of a voice recorder during my one-on-one discussion with Kate made us both feel on edge. This is further demonstrated by the fact that, after I stopped recording, Kate and I went on to have a longer and more personal conversation. Although the content of this discussion was less relevant to my research focus, I found it extremely beneficial in breaking down barriers.

Spending an extended period of time with the team was also vital for allowing us to become comfortable in each other's presence. Although the recorded interview was awkward, holding it in the basement felt natural as myself and Kate had gotten to know one another

in this space. If I had not been involved in the space prior to this, then I would have struggled to get the information that I did. Wall (2010) emphasises the importance of this informal participant observation in her fieldwork on quilt making in rural communities. The informal interactions both in my fieldwork and Wall's fieldwork allowed for more insightful outcomes. Consequently, I would argue that, as a research method, being involved in the community is more enlightening for ethnographers than formal interviews, which can be awkward and uncomfortable.

Recording interviews is an issue I will face throughout this ethnographic project since the informal, unrecorded con-

versations were more relaxed than recorded ones. However, I feel that transcribing in the interview would be more uncomfortable than using a voice recorder. I also felt that by putting analysis to the back of my mind whilst conducting participant observation was beneficial as I was able to gain a genuine experience. This is like what Shah (2017) proposes when looking at doing fieldwork and then writing the analytical ethnography afterwards. For me, the ethnographic practices I adopt are not based on theory and neither should they be. They evolve alongside theory, and I am finding that different ethnographic methods work in different contexts.

Another element of my fieldwork which I struggled with was discussing politics as it is a sensitive issue for many people. The time I spent in the basement before discussing politics allowed me to build a trustworthy rapport with Kate and so discussion of political views was not as uncomfortable as it could have been. Furthermore, having the context of the previous informal discussion gave me some topics to discuss in my recorded interview

as the majority of content which we discussed was an elaboration on Kate's previously made points. In terms of what I gained from the participant observation; the embodied experience was invaluable. I was proud to see the impact I had had on the space and knowing that I was contributing to a communal project created a sense of pride and purpose to my being there beyond that of just research. Due to the short-term nature of this ethnography, it was also beneficial to be involved in intense action, as Pink and Morgan (2013) recommend. The construction site, as Kate mentioned in her interview, is a centrepiece of action in the co-op and so by placing myself in this environment, I will hopefully open more opportunities with a range of aspects of life in the co-op.

Helena's presence as a point of contact was useful as participants were more inclined to speak with me and have more formal interviews. Kawulich (2011) emphasises the importance of having a means of access to a community is almost as important as becoming seen as more than a guest. I feel that by volunteering in the construction of the basement I

Figure 3: Basement (left), kitchen space in basement (right). Own work.



will be able to achieve this positionality. It was also beneficial to be in a space inhabited by students as the small age gap meant that the relationship dynamic was relatively equal, and we instantaneously had something in common being students. Coming in inexperienced was useful as the opportunity to be taught by members of the basement team allowed for more one-on-one interactions with a purpose, thus lending themselves to more informal conversations. Since the basement team members themselves were all self-taught, I felt that they were able to give me more genuine advice than professionals could have, which in turn allowed them to feel like they could know me better as they could see themselves in me. This combination of being of similar age and having a teacher-student dynamic allowed for the exchange of knowledge and information between myself and Kate to feel natural rather than transactional.

Overall, I feel like I faced some issues in my fieldwork in terms of the recorded interview being uncomfortable, and from this arises the issue of whether I should record interviews for a direct transcript or summarise a much more relaxed, unrecorded, and informal conversation. Despite this, my involvement in the construction, close age gap to the participants, and relationship with Helena all contributed to a successful series of interactions in my fieldwork. By continuing with a more informal approach to interviews and participant observation I believe that I will successfully position myself as an insider rather than a guest, which will in turn enable a more in-depth analysis of the social structure of the space.

Discussion

Idealised direct democracy is heavily reliant on the ideals of a generation. Sloam (2007) argued that UK youth are less involved in 'conventional' politics, and instead advocate new understandings of political ideologies. Many governments have attempted to implement 'youth councils' as a democratic representation of younger generations, yet young activists (as many members of the Co-Operative are) have viewed these councils as another means of elitist social control, which does not reflect collective concerns (Taft and Gordon, 2013). The system of direct democracy, which the Co-operative utilises, is a weekly general meeting open to all members; therefore, avoiding the social control of councils. Yet, these meetings are only attended on average by around 20/109 members of the Co-operative, and so many of the decisions made about the space are conducted by a select group. There are many reasons for this lack of attendance, highlighted in the following extract from an interview with 'J', a co-operative member:

You just have some people who are more involved, and at the end of the day they end up doing more things and indeed having more power.

In a separate interview with another member named 'P,' a similar point was raised about certain members being involved more to get more power: "if you have your hands in a lot of honey pots, you get to have more honey." This juxtaposes the ideal of a direct democracy in which people have equal power; thus, demonstrating the cracks in using a small-scale

direct democracy as a model for mass living spaces. Furthermore, controversy has arisen from the employment of members in construction, as is demonstrated in an interview with 'K,' a member of the basement-team.

A lot of people see this as a good thing as we're investing in our members. The money is not going to a contractor, it's going to educate and employ our members. And some people see that the cost is worth it because of the core value behind it; to be autonomous. And so, some people have this really positive view of this project and [are glad] that we've done this renovation all by ourselves ... I think that [those who disagree with the project] have criticisms but they want to encourage us because when they do see progress, they feel particularly happy about that, because they were sad about the lack of progress.

A core issue facing direct democracy is whether it is biased to those who can vote (Lupia, 2004). As previously mentioned, not every member of the Co-Operative attends the weekly meetings; as such, the impact of members is limited. Following a line of questioning by Maddie about whether people's voices are heard in the Co-Operative, 'J' responded with;

Definitely not. No, there is this constant issue of like, since so many things are done in a public forum, if you can't express yourself on a public forum, then you can't express yourself. And there are also things with timetables, and there are also people who just don't really care.

People may have the right to vote in a direct democracy style of living, yet this does not mean that the system is effective. This contributes to the difficulties of creating an egalitarian, democratic state, as even when using a small Co-operative

living space as a model there still exists a sense of hierarchy. Paley (2002, 476) argued that it can be easy for a state to label itself as a democracy when it is in fact a dictatorship, and the sheer ambiguity of democratic ideals makes it impossible to form a truly direct democratic space (Tavits, 2009). Yes, direct democracy is becoming increasingly popular amongst younger generations (Karp, 2006); however, it is a gross over-generalisation to claim that all members of the Co-Operative hold the same political beliefs and views on direct democracy.

In an interview with member 'A,' he states "direct democracy is stupid and cannot function on any large scale. It's fine at the Co-op and quite nice for the ideals I guess." This may be viewed in juxtaposition to a point made by 'K.' She stated that the nature of the Co-operative being focussed on removing power from housing companies means that the majority of members hold compatible beliefs with a "progressive [and] democratic left wing to anarchist political spectrum." Members have been heavily involved in activist movements, such as the UCU Strikes, the 2017 occupation of Gordon Aikman Lecture theatre, and climate protests.

However, even members with activist interests and, more generally, the direct democratic structure of the Co-operative still do not view the space as a site of revolutionary practice. Prior to moving into the Co-Operative, members such as 'J' discussed an assumption that it would be "very political and have a lot of engagement." However, in practice the Co-operative isn't the site of revolutionary practices, even though members do have the power to "influence policies and make things better." As such, this demonstrates that personal politics do not necessarily

hold a strong impact over the experiences of living in the Co-operative as different members find different values in the space: be it low rent, autonomy, or the direct democratic structure.

Conclusion

On balance, in terms of the impact political views of members of the co-operative has on their experience of living in the space, this depends on the individual. The majority of participants demonstrated an inclination towards a leftist political positioning; however, this is not always necessarily the case. Ideas of democracy are changing radically in the 21st century, and the Co-Operative is an effective model of how a direct democracy can manifest in spaces. However, there remain many issues with the administration of the Co-operative and levels of contribution have a major impact on power in decision making. At its core, the passion of the individual to be involved in the space is what encourages active participation in the direct democracy. Therefore, there are intrinsic limits on what a direct democracy can do in a living space, and so it is less important to share a political ideology than it is to share passion.

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