Politicization of research and the relevance of geography: some experiences and reflections for an ongoing debate

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In this paper we address the revival of interest in recent years in the relevance of geographical research and highlight problems of politicization faced by researchers through cases of policy-oriented research in the UK and Belgium. We argue that geographers should be aware of the possibilities and constraints for critical engagement in the context of policy-oriented research. We identify at least two important opportunities for researchers to avoid clientelistic relationships with contractors and enhance their political relevance. First, researchers can stick to letter of the contract and maintain academic standards while at the same time interpreting their tasks according to their own ethical and political judgements. Second, relevance can be increased by forming alliances within and beyond the formal hierarchies of the state and the academy. The identification and utilization of these 'spaces of relevance' can be seen as the first step towards an approach that strategically seeks a balance between societal engagement on the one hand and contractual obligations, policy relevance and academic standards on the other.

Key words: *United Kingdom, Belgium, relevance, politicization, critical engagement, spaces of relevance*

Introduction

This paper embraces the ongoing and heated discussion on the relevance of geographical research, with reference to two cases of policy-oriented, contract research, one in the UK and the other in Belgium. Drawing attention to our experiences, the aim is to highlight some of the difficulties that can arise when researchers are committed to critical engagement for social and political change – what we consider *political relevance* – and where those lofty ideals are besmirched by processes of

politicization. By 'politicization' we mean the intentional or unintentional process of embroilment in political contestation; it may stem from one source or many sources and does not necessarily pose problems for the researcher. Our concern is neither the problem of reconciling contract research with academic liberty, nor engagement with the politics of urban policy evaluation (Turok 1991; Wilks-Heeg 2003), nor does it discuss whether we need more *policy*-relevant or 'grey' research (Peck 1999 2000; Banks and MacKian 2000; Pollard *et al.* 2000). We want to show that more ambitious

political relevance can be thoroughly limited by 'Kafka-esque' forces beyond the researcher's immediate knowledge or control. Whispering in the minister's ear (Banks and MacKian 2000; Peck 2000) does not suffice when he or she is unwilling to listen and take heed of what the researcher has to say.

Critically engaging with Habermas-inspired accounts of the planning process, we argue that sometimes the research context does not in any way resemble an ideal public sphere where arguments are judged on their academic merits alone. In those cases, research results do not speak for themselves. Rather than undermine the ideals of committed researchers, however, the purpose is to reflect upon possible strategies to overcome these limitations and encourage a model of research based on ideologically inspired advocacy that deploys those 'spaces of relevance' at the interface between funding institutions, the state and the wider public. In doing so, we advance the relevance debate by suggesting that the process of democratization of geographical research itself lies at the heart of a new strategy for geographers seeking to maximize the political relevance of their work.

Relevance, defined as 'the degree to which geographers make a contribution to the analysis and resolution of major economic, environmental and social problems' (Pacione 1999, v; cf. Johnston 1997, ch. 9), seemed to have disappeared from the mindsets of geographers since the 1980s, despite a flurry of interest in the early 1970s. It is over thirty years since Chisholm's (1971) *Area* article prompted, in part, discussions on relevance at AAG and IBG annual meetings – the latter covered by a *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* (1974) issue devoted to human geography's debate on the topic. Following the hiatus of the 1980s and 1990s, the question resurfaced in successive theme issues of *Transactions* (1999 2000), *Scottish Geographical Journal* (1999) and *Espaces et Sociétés* (2000), while in *Progress in Human Geography* a vivid debate continues, largely inspired by Doreen Massey's lecture for the same journal (Massey 2001).

A question underlying all these interventions concerns the sudden resurgence of interest in political relevance within geography after decades of more or less complete silence (Pacione 1999; Massey 2000). Many commentators writing in the late 1990s and the early part of the new millennium refer to the coming to power of New Labour and Democrat governments in the UK and the US respectively,

after two decades of New Right governments and their stranglehold on critical policy debate (Pacione 1999; Peck 1999; Massey 2000; Martin 2002). No less important under the Bush II administration in the US today, geographers within sections of the Left might equally bemoan the disappointment wrought by the supposed apolitical orientation of certain postmodern discourses within their discipline. According to some observers, postmodernism has drawn attention away from the practical significance of geography in the field of public policy, contending – and we agree – that it is now time to re-engage with policy issues in a concerted manner (Martin 2001). The revival holds particular interest for us in the possibilities unleashed for countering Leyshon's (1995) claim over geography's relative silence on poverty. Re-engagement requires a move away from esoteric deliberations and an enhanced willingness about 'getting one's hands dirty' (Peck 1999, 131) and to 'jump in!' (Banks and MacKian 2000), by working *in* and *with* the phenomena in question, eschewing any pretence of detached and value-free observation and becoming integral to the very process of trying to affect social and political change.

This paper investigates the kinds of practical problems that might confront researchers in their attempts to increase the political relevance of their work. It appears to us that the recent calls for geographers to engage in policy-relevant research have largely neglected these difficulties. Too often it would seem that geographers are somehow faced with a choice to produce relevant research, assuming that as long as they meet certain conditions (e.g. use specific kinds of language and methods), policymakers will listen to their recommendations, respond quickly and smoothly and adjust their policies accordingly (see Martin 2001; Dorling and Shaw 2002). Our experiences contradict this view. All three of us have engaged in policy-oriented research in the context of more or less 'Leftist' governments at national and local levels in the UK and Belgium. Despite the clear policy orientation of both projects, with the ambition of relevance central to the implementation of our research, at certain moments we all experienced a serious reduction in the political relevance of our work by the way the research was reoriented, interpreted and even discredited, by practitioners and policymakers at various levels of government. Following a section that addresses the Habermas-inspired collaborative planning ideal, we discuss our two experiences to make the point that

research takes place in a political power field that affects how the research process evolves and shapes the political relevance of its outcomes. The political colour of the national government is only one of many variables in this context and our account suggests that it is crucial to move beyond a state-centred approach and identify constraints and possibilities in other institutional spheres and at different geographical scales. We explore such an approach in the third section and conclude the paper with reference to the implications of our argument for the relevance debate in the geographical literature.

Habermas-inspired collaborative planning ideal

It appears to us that commentators in the debate on geography's relevance have sometimes implicitly assumed that in practice a version of the Habermasian 'ideal speech act' exists, where different parties interact openly and each actor is judged equally on the basis of the soundness of their arguments (Habermas 1984 1987). Patsey Healey is one of the more vocal advocates of the collaborative planning ideal that derives from Habermasian philosophy (Healey 1997). She writes of a planning process as 'the practices of managing co-existence in shared spaces' (1997, 68), management rooted in collective action and based on a 'process of intersubjective communication in the public sphere, through which dynamic mutual learning takes place' (1997, 55). Political subjects are social constructs, according to Healey, in the way that their 'ways of seeing and knowing the world, and ways of acting in it, are understood as constituted in social relations with others, and, through these relations are embedded in particular social contexts' (1997, 56). The idea of co-existence in shared spaces highlights the fact that planning, on this view, has moved some way towards a more pragmatic method (Habermas incorporates the philosophical pragmatism of John Dewey into his framework) for the creation of healthy and vibrant multicultural communities (for more discussion see Campbell and Fainstein 2003).

In keeping with the overt utopianism of these claims one would assume that political opportunities for geographers to engage with public debate are plentiful and will be seized as soon as geographical researchers formulate their conclusions so they are deemed comprehensible and relevant to policymakers in the particular context in question. The plethora of academic, policy and political

documents that speak of the salience of 'partnership' working (for the UK urban policy context see North 2000; Imrie and Raco 2003) gives a certain credence to these claims. For us the issue is whether counting on an ideological 'ideal speech situation' is unpalatable given the all too familiar reality of power differentials between actors. As Flyvbjerg (1998) argues, Habermas describes the utopia of communicative rationality, but not how to reach those high standards.

Two examples from practice

URBEX research in London, United Kingdom

The URBEX project of the EU-4th Framework Programme (1999–2002) focused on spatial patterns of exclusion and the extent to which concentrations of deprivation compound the difficulties of developing effective policies to address those problems at the neighbourhood level in 11 cities within six EU member states (Musterd and Murie 2002).[1] The objectives of the project were to:

- reach new understanding of the nature of social exclusion in European cities and how market exchange, redistribution and reciprocity affect integration and exclusion;
- assess the ways in which economic and labour market change, political participation, changing welfare states, housing systems, household structures and social networks determine patterns of spatial concentration of poverty in different European cities;
- assess how spatial patterns of social exclusion should be taken into account in strategies to enhance social integration, combat exclusion and reduce unemployment at different levels.

The cornerstone of the project was the selection of two neighbourhoods within each city to explore these concerns in a concrete, geographical setting: one nineteenth-century inner city area consisting primarily of private-rented housing; and the other a post-war suburban neighbourhood with a predominance of social-rented housing. The neighbourhoods were selected as those subject to particularly marked processes of exclusion and the aim was to conduct at least 30 in-depth interviews in both neighbourhoods with households considered to be victims of social exclusion, as well as a number of additional interviews with key-actors at the local level. In essence the project aimed to combine

in-depth neighbourhood analysis with an assessment of policies to tackle social exclusion in various cities across Europe.

The London case study was motivated by the desire to engage critically in the depth and extent of poverty experienced by residents of two council estates in Lambeth, South London (Beaumont and Hamnett 2001). Interviews in the early stages of the research revealed that the criteria for neighbourhood case selection were too strict for the London case, where the vast majority of deprived, vulnerable and marginalized inhabitants continue to reside in rapidly deteriorating council estates (Hamnett 2003; Beaumont 2005). Given their targeting by various regeneration programmes, two council estates were chosen for more detailed investigation: the Ethelred estate in the northern part of the borough near Vauxhall; and the Clapham Park estate in the more suburban southern part between Clapham, Brixton and Streatham town centres.

In retrospect, three distinct phases in the London URBEX research can be discerned: (1) case selection and research gathering momentum; (2) the proposed 'Project Vauxhall' (PV) regeneration initiative, the 'No' vote and subsequent politicization; and (3) the discreditation of the research in the aftermath of the 'No' verdict. The research began with a number of in-depth interviews with local practitioners, local government officials, council officers in Lambeth Borough Council, to gain an overall picture of the issues facing the borough with regards poverty, deprivation and the local regeneration agenda. The purpose was to acquire a more intricate understanding of the geography of deprivation in Lambeth and to make an informed decision about the appropriate neighbourhoods to investigate in detail. Certain Lambeth housing officers played an important role at this stage. The research progressed on to similar in-depth interviews with a vast array of people at the neighbourhood level: community development workers, activists and numerous residents. The research process gathered momentum and, at least for a while, was able to skirt the boundary between conflicting intra-community interests alongside rife tensions between local community activism and the local authority (cf. Maginn 2004).[2] It seemed that the research could make a few steps towards the ideal of all local stakeholders accepting the methodology, data and likely conclusions of the research. Relations between the research and the various stakeholders were managed through openness and transparency about the project's aims and objectives.

The result was a situation where all actors would share the same set of collective resources (i.e. the eventual results of scientific enquiry), enabling all parties, at least in theory, to communicate on a more or less mutually beneficial basis.

The second phase, however, witnessed politicization of the research in the context of the PV initiative and the 'No' vote among residents (cf. North 2003). In the midst of de-industrialization, central and local fiscal scarcity in the UK, and large-scale gentrification in Inner London, boroughs like Lambeth were increasingly looking for partnership with the private sector for 'regeneration' of their deteriorating council estates. Taken in conjunction with the agenda for promotion of so-called London-South-Central, Lambeth's appalling financial predicament and proposals for 'stock transfer', the PV initiative was a proposed £440 million redevelopment of a northern part of the borough encompassing China Walk and Ethelred housing estates (the latter one of the URBEX neighbourhoods). Initiated in 1995, the process involved a series of consultations between local authority councillors, executives and officers, private developers and residents over the desirability of demolition of council stock and the construction of more luxurious apartments, enhanced social and commercial infrastructure and a degree of housing for lower-income groups. By 1999–2000, the uncertainty of the benefits for local inhabitants was whipped into a frenzy of local political antagonisms among fractured and often conflicting intra-community interests, particularly in the run-up to the resident ballot for or against the PV initiative.

One resident of the Ethelred that had been interviewed for the URBEX research on a number of occasions as one of many important interviewees successfully mobilized support in the neighbourhood against PV in favour of proper upgrading, maintenance and repair of existing council stock under the banner of the 'Save Ethelred Homes' (SEH) campaign. With the advent of the marginal 'No' vote, the council was keen to apportion blame on suitable 'scapegoats' such as those involved with the SEH campaign and others present in the neighbourhood. The ensuing institutional and political paranoia resulted in rabid politicization that implicated the URBEX research as a collaborator and conspirator with alleged destructive local elements with, in the words of a local housing officer, 'the sole intention of the downfall of Lambeth Council'.

Politicization led to the third phase of the research. Under these tense conditions, the URBEX

research proved increasingly difficult to complete. Deteriorating relations between the researchers and the council involved accusations that lambasted the project as 'unscientific' (on grounds of alleged bias over respondent identification) and 'politically dubious' (alleged conspiracy with the SEH campaign). The accusations threatened the scientific respectability of the research, on the one hand, and the critical and transformative capacity of the research findings on the other by discrediting the project and placing limits on the possibilities of its completion and the effective dissemination of the results. The process necessitated a meeting at Brixton Town Hall to clear the air and establish and confirm the scientific, critically constructive and policy-oriented motivations of the URBEX research.

The final report was produced in a tamer fashion and in keeping with the desires of the council. Some of the more vociferous damnations of the council's record in dealing with the neighbourhood, voiced by residents and activists alike, were omitted but will be published elsewhere (Beaumont 2005). Doing otherwise ran the risk of further destabilizing already tense and increasingly politicized relations between the research and certain elements in the council. It is interesting to note that North's (2003) account is relatively silent on the conflicts between the local authority and the local civil society and paints a more sympathetic picture of the council's record on community involvement. Lambeth was the client for the evaluation of the PV initiative on which part of that chapter was based. It would seem that differences in the institutional and scalar dimensions of contracts might significantly determine outcomes. The greater distance between the EU-funded URBEX research and the council opened the space for strategic decisions over appropriate alliances during the research that facilitated the emergence of very different issues and tensions from the field.

Urban policy evaluation in Flanders, Belgium
The story of the Flemish urban policy research can equally be divided into three main stages. It starts under a social-democratic coalition of Socialists and Christian Democrats who established an urban policy in Flanders focusing on poverty and social exclusion, but with the prime political goal of countering the recent surge in support for the extreme Right party *Vlaams Blok* in deprived urban neighbourhoods. The urban policy emphasized a strong territorial focus on deprived neighbourhoods,

a relatively new approach in Belgium that demanded new research and education for officials. Funding was secured from (at the time) the Socialist minister for urban policy (Peeters) for a major, three-tiered evaluation (1999–2001), with the informal promise of later extension. The aims of the project were:

• development of a longitudinal screening of socio-economic conditions in urban neighbourhoods;
• a literature study and international comparison of the effectiveness and utility of a territorial approach to poverty, relating to the URBEX project;
• monitoring of the Flemish urban policy results, and integration and distribution of the overall research findings.

A second phase set in right after the research began in 1999, when a new coalition government came to power largely dominated by the Liberal VLD and with a sequence of Flemish regionalist ministers with little or no interest in urban problems at the head of the urban policy department. The researchers on the project experienced a rapid narrowing of interest from the side of the Flemish officials: first, it became clear that the project, as a relic of the former government, would not be prolonged after 2001; and second, the officials demanded a more shallow 'impact' evaluation of the urban policy on the basis of crude indicators of changing neighbourhood composition and a documentation of 'best practices' in other countries. Calling in requirements of scientific rigour, the researchers successfully resisted this redirection of the focus, and even extended the third section of the study to the analysis of the Flemish policy process (its discourse and goals). While the Flemish administration seemed to respect the researchers' intellectual freedom, their interest in the research findings continued to wane.

The project entered a third phase when the final report was written. The publication of the report inadvertently coincided with the voting of major legislative changes in urban policy. As the results of the study advised against some of the planned changes, the report and its contents were judged as politically undesirable. The Flemish officials in the steering committee of the research demanded that specific passages were deleted from the report and banned whole chapters to the appendices on the grounds of their allegations of 'dubious scientific value'. In addition, the officials succeeded in postponing publication until after the main decisions on the policy restructuring were taken. When finally

published, only a small number of copies were printed and, contrary to other reports, a digital version does not figure on the official Flemish urban policy website. Finally, and contrary to the stipulations of the research contract, the Flemish authorities demanded that the researchers did not publish the results through other channels.

There was evidently little or no question of the research being used in a productive fashion by the Flemish government. The best the researchers could do under the circumstances was to limit the utility of the research in the incumbent government's attempts to delegitimize the previous policies. Contrary to the Lambeth experience, the researchers tried to affect the policy process through several contentious acts. The researchers decided to ignore the demands of the administration and pursued a publication strategy resulting in a number of articles in planning journals that are influential in Flanders (De Maesschalck and Loopmans 2002; Loopmans 2002; Loopmans *et al.* 2003; Uitermark 2004). The researchers also had the occasion to engage in a public discussion with the Flemish urban policy coordinator and were invited to speak on behalf of civil society organizations. They were unable to counter the policy restructuring, but successfully stirred up a debate and strengthened the arguments of collective actors who opposed the policy reform. The publications and public statements inspired articles in *Alert* (the official Flemish magazine for welfare workers) and in the *Yearbook on Poverty*, an influential, annual publication on anti-poverty policy in Flanders (van Menxel 2002). They also inspired the Socio-Economic Council of Flanders and the High Council for Internal Affairs, both influential Advisory boards for the Flemish government, to take a more critical stance in their (non-coercive) advice on the policy reform (Vlaams Parlement 2002). At the same time, the arguments of the researchers have fed local struggles for the maintenance of a socialized urban policy (see Raymaekers and Vandekerckhove 2003).

Afterthoughts on the experiences

We are aware that these experiences are not unique. Any critical researcher involved in policy-oriented, contract research is likely to encounter at some point a conflict of interest that might serve to impede the dissemination of their findings. We disclose these experiences to argue that the relevance debate should acknowledge that forces beyond the individual's direct control can shape the research process. Even if one is fully aware of the political impact the research might have, it remains important to consider the possibilities for organizing research so that it retains its political and academic credibility while avoiding the threat of discreditation when conflicts of interest set in. Both the Lambeth and Flemish cases reveal the difficulties of following this line and highlight contrasting decisions by the researchers towards politicization in their respective contexts. In the Lambeth case, politicization posed a problem where the Habermasian ideal was severely restricted, delegitimizing the project and where the relatively depoliticized arena of academic publication became the preferred route for dissemination. Politicization in the Flemish case, however, formed a necessary complement to the research by triggering a response to join resistance against the government policy. Rather than lament the absence of the Habermasian ideal, the Flemish case reveals the importance of political action by the researchers to do something about it. Both cases suggest that organizing research to maximize its political relevance might require strategic decisions, which immediately raises the question about the requisite rules that should be adhered to when undertaking research and presenting the findings to the outside world.

Conducting research in a conflictive environment

Any answers to these questions necessarily have to address the role of the researcher within a strategic context, especially his or her position vis-à-vis the institutions of the state with their twin role as vehicles for influencing social change and as prime sources of research grants. In order to grasp how research can retain its relevance in a non-receptive environment, we want to stress that researchers are not obliged to accept that state institutions sometimes ignore, misinterpret or discredit research. Instead, we argue that researchers should deploy 'spaces of relevance' at the interface between funding institutions, the state and the wider public, to maximize the relevance of research in conflictive situations. These 'spaces of relevance' stem from the combination of two sources.

The first source lies in the relationship with the funding institution. A general feature of contracts is that they do not indicate precisely what each party should do. Academics thus have some liberty to choose methods, concepts and theories. Moreover, the funding institution is not always particularly

interested nor does it possess the capacity to thoroughly influence the research (as exemplified by the 'distant' European Union in the Lambeth case). But even when the 'client' keeps a relatively close eye on proceedings, as in the Flemish case, researchers still have recourse to the dual statute of applied research (Blanc 2000). Applied researchers are always obliged to respond to the demands of scientific respectability for their recognition within the academic community, while at the same time facing the demands of their 'client'. The duality forces the applied researcher to compromise, where the demands of the scientific community can serve to resist total obedience to the 'client'. As long as it is possible to provide proof of academic competence, researchers can stick to letter of the contract while interpreting it according to their own ethical and political judgements (Blanc 2000). In the context of the urban policy research in Flanders, for example, it was decided not only to discuss earlier policies but also policy proposals that were currently on the table. The contract and the academic considerations *neither obliged nor forbade* the researchers to discuss these proposals in a critical manner. While considered unfavourable by the Flemish authorities, the researchers were able to persist by claiming its necessity on the basis of their own judgement of scientific rigour.

A second source relates to the idea that the state should not be seen as a unified and monolithic actor (Brenner 1999). Most contributions to the relevance debate (with notable exceptions of Massey 2001 2002; Blanc 2000; Pollard *et al.* 2000) seem to assume a centrist view on the distribution of power in society and describe the state (and even more limited, the government) as the only actor capable of implementing social change. Hence, much of the debate revolves around getting access to government and its allied institutions and 'selling one's soul to the devil' (i.e. subservience to the state and its vested interests – see Harvey 1974; Leach 1974; Garnier 2000), or remain distant from the state but at the same time without power (Dorling and Shaw 2002; Martin 2001 2002; Peck 1999 2000).

Conversely, Blanc (2000) and Massey (2002) seek to transcend this polarized discussion. While acknowledging that policymakers are indeed powerful actors who merit particular attention when it comes to disseminating results and at the same time emphasizing that they will not always be receptive to a researcher's message, both stress connections with multiple actors beyond the formal state apparatus.

Examples include a plethora of non-state institutions mediating between individual citizens and the state. Our concrete experiences reveal that 'the state' is not a singular actor, and that particular institutions of the state (and beyond) might have different and even opposing interests (e.g. EU, Lambeth Council and local civil associations in Lambeth; the Flemish urban policy administration, its advisory councils and local welfare organizations in the Flemish case). It is important to acknowledge the fragmented nature of the state, since the research environment, like the state itself (Brenner 1999), seems to be rapidly re-scaling, with new institutions, notably the EU, playing an ever-important role. The re-scaling of the research environment makes it progressively important for critical researchers to strategically 'jump scales' to find forums where results can be presented under favourable circumstances and with the most desirable social and political impact.

Interstices must be sought by researchers to mobilize support, establish a firm institutional basis and advance critical claims that may or may not tally with those of the authorities. In order to enhance political relevance, researchers should connect strategically with a range of different actors, not the least with those who are seen as 'dominated' (vulnerable, marginalized, subordinate) in society. As Leach (1974) points out, the individual (researcher) is not a political force but can unite with and arm the opposition to counteract hostile stakeholders. In the context of urban policy research, the conditions for pursuing such a strategy seem favourable as researchers are ever more compelled to engage with local stakeholders (the EU 6th Framework Programme is an obvious example). Academics are again presented with the opportunity to involve marginalized groups and to elevate their position in the discourse and the structure of policy networks (Pain and Francis 2003).

Conclusion

At a time when almost all research has something of a 'grey' tinge, we do not deny the important contribution made by policy-oriented contract research towards a more just society. But we are keen to associate with critical researchers who depend financially on policy-oriented contracts and are willing to feed wider debates to move towards a more radical and democratic research process. While we agree in principle with attempts to apply the Habermasian 'ideal speech' situation for the

development of more appropriate policies involving all relevant actors including researchers, we do not hold radical consensus as our ideal. How our two suggestions for seeking spaces of relevance are used in the real world is very much up to the discretion of the individual researcher or team. It is clear these spaces of relevance have not been fully exploited in our two experiences and therefore we do not hail them as examples of 'best practice'. In hindsight more could have been made of the independence as a result of EU funding in Lambeth, as well as more use of alliance formation with local civil groups and greater efforts to publicize the findings. More could have been done to follow up and connect with the flow of ideas and practices that was spurred by the initial set of publications in Flanders. Massey is right when she notes that it

> is all too easy for the emphasis to be on . . . [publication as an end in itself] rather than on the notion of launching something in a stream, a proliferation of connections, to see how it will fare, how it will affect and be affected. (2000, 133)

We argue that there are important consequences for the choices researchers make and that there are pressing reasons for giving due consideration to the opportunities that are available for radicalization and democratization in each particular research context. These opportunities are masked when one follows a more structural determinist conception of the state. On the ground, concrete experiences show that research feeds into and is affected by many smaller and larger battles and that an effective strategy for the dissemination of research findings can ensure academic authenticity and political relevance. This strategy can be based upon the classic academic practice of scholarly and popular publications (where the right to publish as a non-negotiable bottom-line in 'grey' research is a necessary condition), but in some cases, more creative methods (public speeches, discussion groups, think tanks and so on) will be necessary to infuse the debate with the results of the research. It is clearly unwise to associate so-called 'grey' research with dullness, political irrelevance and academic mediocrity. We should rather see the ambiguous status of this research as a challenge and find out what kind of unexpected opportunities for critical engagement are present at the interstices in the apparently monolithic structure of the state.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 See the URBEX website for more details and for copies of the research findings (http://www2.fmg.uva.nl/urbex/Welcome.html).
2 Lambeth Borough Council was presided over by successive Hard Left Labour Groups in the 1980s that clashed repeatedly with Thatcherite central governments of the time. During the research the council was resolutely New Labour; it is controlled more recently by the Liberal Democrats.

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