'The Illusive Local' - Abandoning the Student/Local Dichotomy in St Andrews

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This project took a variety of guises before I discovered what it was I was studying. Initially I entered the field with the loose aim to prove or disprove whether there was a 'student/local' dichotomy. To do this I had to find 'local' people, yet this proved problematic. The idea of 'incomers' emerged, and with it the idea that St Andrews was a place where not all locals are 'local'. Finally I realised what I had been trying to understand. In a place where a diverse range of people live together, (both student and 'local'/'incomer'), how an individual defines their own position within society becomes vitally important. I present the view that such dichotomies of 'student'/'local' and 'local/incomer' do not really exist; I instead contend that such ideas are artificial, more a means of distinction, not of division, and that their existence is prevalent in how we think, but not necessarily what we think.

Part One: In Search Of 'Locals'

The Whey Pat, Monday Afternoon

The Whey Pat Tavern in St Andrews is a warm, welcoming pub with a clutch of regulars, both student and local. I begin my fieldwork on a bright afternoon in March; it is 4:25pm and there are five customers in the pub, including me. Sunlight penetrates the thick glass windows, lighting up the floating dust; the atmosphere is one of calm. Old black and white pictures line the walls, some of golfers gone by, most of various streets and businesses throughout their history, and personalities of the town, the shopkeepers, the caddies. A few more recent snaps pay homage to one of the regular's 'Old Tom Morris' act. Soon, the '5pm crowd' filter in. They are, with some variation, a group that congregates every day to drink together. A bishop, golfers, lecturers, the retired, most over fifty, and all male. I probed them with a few simple questions: what did they think of students? Did, as many of those students might suspect, they dislike them? Was there a great divide?

They're Alright

These simple questions often received simple answers. The locals do not dislike students. 'They're okay'; 'They bring money into the town'; 'It's just the minority that spoil it for others'; are a few of the answers I received. People were generally rational and measured in their responses, as if they had made them many times before, had genuinely weighed up the pros and cons of students' presence in the town. The relationship between university students and locals is one that, in St Andrews especially, with its high percentage of students, will always be discussed. When working behind the bar I cannot help but catch snippets of conversations about students, some in support of them, others against. Now, in search of opinions, I find that people readily supply them, already fully formed.

Often, these opinions revolved around drinking habits in particular. During a conversation with the 'Monday crew' (a group of 4-6 men who often drink together on a Monday evening), Bob said to me that it was 'just the odd few [students], the ones playing pub golf and vomiting in bars and the like' who caused trouble, whilst Glyn said that it was just the 'minority that spoil it for the others'. To me, these statements suggested two things. One, that these older men did not appreciate what they saw as disorderly and rude behaviour, especially within the Whey Pat (just a week before a group of male students from a sports club caused two of their members to vomit inside the pub; this was evidence for their remarks), and two; that whilst a few anomalous individuals could harm the reputation of the whole, in general students were perfectly fine, good people. This initial response already began to destroy the idea of a student/local dichotomy I had entered the field with; locals did not have problems with students as a whole, and instead found fault with specific students, or types of students in particular.

Different Students, Different Locals

My conversations with the 'locals' often took a specific route, one that I now see I had unwittingly imposed upon them. After my initial questions about students, I often wanted to fill out each informant's background, and I did this by simply asking 'Are you a local?' and 'How long have you lived in St Andrews?' Having embarked

upon my fieldwork with the student/local dichotomy in mind, my exploration of each informant's background was imbued with a desire to provide me with evidence of such a dichotomy; I wanted to find 'locals' to oppose my 'students'. I soon realised imposing the student/local dichotomy upon my fieldwork was naïve. I found that not only were there different students, but different locals too. It was during a conversation with Nick that I first discovered this.

Nick, I learnt, had lived in the town for thirty years. Now retired, he had been a producer with STV and relocated to St Andrews in the twilight of his career to support his mother. Despite having been an almost daily visitor to the Whey Pat, and a presence in the town for three decades, Nick was still not a local. 'Oh no,' he said, 'I'm an "incomer". People like Jack over there are fourth generation St Andrean, he is a real "local"'. Nick then was not considered to be a true 'local' by locals, and subsequently he did not feel a 'local' himself either. Similarly Simon, who had also lived in St Andrews for thirty years, moving initially to work in the hospital said: 'I'm an incomer, and I'll always be an incomer, it doesn't bother me, but that's how it is'. Both then expressed that they are somehow different from the true 'locals', those born and bred in the town, and thus tend to band together (albeit loosely) under the term of 'incomers'. Both Nick and Simon were not isolated cases with almost half of my informants identifying themselves as 'incomers' rather than 'locals'.

This realisation that there were 'incomers' as well as 'locals' shed new light upon my initial theory of a student/local dichotomy. How could there be such a dichotomy, after all, if half of the locals were not in fact 'local'? There seemed instead to be a much wider spectrum of people, at least with the categories of student/incomer/local, along a scale of perceived acceptability by the latter. The dichotomy of local/incomer was also problematic. These incomers may not have felt they were truly 'local', but were never treated poorly because of this distinction. In fact, I feel my ignorance of the categories altogether, despite having worked in the pub for over six months, is proof of the submerged nature of such a distinction. The local/incomer dichotomy I found impinged even less upon people's actions than the student/local dichotomy did. Having set off in search of locals, I found there were

few to be found. I soon turned towards examining the existence and inadequacy of these dichotomies.

Part Two: Abandoning Dichotomies

The Past

Of the 'true' locals I met, I was presented with differing ideas of the past: what the relationships between students and locals were like, and their own 'local' upbringings. Strathern suggests that the past is integral in creating a local/incomer dichotomy; she states that we 'unthinkingly account for [the dichotomy] by simple regression: the whole village *was* a community till outsiders came in' (Strathern 1982: 248). She suggests that localness develops through nostalgia, that there is a notion of a community before incomers arrived, which is more pure, and what 'localness' actually reflects. I believe Strathern's idea has some firm grounding, but this is exactly because the inverse is expressed in St Andrews.

Jack, for example, said to me that student/local relations were better in the past as students were better integrated within the town. Students, he said, whose numbers totalled around 2,500 compared with 8,000 nowadays, often lived alone, with a family who put them up for the academic year. He claimed this fostered better relations between the student body and the locals as contact was maintained. Tom, on the other hand, felt that student/local relations were worse in the past due to a series of stunts performed by students. He told me two stories: one where someone had abseiled down St Salvator's Chapel, leaving bright footprints upon the spire; and another where a large sheet had been strung between the two remaining spires of the cathedral. He went on to explain the high intake of boarding school pupils also had an effect on the town. These students, now somewhat liberated from their previous lifestyle, went 'a little crazy' with their newfound freedom. Anthony however, felt little change in the relations between locals and students. In answering my question 'how do you feel about students?' he began his response by saying 'I've grown up with them'.

These three differing views indicate then that St Andrews has no single nostalgic or romantically idealised past. Indeed, Anthony's remark about 'growing up' with the students made me think there was a feeling of inevitability about students being in the town. My view that there is no student/local dichotomy is supported here; if there is no single past for the 'locals' to strive for, there can be no student/local divide. Students have been a part of St Andrews for the past 600 years and will continue to be so. They are as much a part of the town as the locals and so in these terms there can be no simple student/local divide.

The Whey Pat Drinker

I wondered if the student/local and local/incomer dichotomies did not exist, was there anything else that did? The initial responses I received from my informants and which I have detailed above suggest that there is. If the locals disliked those students who did not drink in the Whey Pat as they felt people should, was this the basis for a separate dichotomy? Indeed, many of my informants expressed the idea that drinkers at the Keys or the Criterion for example were 'different sorts of people', and that each pub had its own clientele and way of doing things. Indeed, as a barman at the Whey Pat, I can identify both local and student regulars, who are 'Whey Pat drinkers'; conversely, I can identify those who are not 'Whey Pat drinkers'. This suggests that such a dichotomy cuts across any notion of a student/local divide. Emmett's ethnography of Blaenau Ffestiniog supports this idea and she explains that 'one of the ways in which the barrier between Welsh and English is crossed is by members of each category uniting on each side of other divisions in the town' (Emmett 1982: 217). Thus, although the sports club students who vomited in the pub were definitely not 'Whey Pat drinkers', the Real Ale society, who drink 'real' beer at a reasonable pace and join in with pub activities such as the dominoes competition, are.

This dichotomy seems perfectly reasonable then, but it is exactly this that causes me to believe it is weak in application. Emmett points towards the false nature of dichotomies, stating that there is a difference between how the native Welsh feel 'towards *ruling England* on the one hand and towards English individuals they get to know on the other' (Emmett 1982: 215) thus contending that often

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dichotomies do not impinge upon individual interpretation, and that they do not lend much to the decisions made by those who utilise them. Further, her suggestion that dichotomies can cut across one another is equally reductive; if dichotomies can be re-arranged, re-negotiated, and ignored, then are they not inherently personal, flexible and open to individuals to appropriate for themselves? Thus in creating another dichotomy, one which cut across the two I had previously found, I realised I had in fact merely highlighted this personal nature, and further shown the ways that dichotomies are non-existent in reality. Dichotomies then, even when delimiting interest, and not position, clearly have little foundation in the real world, so why do they exist, and why do we deploy them in our thinking?

Part Three: Distinction, not Division

Distinction

In St Andrews, a town where a diverse range of people from all over the world come together, dichotomies seem to be used to distinguish, not to divide. To quote the examples above, we can see how in St Andrews, there are cases where dichotomies exist along the lines of perceived position (student/local), and cases where we can infer they exist through shared ideals (Whey Pat drinker/non Whey Pat drinker). That these dichotomies can cut across one another, be utilised, ignored, adhered to or rejected is exactly the point; they are personal ways of distinguishing the self from the other. Something Simon said to me throws this into sharper relief. When talking about students, he began by saying 'I'm extremely tolerant'; that 'most of them [students] are alright', and finished with an amusing quip: 'some of them are complete arseholes, but that's by the by'. Simon then, an incomer, seems to implicitly recognise the mutability of dichotomies in his own speech. He felt the need to describe himself as 'extremely tolerant', first positioning himself in relation to these dichotomies; and recognised the fallibility of the student/local divide, as he believed some students were bad, but 'that's by the by' – this was to be expected. Thus he recognised in his answer this was his personal take on the dichotomies we were discussing, and furthermore that mutability of such divisions was inevitable.

Cohen's reflections on ethnicity and community support this. He states that although people 'recognize in [community] the most adequate medium for the expression of their whole selves' (Cohen 1985: 107), and therefore dichotomies are useful in structuring thinking, this does not mean 'people perceive an exact identity of interest between themselves and their community' (Ibid). Consequently the individual does not adhere to dichotomies so stringently as to see them in black and white. Cohen uses Tilly's idea of an 'ideological hat-stand' to illustrate this paradox, and Simon seems to exemplify this in his speech. By pointing out the shared and differing nature of dichotomies Simon reflects how 'a single piece of furniture...can accommodate a large number and wide variety of hats' (Ibid).

Not Division

I hope to have made clear that this aspect of dichotomies as distinguishing reinforces their inadequacy in reality, yet also explains their continued existence in our minds. Dichotomies should disappear, as inadequate ways of thinking about things, but their mutability allows them to survive; they are extremes within which we bound our ideas. I shall clarify this by using McFarlane's notion of dichotomy as a form of 'language'. He says of the dualistic, dichotomised society of Shetland, that:

'The identities incomer and Shetlander, and the stereotypes associated with them, have become the main language in terms of which conflicts between individuals and groups are discussed, and in terms of which people's behaviour is evaluated. This is simply because these conflicts have emerged in these directions' (McFarlane 1981: 134).

I would argue this is also true of the Whey Pat. A local might dislike a student for any particular reason, yet often this reason is confused and blurred with the category of student. For example, when the sports club students vomited in the pub, Glyn said 'it's the minority who spoil it for the majority'. In reality, he disliked the boys for not respecting what he saw as the values of the pub, yet he still focused this opinion in terms of students/locals. The student/local dichotomy didn't inform what he thought, but how he thought it. This dichotomy, as with the Shetlander/incomers,

provided a language to describe the conflict he saw happening. Thus we can see that although dichotomies are seen as unrealistic, they still seep into our structuring of the world around us.

To tie up this idea of dichotomies as a method of structuring the world around us, I want to come back down to the level of the individual, and focus upon how each of us choose the dichotomies we adhere to. Burnett claims 'Communities are largely populated by individuals who are involved in a complex and heterogeneous myriad of relationships and identity groupings' (Burnett 1998: 217). This is very prevalent in St Andrews, and is particularly exemplified by the idea of Whey Pat drinkers vs. Keys drinkers, or indeed of any other pub. A person might put themselves in the category of 'Whey Pat drinker' rather than 'Key's drinker' because the values of the Whey Pat appeal to them. This does not prevent them from being a student, or a local, or an incomer, a member of the church, an atheist, a unionist or a nationalist. The few dichotomies I have discussed here form part of a complex web from which people pick categories with which to define their sense of self. In this sense dichotomies are definitely not divisive but again, distinguishing, each individual hoping to define and 'delimit the bounds of similarity' (Cohen 1985: 110). Essentially I believe that the existence of dichotomies within the Whey Pat is merely an extension of those individual choices being reflected within people's speech and actions. I do not believe any of my informants held stringently to the dichotomies of student/local, local/incomer, but rather used them as a springboard from which to begin illustrating their own ideas.

Part Four: The Illusive 'Local'

Conclusion

To help me conclude, I shall call again upon Burnett as I feel that my findings echo her findings and theories of Shetland. She states that:

'...whilst there is much evidence to suggest that within the rural setting individuals do recognize the economy of incomer/local labels, individuals also appreciate the

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superficiality and inaccuracy of the labels in terms of how they identify with them from their own experience' (Burnett 1998: 217).

Burnett then, it could be said, supports my notion that people recognise and make use of dichotomies in their ways of thinking, yet at the same time they see them as inaccurate and that realistically, their experiences differ far from these perceived oppositions. Thus, the drinkers in the Whey Pat might use the various dichotomies of student/local, local/incomer etc. in structuring their thought processes and responses to my questions, but this does not necessarily reflect their real feelings. How people feel about others is more a result of their individual personality than it is because of their position on one side of a dichotomy.

By examining dichotomies in this light, we can see how they exist in a paradoxical sense, at once ignored and repudiated and yet reinforced and enacted at the same time. Their unrealistic nature is partly the reason for their continued existence. We cannot help but use them in our everyday lives. As I draw to a close, the identity of the 'local' still remains illusive. I went searching for the other half of the student/local opposition and instead found a huge spectrum of people, each located in a separate part of this complex web of dichotomies. I discovered that these naïve oppositions still inform our ways of thinking, even if we know things are never quite so simple. I have found then that dichotomies are artificial; more a means of distinction and not of division, that their existence is prevalent in how we think, but not necessarily what we think.

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