



Respatialization and local protest strategy formation: Investigating high-speed rail megaproject development in the UK



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ABSTRACT

Understanding spatial conceptions is critical to the analysis of local protest strategy formation. Spatialities provoke inquiry into the drivers that may prompt local actors to adhere to particular strategies, and the implications this has on forms of contestation and the way protest is organized. It is argued that local protest can 'respatialize' when actors are embedded in social movements and translocal assemblages associated with controversy over development, and that this warrants reconsidering the role of 'place'. A case study of a proposed megaproject framed in the national interest – a high-speed rail network called HS2, in the United Kingdom – is used to investigate local protest respatialization. Fieldwork was conducted in the Chilterns, an area of high scenic beauty which will be adversely impacted by HS2. The results show how the perceived need to respatialize protest away from the local to the national domain reconfigures debate to focus primarily on economic issues. Respatialization also has implications for the dynamics of protest assemblages with unlikely alliances developing around a need to engage with or engender debate in the national polity. It is concluded that local actors may opt to respatialize their protest in response to their interaction with social movements and protest assemblages that disengage from specific place-based interests. The paper recommends that future research on the geographies of social action take forward spatialization as a powerful lens for investigating protest strategy formation.

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Introduction

In this paper the respatialization of local protest is critically investigated. The key aim of the paper is to demonstrate how research on respatialization can generate analytically novel understandings of protest strategy formation for research on the geographies of social action. This is achieved by investigating how protest is reframed according to a particular spatiality – thus, 'respatialized'. To adequately study the interfaces between social geography and political contention, it is pivotal to understand how locally situated protest is structured in and through spatiality. The need for doing so is inspired, in part, by the continuing prominence given to the 'not-in-my-backyard' (NIMBY) concept in the social geography literature (e.g. DeVerteuil, 2013; Hubbard, 2006; McClymont and O'hare, 2008; Wolsink, 2006). Utilization of NIMBY is considered cumbersome where the role of 'place' in local protest environments should instead be understood as relational to – and

therefore informed by – place attachments of other actors groupings as well as variegated types of political conduct (Massey, 2005; Pierce et al., 2011).

How and why do local actors adopt a particular conception of spatiality in their protest strategy? This first and central research question inquires into the roles of spatialities in protest formation. It builds, in part, on studies which frame spaces as sites of political struggle (e.g. Dikeç, 2012; Leitner et al., 2008; MacKinnon, 2011; Martin, 2013; Martin and Miller, 2003). A second research question elaborates upon these findings by looking at what implications protest respatialization holds for debate on controversial developments, as conveyed, for instance, through major frames of contestation (e.g. social, economic, ecological) commonly adopted by protest movements (Bailey et al., 2010; Hess, 2007; Holifield, 2009). The third research question therefore focuses on the organization of protest experienced both locally and elsewhere.

The paper contributes to the existing literature by formulating a novel perspective that centres on the (re)spatialization of political contestation. This perspective emphasizes the ways in which spatialities are purposely reconfigured in order to respond to existing 'scales of regulation' in the relevant public policy domains (Kurtz,

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2003). Whilst actors' ability to spatialize protest has received relatively little scholarly interest (but see Kurtz, 2003; Bailey et al., 2010), it is crucial to understand which spatialities are adopted to engage with developments in a particular way. Yet where controversial developments are contested, it is also crucial to understand how diverse actors of plural spatial designation invoke debate and organize protest. The course and direction of protest that result from such plurality gives way to modified understandings of protest strategy formation.

The core idea of this paper is that protest respatialization is a consequence of, but also leads to, new modes of debate and protest through interaction with social movements and assemblages. To this end, theories on social movements and translocal assemblages are synthesized to set the conceptual background against which respatialization can be understood in terms of protest strategy formation (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Marston et al., 2005; McFarlane, 2009). It, therefore, aids understanding of the spatialization of social movements in situations of political contention (Martin, 2013). Particular emphasis is placed on protest in science-intensive decision contexts, not least because of the ability of both incumbent (i.e. expert) and counter-knowledges to co-construct protest (Chilvers and Evans, 2009; Hess, 2011; Irwin and Michael, 2003).

Mirroring earlier work (cf. Davies, 2013; Hess, 2011; Holifield, 2009; McFarlane, 2009), a case study is included to provide insights into the geographies of social action. The case study concerns a 'megaproject' proposal for developing a high-speed rail network in the United Kingdom (UK), called High-Speed Rail 2 (HS2). Fieldwork was conducted in the Chilterns, an area likely to be adversely impacted if HS2 goes ahead. The Chilterns is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), meaning it is a nationally 'sensitive area' from the perspectives of landscape conservation and scenic beauty (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011; cf. Rozema, 2014). Face-to-face interviews and document analysis have revealed that local protest actors engaged with HS2 as an issue of national rather than local interest, and in so doing changed the spatialities of debate. The issue of journey time savings in the HS2 business case, which became a primary issue on which debate focused, has been unpacked to illustrate how this came about.

The case study investigates how place-based actors in the Chilterns constructed HS2 as a national issue. It focuses on actors' interaction with the national campaign against HS2 and with the translocal protest assemblage. The implications respatialization had for debate on HS2 will be mapped, as well as how respatialization impacted on organized protest. The case study (Section 'Protest respatialization in the debate on journey time savings') is preceded by a literature review of counter-scientific social movements and assemblages in Section 'Social movements and assemblages of protest'; and in Section 'Case selection, case study and methods', by a justification for focusing on infrastructure 'megaproject' development, an introduction to HS2 as a development controversy and a description of the methods. Section 'Conclusions and recommendations for further research' returns to the research questions posed in this introduction. In this final section it is recommended that further research on the geographies of social action take forward spatialization as a powerful concept for investigating the dynamics of protest strategy formation.

Social movements and assemblages of protest

Definitions of social movements abound. Della Porta and Diani (1999: 16) define social movements as "informal networks based on shared beliefs and solidarity which mobilize around conflictual issues and deploy frequent and varying forms of protest". This

definition emphasizes that political contention is fundamental to the emergence and growth of social movements, thus suggesting that contention builds civil collective action (cf. Leitner et al., 2008). When it comes to contention over the utilization of science, especially where characterized by uncertainty, social movements play an important role in the production of alternative knowledges (Jamison, 2010). These so-called counter-knowledges are invariably subordinate to the established knowledge centres, but obtain legitimacy from a public mandate to frame problems in a particular way. Social movements may use counter-knowledges for constructing alternative scientific understandings or, conversely, to 'un-do' the scientific basis of particular controversies (Hess, 2011).

In the political sciences, social movements are often associated with the political opportunity structures of states or other rule-competent bodies (e.g. Snow et al., 2008). An investigation of political opportunity structures may identify existing institutional points of access for social movements. It can also explain variance in the institutionalization and professionalization of social movements (Van der Heijden, 1997). Although this structural approach reveals interesting differences between social movements across polities, it does present a number of problems. The approach stipulates that movements want to become politically active within the formal structures of the polity, without giving due consideration to informal structures – cultural norms, ideas, and so on. Consequently, the approach assumes social movement growth to be largely determined by the availability of institutional access points. Yet most problematic is the absence of a spatial perspective in understanding social action. That is, social action is decoupled from its spatial underpinnings with social movements and the polity being presented as fixed entities.

In the face of political contention, not least science-intensive decision contexts, analyses of social movements require an understanding of spatial and temporal complexities (Leitner et al., 2008; cf. De Landa, 2006). These complexities present opportunities to better investigate manifestations and the profiling of social movements in the science-policy interface. In particular, they provide scope to understand social movements as a subset of their respective social, political and cultural environments. Hess (2007) draws attention to the roles of meaning (i.e. discourses) and what he frames as 'cultural repertoires' (e.g. themes of contestation) to navigate how social movements make sense of and act upon what happens around them. Meanings and cultural repertoires help understand the emergence, growth and sometimes also the disappearance of particular social movements across space and time.

Social movements are active in a number of science-intensive policy domains, including policy controversies relating to genetic modification, biotechnology, nuclear energy, and climate change (e.g. Irwin and Michael, 2003). One way of looking at this is to consider their manifestation a function of the political system, for example as is done in the case of the anti-nuclear movement (Kitschelt, 1986). However, in recent years more social movement analysis has focused on the sites where (counter) knowledges are accumulated. This literature has assigned value to the interfaces where 'lay' and 'expert' members of a policy domain congregate or conflict (Irwin and Michael, 2003; Hess, 2011). In the HS2 case study, lay-expert analytics have proved particularly useful for understanding how the scientific justification for megaproject development divided the polity into clear proponent and opponent camps.

In science-intensive decision contexts, social movements are best regarded as scientific counter-publics that emanate from subordinate positions and advocate alternative policy trajectories (Hess, 2011). Counter-publics mobilize public opinion which not only differ from, but also contest the 'incumbent' policy discourse of those in positions of authority. As observed by Hess (2011), the significance of scientific counter-publics lies within their struggle

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