The village in the city: participation and cultural value on the urban periphery

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ABSTRACT
Drawing on evidence from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2014–2016 for the Understanding Everyday Participation (UEP) project, this paper addresses the relationship between space, place and participation in a “suburban village” on the edge of the city of Aberdeen in North East Scotland. Recent critiques have pointed to the ways in which the rural and peri-urban domains have been neglected in cultural policy as the by-product of a preoccupation with urban regeneration and the “creative city”. Working with conceptual frameworks developed by Raymond Williams and Charles Taylor, our research reveals the rich fabric of participation in this community, reflecting an historically rooted “common culture”, through which social tensions are mediated by a “village social imaginary”. This “residual” formation, which emphasises the importance of everyday culture to the constitution of the civic realm, suggests a much broader understanding of cultural value than is currently recognised in policy, but is currently under threat from generational change and social flux.

KEYWORDS
Participation; place; urban–rural; clubs and institutions; community; cultural value

Introduction
In this paper, we address the Understanding Everyday Participation (UEP) project’s concern with the relationship between space, place and participation (Miles & Gibson, 2016) in an account of our research on the nature and significance of everyday forms of participation in a “suburban village” on the edge of the city of Aberdeen in North East Scotland. Drawing on evidence from ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2014–2016, we argue that the historical trajectory of this community, giving rise to a particular spatial–material, social and cultural configuration, provides important signals for contemporary cultural policymaking in its relative neglect of both rural populations and settings on the urban periphery.

Cultural policy in the UK displays a strong urban bias. Profound regional inequalities in English cultural funding, to the marked advantage of those living in London and the South-East, have recently been revealed by Stark, Gordon, and Powell (2013, 2014). Yet this is simultaneously an urban–rural division, which secondarily prioritises city centres before suburbs and urban sites above their rural hinterlands. While Scotland – the location of the study discussed in this paper – enjoys devolved cultural budgeting, this
same kind of disparity is evident in the flow of funds to the Central Belt (Bonnar, 2014) and to prestigious city-based projects such as the Dundee V&A.

From the standpoint of academic research, the city, as subject and object, has had an equally seductive effect on both Sociology – our own discipline – and Cultural Policy Studies. In the former case, the national urban is the terrain on which the grand narratives of modernity were played out and on which, it is held by theorists of Globalization, they have dissolved (e.g. Appadurai, 1996; Beck, 2000). In policy related work, the “creative city”, issues of culture-led urban regeneration, and the dynamics of a city-based creative industries workforce remain central preoccupations (O’Brien, 2014).

Recent critiques have pointed to the failures and contradictions of city-focused cultural policy initiatives (e.g. Peck, 2004; Pratt, 2009; for a summary see Bell & Oakley, 2015), including the ways in which creative city discourses are performative, marking off and marginalising “other” places as “non-creative” by definition (Waitt & Gibson, 2009). Interest in revealing and restoring other places as sites of cultural production and creative activity has revived accordingly, and includes research on different urban sites (Bell & Jayne, 2004), the countryside (Bell & Jayne, 2010; Luckman, 2012) and other spaces of “vernacular creativity” (Edensor, Leslie, Millington, & Rantisi, 2009). Yet, a noticeable feature of much interest in either para- or peri-urban activity in policy is its focus on a narrow, almost stereotypical, conception of the kinds of cultural participation and value that do and might exist beyond the city (Bell & Jayne, 2010).

Whilst we would agree with calls for increased policy attention to be given to non-urban and suburban sites of cultural activity, we would also wish to join with others in stressing that any such attention needs first to escape the straightjacket of established creative industries policy discourse, and associated notions of the “rural creative economy” by addressing the “interactions of people, place and creativity” (Bell & Jayne, 2010, p. 217) afresh. In setting out and discussing some key findings of our research on the case study of Peterculter in this paper, we show how these interactions must be understood against an historical background of complex interdependencies between town and country; the impact of a changing economy and shifting patterns of work on the dynamics of cultural spaces and institutions; and the central role of a “village imaginary” in negotiating community identity and the tensions of local social relations. For policy, the principal message is that the nature and significance of everyday participation in this community calls in to question the restrictive framing of cultural production and value that is implied by market-orientated narratives of the creative economy. It broadens our understanding of both what cultural participation is and what it does, and is suggestive of a much expanded realm of cultural value; one which is currently challenged and at risk of disappearance.

Exploring the qualitative village

The location of our research is Peterculter, known locally as Culter; a settlement situated eight miles from the centre of Aberdeen at the far south-western end of the city’s oil wealth corridor, which runs out along the north bank of the River Dee, in the direction of the latter’s source high up past Ballater, Balmoral and Braemar in the Cairngorms. It was the somewhat anomalous profile of “the quantified village” – the mapped and
measured perspective most familiar to policy – that first drew our attention to Culter. Official statistics confirm that household incomes here are relatively very high and on a par with the neighbouring oil suburbs of Cults and Milltimber, as are rates of owner occupation (National Records of Scotland, 2016; Community Planning Aberdeen, 2006). A much higher proportion of people here are in NS-SEC classes 1 and 2 (higher professional and managerial occupations) than the Scottish average, and the age profile in this part of Aberdeen is older than both the city as a whole and the nation. Yet, Culter also contains pockets of social housing and has a higher proportion of households with dependent children, and with married and cohabiting women in their thirties, than elsewhere in Aberdeen. Whilst the fraction of Scottish-born residents here is larger than in the rest of the city, so too is the relative number of English incomers (National Records of Scotland, 2016).

On further inspection, we found more heterogeneity and texture lying behind Culter’s suburban statistical façade. Until incorporation into the city’s Lower Deeside ward in 1996, Culter was in fact administratively located in Aberdeenshire. Yet, despite its semi-rural location, it was, up until just 15 years before the village left the shire, the site of a large paper mill, which originated in the eighteenth century, and in its mid-twentieth century heyday employed over 400 people (Forrest, 1979), exporting its products worldwide. Since the 1970s, that direct link to the global industrial economy has continued through the involvement of many residents in North Sea oil and gas production. Although removed from the formal cultural institutions located in the city centre, we also discovered from the plethora of venues, events and clubs referred to on the village website and in the community magazine, that Culter has a rich and diverse associational culture, which is strongly linked to its geographical situation and economic history.

In order to examine and articulate the significance of the connections between history, economy and an everyday, participative culture in Culter, we shifted our focus onto “the qualitative village”. Here we adopted a primarily ethnographic approach, which, as Harvey (2015) argues, “is a powerful way of opening up and extending understandings of how human beings live in the world [through] disciplined preoccupation with the enactment, articulation and transmission of social imaginaries (values, ideas) and material practices”. This work involved a researcher (co-author Ebrey) embedding herself in the life of the village over a period of 12 months, including an intensive three month period during which she conducted participant observation in three institutions, chosen because they are, in different ways, central to the cultural life and identity of the village. Discussed in more detail below, Culter Village Hall is the community’s civic hub, while Culter Mills Social Club and Kippie Lodge Sports and Country Club reflect, respectively, the legacy of industrial heritage, and the influence of the contemporary oil and gas economy, in articulating everyday cultural practices in the village.

These settings were visited at least twice a week for several hours at a time, with the researcher formally taking on a specific role in each (Mother and Toddler group helper in the Village Hall, glass collector at the Mill Club, Hair and Beauty reception assistant/Boot Camp class member at Kippie Lodge). Beyond this she participated more broadly in the life of the institutions and in the village generally: for example, walking to the Village Hall in the morning with mums and dads, grandparents and children; regularly attending Bingo at the Mill Club; shopping, chatting and listening to gossip in the local
Post Office-cum-supermarket; going to local events and joining residents for coffee, drinks or dinner.4

In effect, all our research in Culter was ethnographically orientated, allowing us to expose the “bricolage” of the everyday, which, as Back (2015, p. 15) states, “identif(ies) the public issues that are alive in the mundane aspects of everyday life”. As in the other UEP project case study areas, we conducted two waves of in-depth interviews, which drew centrally on residents’ accounts of their life histories (Miles, 2016). We then went on to make a co-produced film about village life (Wingard, 2015), and to explore issues of community memory and futures in a photography project linked to the annual gala and other local events. Here, our proximity and situatedness, combined with our outsider status, helped us to reflect on the “definitive character” of village culture and how this might be created through an “ensemble of social relations” exercising power over individuals through “taken for granted routines and practices” (Williams quoted in Taylor, Evans, & Fraser, 1996, p. 5).

“Ordinary” participation and the imagined village

In framing our account of everyday participation in Culter in this paper, we draw further on the work of Raymond Williams: mobilising his “social definition of culture” as a “description of a particular way of life, which expresses meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behaviour” (1961, p. 57). In stressing that culture is “ordinary”, Williams argued for the notion of a “common culture” – understood in terms of a collectively produced, continuously remade variety of, spontaneous as well as deliberate, modes of expression – and against its divisive abstraction by elites (Eagleton, 2000; Williams, 1958). Culture for Williams is therefore seen both as “a whole way of life” and a “signifying system” through which the meanings and values of particular social formations might be articulated. These are brokered within a complex, temporally fluid system, in terms of three elements – dominant, residual, and emergent – which may together inform us about the “structure of feeling”, or the particular quality of lived social experience, relationships and understandings that are in process at a given time (Williams, 1977).

Coming from the village of Pandy, in “border country”5 on the boundary between England and Wales, Williams’ work has a particular resonance for our research. Culter is likewise a place on “the edge”, where boundaries are highly significant: between the urban and the rural, village and suburb, public and private, “local” and “incomer”, “toochter” (country person) and “toonser” (townie). Opinions are divided as to where the village most comfortably sits. Some residents, like “Ross”, enjoy the possibilities offered by both urban and rural life (“I can walk down School Road and if I turn left I can get to the city and if I turn right, to the country. Perfect”). Others are disconcerted by the relatively new attachment to the city, so the village Community Council has steered a path that takes account of both positions, describing Culter in their literature, as “the village in the city”.

The way in which these apparent divisions are negotiated in public discourse is part of the participative process in civic life, which in turn creates an attachment to the “imagined village” (Anderson, 1983). Distinctions between different types of identity and belonging (Ingold, 2008; Savage, Bagnall, & Longhurst, 2005) are often the subject of jokey banter in the village (people who arrived 40 years ago are still labelled incomers by those who are born and bred), which acknowledges their fluid nature. They are also an example of the
way in which the physical boundary of the village is seen as an important “container” of down-to-earthness; whose inhabitants are more grounded and ordinary than what are perceived to be the universally well-heeled residents of Cults, located further east toward Aberdeen.

The complementary ideas of “common” and “ordinary” also mark a contrast with the emergent attachment to “coolness” and “edginess”, often cited as attributes of the city. Our work in Culter encountered a collective celebration of the “comfortable”, the “social” and the “common good” in each of our ethnographic settings. In their preoccupation with “innovation”, “creativity” and “the aesthetic”, contemporary cultural policymakers and urban planners have neglected to see how residual forms, such as the traditional Village Hall and its activities, may have something to offer in terms of their social organisation, and the way they sponsor an interaction of cultural and civic engagement. Run-of-the-mill organisations such as the local playgroups, football teams and theatre clubs, though not considered culturally significant, have within them the seeds of a collective, non-corporate, culture.

Sites, forms and cultures of participation

Village institutions and club life

Outside of the home, everyday participation in Culter revolves around a number of clubs, associations and venues, many of which are anchored by or attached to the three core institutions upon which we based our ethnographic work. Alongside the Church Hall, the Heritage Hall, and the pubs and shops, they constitute what Taylor (2002, p. 112) defines as the “public sphere” of the village, providing both the material settings and cultural contexts for the “discussion of common interest”. They are also expressions of the community’s “self-government”. In Taylor’s terms, therefore, they form the central pillars of the village’s “social imaginary”, which, as suggested above, works to accommodate sources of division in its cultural life. Together with their affiliated groups, these institutions confer vernacular forms of social and cultural capital (Friedman, Savage, Hanquinet, & Miles, 2015) that inform the character of extensive civic participation. Rooted in the respective contents and participatory dynamics of particular institutions, the civic realm in Culter is refracted through a particular collective morality that generates forms of cultural value that pass under the radar of policy. This, to return to Williams (1961, 1977), is articulated by a “residual” structure of feeling in which the imagined village is one defined by mutualism and reciprocity, although in practice this is never free of conflict or contradiction, and – as we will go on to illustrate – is subject to challenge.

Culter Village Hall represents in many ways the “village public”. Symbolically located on the main road in the centre of the village, it is a space whose very name infers communal ownership. As an institution, the Hall fulfils a number of roles. It provides paid and voluntary work, childcare, and spaces for leisure and cultural activities. For example, it is home to the Theatre Club, Knit and Natter group, the Mah Jong evening class and the CFine community food initiative. It hosts village events, including the Christmas pantomime, cabaret and dinner events, the occasional roller disco, and can be hired externally for functions; for example, the Aberdeen Thai Buddhist Association uses the Hall for its annual celebrations.
The Mill Club is a legacy of the Culter Paper Mill (1751–1981). Participation here revolves around a number of discrete activities, ranging from “a nip” at the bar or a session at the Bingo on a winter’s evening to a game of bowls or a barbeque in the summer. The club also provides practice space for Culter Pipe Band and the Accordion and Fiddle Club, puts on weekly bingo and tea dances, provides post-match meals for Culter FC and occasionally hosts snooker tournaments. Links back to the paper mill remain strong; current core club membership being comprised of a significant number of former workers and family members, who retain close inter-personal ties, more than 35 years after the mill’s closure.

Kippie Lodge, a private leisure club, is located in and around a large country house, situated up on the hill between Culter and the adjacent settlement of Milltimber. It provides subscription-based recreational and social facilities for a clientele comprised mostly of oil industry professionals and their families. The main sports structure includes a gym and accompanying exercise studios, along with a fair sized swimming pool. In the same building is a “hair and beauty” facility, containing a hairdresser and a suite of spaces for manicures, pedicures, massage and other “treatments”. Behind this building is a 9-hole golf course. The Lodge itself houses a central conservatory restaurant looking out on to a large garden and the children’s play area, together with a smaller, more “exclusive” bar and restaurant space, and a “function suite” for hire.

The voluntary imperative

Participation occurs in many dimensions and at several levels in these places but is informed by a number of themes, which help to articulate its meaning and significance to local people. In the first instance, much of the cultural life of the village is, as one member of the Community Council remarked, “kept afloat” through the voluntary work of many of its residents. Volunteering is both a practice that underpins (other) people’s participation in venues, amenities and events of the village and a complex form of participation in itself (Smith, Timbrell, Woolvin, Muirhead, & Fyfe, 2010). It underpins the operational culture of village institutions and presents both an alternative and a challenge to the mechanisms and values of the cash economy. For the participants themselves it creates a sense of identity, which can have both positive and negative connotations.

The administration of the Village Hall is considered by the “collective” who undertake it as more of a calling than a job. This generates a certain sense of distinctiveness and self-satisfaction in that members of the group feel that they are prepared to “roll up their sleeves”, rather than “just wanting to come and pay their money” (Carol, Village Hall volunteer). In this way, volunteering is a gift that becomes a kind of moral currency, allowing participants into a community of “do-ers”; a form of participation that can be understood as free labour exchanged for a kind of belonging.

Voluntary activity of this kind has potentially radical implications for the market model of service provision that has come to dominate public discourse. For example, at first glance, it may be considered that the mode of participation generated by the Mother and Toddler group – the main focus of our ethnographic work in the Village Hall – is conservative and inconsequential. Yet there is a commitment to a form of childcare that is participative and non-profitmaking, which depends on the active involvement of the parents and their commitment to the group. Comparing the quality of childcare to that
provided by a privately operated establishment nearby, offering a play barn, café and shop, mothers remarked on the “cooperative atmosphere at the Village Hall”, the sense of “continuity and commitment” there, rather than “random” mums’ where there “was no sense of sharing”.

Yet, as well as satisfaction, belonging and a sense of joint endeavour, the volunteering culture can create feelings of fatigue among the self-styled “usual suspects”, who feel duty-bound to get involved, resentment among those who feel shut out by the same, as well as a more general anxiety about whether enough people will come forward to “keep things going”. Volunteering knits local organisations together, making them viable, but it also reflects and generates fissures: between generations, genders and social classes.

Work, leisure, class

The contexts for and types of everyday participation in Culter are strongly influenced by both past and present forms of employment in the village. The imbrication of work and leisure is most evident in the “traditional working-class” culture (McKibbin, 1984) of Culter Mills Social Club, where the ghost of the paper mill, in which many of its current members worked, looms large. Former workers still share an easy relationship with each other, one born in the conviviality of working at the paper mill, and it is this that underpins the solidarity and mutuality of participation at the Mill Club. Work in the “cut throat world of the oil”, to which many had subsequently transitioned with considerable economic benefit, was sometimes compared unfavourably by this group.

In a different way, the affluent business culture of oil intersects with and shapes the nature of participation at Kippie Lodge. Still administratively titled the Aberdeen Petroleum Club, many of Kippie’s members are connected to the oil and gas industry, which also accounts for the fact that a high proportion of them are women. The industry pays high salaries in exchange for its employees’ time, much of which is spent abroad or in meetings at the oil companies London headquarters, or out on the rigs for weeks at a time. These arrangements appear to rest on a particularly gendered familial division of labour, where “the men” are especially mobile in their working lives, whilst women generally work at home looking after children and “keeping the house”. This can be in Scotland one year and places as far flung as Norway, Indonesia, or the USA the next. Kippie’s primary function is to facilitate the participation of members in various forms of sport and exercise. It promotes a culture of “body beautiful” – keeping fit, healthy and in good shape – which chimes with contemporary concerns about image and embodiment. Yet what, in fact, became evident during the course of our research was the club’s equal and somewhat contrasting importance in supporting an altogether more prosaic form of participation, by connecting often dislocated and otherwise isolated women into friendship groups.

Gender and sociality

Our observations of village institutions and their members suggest that much of the cultural value in everyday forms and contexts of participation is located in sociality; in the associations and relationships that participating in club life sponsors, and which, in turn, sustain and inform the culture of those institutions. In this sense, village institutions are notable for facilitating the kinds of strong ties, levels of trust and mutual understandings
that serve to generate “bonding” forms of social capital among their memberships (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). As well as reflecting the different class dynamics of each venue, another prominent feature of this relationship between cultural engagement and social life is the way that participation sites – and the forms of sociality they furnish – are gendered.

At the Mill Club, for example, the bar is a space dominated by men. It is the location of The Five O’Clock Club – a nod to the rhythms of work in the paper mill – which comprises a small, informal group of men in their fifties, sixties and older, who meet here regularly on a couple of evenings at the latter end of the week. They gather for a few pints, some banter and the exchange of news. Despite the fact that many of them have worked in the oil industry, some offshore and overseas, with weeks and months spent away from home, the club is their anchor, pulling them right back into friendships and village gossip for a couple of hours every week.

By contrast, it is the absence of men, albeit in a symbolic sense, that shapes the social relations of Kippie Lodge. Here, “being busy at leisure”, such as training for and organising teams to take on physical challenge charity events such as the “Tough Mudder”, is part of the expectation that comes with being an “oil wife”. Yet it was the time women members spent in the café and restaurant in between classes, treatments and events – relaxing with each other and their children – that they particularly valued, because it enabled the development of relationships in which Kippie took on the role of a “family house”.

A similar dynamic was evident in the Mother and Toddler group at the Village Hall. The initial motivation to become involved was the socialisation of children, but thereafter the making, renewing or deepening of friendships took on as much importance. For some, this was a means of strengthening existing networks, whilst for others it was a first step into the community, and a potential springboard for greater involvement in village life later, as their children grew older. Although this is a mixed social class group, the common experience of its members was generally that of being women; of experiencing difficult moments such as the illness or even death of a child, or complications in pregnancy, and as at Kippie, of coping with the frequent absence of partners working in the oil and gas industry. Levels of participation were often precipitated by or deepened through such experiences.

A common culture at the crossroads: the contest over cultural value

Alongside notions of the “public sphere” and a “self-governing people”, Taylor (2002) suggests that the social imaginary through which modernity was constructed was based around a “market economy”. Yet underpinning the everyday cultural life of Culter is an alternative “sharing” economy, evident, as we have illustrated, in the voluntary work by and for residents that underpins a multitude of village clubs and amenities; free labour given in return for access to social networks and vernacular forms of cultural capital. In these ways everyday cultural participation occurs in large part through forms of gift economy (Offer, 1997), where little money passes between people, but “payment” relies on the swapping of skills, “mates rates”, “one turn deserving another” and so on. The sustainability of the Village Hall, for example, relies on all of these exchanges.
Yet within this formation there are strains – around generation, gender, class and their intersections – which reflect the tensions between residual (internally dominant) and emergent (externally dominant) structures of feeling, and which threaten to undermine it. Against the backdrop of broader changes in economic and social life, many older people in the village feel that it stands at a crossroads. Amongst the group of former state professionals (often women), who have tended to take the lead in voluntary civic forums like the Community Council, for example, there is frustration that more people do not step up to share what they sometimes feel is the burden of responsibility, along with concern that there will eventually be no one to fill their shoes. Yet volunteering depends on resources – forms of capital – that are more available to some than others, so that certain groups who might otherwise put themselves forward are constrained by rising working hours or their children’s organised after-school and weekend activities. For other people, volunteering highlights the issue of cultural capital, expressed in distinctions of class and belonging. An example of this is provided by Bert, a retired paper mill worker, who spoke favourably about the big difference a middle-class group of volunteer planters known as “Culter in Bloom” had made to the look of the village. At the same time, he expressed guilt that “locals” had not come up with the idea first and for not getting involved with the group himself. When asked why, he replied, “There’s a wall between us that I can’t get beyond. I don’t know why, but it’s there. I cannae explain”.

Whilst demarcations by social class are a feature of village life, historically these have largely been accommodated by a shared commitment to the communitarian-like principles underpinning the village imaginary and by the particular socio-spatial arrangement of institutional life. The latter tends to segment participation at the predominantly working-class Mill Club from involvement at more middle-class venues, such as Kippie Lodge and the Heritage Hall. Sitting in between, the Village Hall, as the “hall of the public”, takes on an ostensibly more neutral hue. Yet recent changes following the retirement of the long serving Hall Administrator provided an occasion for emerging class tensions around cultural value – and the broader contest in cultural values they imply – to surface. Seemingly just a straightforward disagreement about the appearance of the building within the hall’s management group, closer inspection revealed this to be a highly charged dispute about interwoven issues of “taste” and “purpose”. On one side, an incomer group of executives and professionals connected to the oil industry argued that the hall’s “aesthetic” needed upgrading in ways that would make it more marketable as a venue to let out to corporate bodies and for wedding receptions. Meanwhile, those on the other side of the argument, made up of locals and longer term residents responsible for the hall’s day-to-day administration, stressed the importance of it remaining as an open, free and familiar resource for the whole community. At root then, this was a dispute that centred on the value and values of everyday participation, about what kinds of activities were to be prioritised, who could get access, and on what terms. Ultimately, the “emergent” forces in this dispute, whose vision aligns more clearly with the neoliberal model of participation that increasingly dominates at the spatial scale of the creative city, backed down. Yet while this marked a victory for those defending the status quo, it is also an indication of the challenges to the sustainability of the residual model of participation in the face of ongoing changes to the material, demographic and social fabric of the community.
Conclusion

Cultural policy-making in the UK is subject to an urban, big city bias, which brackets out and marginalises other – smaller scale, rural and semi-urban – places; failing to understand and therefore misrepresenting their creative dynamics in the process. Here much thinking on the rural creative economy remains straightjacketed by a creative industries discourse that essentialises participation in extra-urban settings in limited ways. This is a problem stemming from and compounded by static and imposed metropolitan understandings of cultural participation and value more generally (Miles, 2013). In response, there is a growing critique of the neglect of the rural in cultural policy, and this has begun to unpack creative activity and the cultural economy outside of urban locations (Bell & Jayne, 2010). However, much of this reappraisal remains couched in the standard terms and traditional categories of what is to count as cultural engagement, along with how and where this happens.

In some accounts, this has resulted in a direct transposition of the deficit model of participation (Miles & Sullivan, 2010) to the countryside. Matarasso (2014, p.104), for example, in his account of the hitherto unrevealed vibrancy of cultural life in Aberdeenshire, highlights “the inspiration [residents] get from the gifted [arts] professionals they bring into their communities”. Our work in a nearby community, formerly in the shire but now located on the edge of the city of Aberdeen itself, also reveals the existence of a rich fabric of cultural participation outside of the urban centre. However, this extends well beyond understandings of the cultural domain and its value in policy, and is not dependent upon the imported expertise of cultural intermediaries. Rooted in everyday social relationships, it is comprised of a vast range of both traditional and informal practices, which together make up – in Williams’ (1958) sense – a “common culture”. This is articulated by local institutions that form pillars of the village social imaginary, contributing to a “structure of feeling” in the civic realm that emphasises mutualism and reciprocity.

The ethnographic method employed here is key to unearthing the historical configuration, contemporary mechanisms and underlying tensions of this “residual” formation. It shows how the manifold values of participation, understood as a set of interrelated cultural, social and economic processes, are only traceable close up in the everyday realm. It also reveals how the relationship between place and participation needs to be understood in terms of a negotiated process of identity and belonging. The issue of methods for understanding participation and notions of cultural value is one challenge for policy arising from our work. The other is how to act upon its findings in order to support, sustain and enable communities like Culter to “re-emerge” as providers of a richer, alternative model of participation to those currently legitimised by the state and shaped by the market.

Notes

1. Arts Council England’s 2015 Rural evidence and data review recognised funding imbalances in favour of urban areas. See http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Rural_evidence_and_data_review_0.pdf. A previous Council position statement (http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Position_statement-The_Arts_Council_and_communities_living_in_rural_England_April_14.pdf) indicates that, in 2012/13, investment per head from Grant-in-Aid and the National Lottery was four times greater in predominantly urban areas compared to those categorised as predominantly rural, and that per capita
spending on the arts and culture by local authorities was lowest of all in areas classified as “significant rural”.

2. From p. 49 of The story of the culter paper mills on the silvery dee. Privately printed for the directors of Culter Paper Mills at the Adelphi Press by his Majesty’s Printers, 1927. Copied booklet held at Aberdeen Central Library. Ref: The culter paper mills then and now 1751–1899, 1899–1919, 1919–1927; Lo 676 PR9.

3. The Culter Courier. The village website is at www.culter.net.

4. No recording devices were used in these encounters; otherwise their everyday, informal and sometimes intimate nature would have been compromised. Field notes were written up every evening and were manually coded in order to develop a thematic analysis of participation contexts, practices and their significance.

5. This was the title of Williams’ first novel, published in 1960.

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