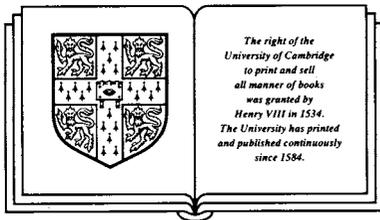


POLITICS IN PLACE

Social power relations in an
Australian country town

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Introduction: the origins of a study

This is a study of local politics in the rural Shire of Cowra, New South Wales. Cowra Shire, in 1986, had a population of about 12 000, some two-thirds of whom lived in the town of Cowra. The Shire's economy is largely agricultural, with the town servicing the needs of its own people and those of its rural hinterland.

The study explains the maintenance of Cowra's local political power structure with analysis of social processes and associated ideologies. The problem it tackles lies in the persistence of a hierarchical social relationship, one between interested groups of people who were, and some who were not, able to consistently gain access to a political system. It reveals why, in Cowra Shire, in 1986, some people could more easily than others make local politics work for them. In order to do so, it describes the dynamics of local political activity. To develop explanation for the nature of that activity, it refers to the historical social structures within which choices of political action have been made.

In building explanation, my work applies and seeks to develop social theory which may be used to cast light on political relations in other situations. In this, and being a study of a particular place and time, it resembles many community studies. By regarding spatial and historical contexts, however, it moves away from the discrete community assumption of some earlier studies toward a concept of community in which institutions are interrelated and locality-based without being locality constrained.¹ Community studies can transcend locality, as indicated by their contribution to theoretically informed analyses of class and power in Australian society (Austin, 1982, 1984).

Recognition that social relations are constructed over space, and that localities differ socially, has helped to reawaken some of the interest in community studies which waned during the 1970s. Community studies, however, should not repeat old errors. There is no justification for attributing simple social causation to a spatial entity, as implied by the now long-discredited notion of a rural-urban continuum. This does not mean that spatial factors have no place in a causal model of social relations, nor does it mean that differences and relationships between urban and rural

societies are not worthy of research. It does suggest that attention to such generalities as urban and rural may be more productive with complementary focus on the particularity of place, and social construction within and of place. The research to be reported here considers such social constructions. It draws heavily on the methods of community study, in order to observe the effects of ideology on the interpretations of individuals, to observe the meanings which individuals attached to their social situation and events around them, and to observe the way those meanings enabled some groups in local politics while disabling others.

Origins and methods of research

No community study can claim to be free from the background and idiosyncracies of its writer, and the personal events which occur before and during fieldwork.² This study originated with research which started in July, 1985. No field other than community studies attracted my serious attention. The project was to be a rural community study because, although I had been raised in Sydney, my parents, their siblings and most of their nieces and nephews had grown up in the country, some in towns and some on farms. I thereby had had plenty of contact with country people. I spent much of my school holidays, and some time since, staying with country relatives. This time had not, however, given me what I felt to be a satisfying understanding of the country and its people. I saw the research project as an opportunity to learn about life in the country sociologically: a means that none of my family and relatives had had an opportunity to apply.

My theoretical perspective was developed and reinforced by fieldwork experience. I found encouraging potential in the community study method and the emerging critical approach in rural sociology. Critical analysis seemed timely as late 1985 brought another of Australia's intermittent rural economic crises, this time with added vitality from developing farmer militancy, and the casual speculation on my part that when the rural economy falls down, the politically as well as economically weakest people will hit the ground hardest.

I chose Cowra because it is of medium size, its economy is based on agriculture, and it is reasonably close to the Australian National University in Canberra where I was a graduate student. It was passing through a local political crisis which, from reports in the local newspaper, was a big one. I correctly anticipated that this would make talking to people about local affairs easy. Before deciding on Cowra I looked at Commonwealth Census data, read some newspapers from other towns, and made a one day tour around most of them.

Cowra had an industrial working class. It had acquired some large secondary industries which other towns might have envied, but it had almost lost its railway industry. I hypothesised that these factors, and the

forthcoming celebration of the centenary of the railway to Cowra, would have created local public discussion. Noting the presence of an Aboriginal settlement, I also hypothesised that Aboriginal welfare would be a problem, and seeing that a Neighbourhood Centre was struggling to establish itself, I thought it too might contribute to local political activity. These very early hypotheses had much bearing on the research.

While I knew that many people in the district were involved in a fracas in the Shire Council over planning, that the district was facing the decline of its railway and that some people were trying to establish a Neighbourhood Centre, I did not know either how or where these matters would be determined. My brief, as I explained it to Cowra people on arrival, and for a few months thereafter, was to study local organisations and the way the 'community' solved its problems. After realising that Cowra Shire Council was the arena around and through which local affairs moved, my explanation changed to: 'I'm here to study local government'. To many people I was there to write a book about the town. The messages that returned to me suggested that this was how the grapevine transmitted my purpose. People often asked me how the book was going.

Cowra Shire Council was my first point of contact. I started attending its meetings in October, 1985, before I moved to Cowra in November. My reception was warm: senior Council staff welcomed me and assured me that all meetings were open and I need make no special arrangements to attend. One councillor suggested that I should not miss the committee meetings, because most of the important discussion occurred there. I missed only two meetings, including committees, during the next twelve months and attended some meetings during the following year. By mid-1986 councillors and staff were quite accustomed to my presence, helped no doubt by my practice of drinking with them, sometimes after meetings, but more often at casual encounters in pubs and at social functions. I was as much a part of council meetings as the press representatives, but I was less threatening because I did not repeat councillors' words in a newspaper. Council meetings were a rich source of data, unaffected by my presence. The seriousness of debate eliminated the possibility that some was performed or modified for my benefit. After a particularly torrid meeting, a Council officer once said jokingly to me, in the presence of another, 'Of course, we are only doing this for your benefit'. The other replied: 'Like hell we are', in a tone of annoyance.

At the first meeting I introduced myself to several councillors, as well as the editor of the local newspaper who offered me office space. A senior Council officer also offered support, but not wishing to be sponsored, I thanked them and said no more. I was received warmly from the beginning. I attributed this successful entree to my willingness to learn rather than instruct, as visiting 'experts' are often seen to do. I enjoyed the benefits of equal status with the locally powerful, although my background of parentage in farming and country-dwelling families may have been more

valuable than the often-questioned status of an intellectual in a farming environment.

I was sufficiently different to make becoming a complete insider impossible. My origins in Canberra and my supposed intellectual status made me an outsider; the link with Canberra being particularly important at a time when farmers and their organisations were attacking the Commonwealth Government. I did not accentuate my Canberra base. Being seen as a potential ear in Canberra was no doubt useful as a conversation stimulant, but it could also have been inhibiting, as people were unsure of what was wisely revealed. I did what I could to dispel this interpretation of my presence, and I believe that as people came to know me and saw some of what I was doing, the idea was dropped. My 'outsiderness' was productive because, as Richards (1981) noted, being an outsider leaves one open to teaching; intimacy may be accompanied by 'the imprisonment of tight role expectations' (Stephenson and Greer, 1981: 127) and failure to recognise relevant patterns and meanings (Burgess, 1984).

I participated in the Railway Centenary Committee, and offered my labour to a Sydney-based railway museum organisation which kept its locomotives and rolling stock in the otherwise virtually unused Cowra Locomotive Depot. I worked in the Neighbourhood Centre as a volunteer, answering the telephone and doing odd jobs. I was invited to, and did, join a discussion group which undertook unexamined university extension courses. I also joined the local historical society. I almost joined the Apex Club, but when the focus of research moved onto the Shire Council, I had to forsake the Apex Club to avoid clashes of meeting times. I nevertheless maintained some contact with Apexians. I also drank in the pubs and attended social functions. I entertained people in my flat and was entertained in others' homes.

My biggest participatory role was in the Neighbourhood Centre, through which I undertook surveys with the local Home and Community Care (HACC) Committee.³ I became identified with the Centre through that project, with assistance from radio and television interviews during pre-survey publicity. For some people, this associated me with the welfare lobby, but it did not occur until ten months into the fieldwork period. I was also identified with the Railway Centenary organising committee after I appeared in a photograph of the committee in a book published at the time of the celebrations, which occurred a few days before I returned to Canberra.

I was accepted at the Neighbourhood Centre as an academic whose skills had something to offer the district. I was accepted by the railway people for my willingness and interest rather than for skills. A few of the local railway employees were active members of the museum. They were welcoming and forthcoming, but I think for some I merely confirmed the uselessness of intellectuals. My friends at the discussion group did not show the same scepticism. My contact with the Farmers' Association

through this group enabled another survey.⁴ I lived in what could loosely be described as a lower middle or working class area, known as Taragala (map 2).

I had no formal sponsors, in the sense of support coming from an individual or organisation in some official capacity (Dempsey, 1986b). Informal sponsorship was also virtually absent. The exceptions were three people who suggested others whom I might interview. I consciously avoided sponsorship for fear of identification with some group or organisation which might close the door to others. Nor did I encounter significant gatekeepers. Beyond these introductions, I am not aware of any individuals whose help was essential for access to sources, other than the senior officers who made Council records available.

If, however, one takes an exchange perspective in order to illuminate reciprocal responsibilities (Gray, 1980), and acknowledges those responsibilities, relations between myself and my informants become more complex and ethically demanding. All informants were told as much about my work as formulation of the project would allow. They knew that there would be a final product, and for some, access to that product would complete a tacit exchange. For others, notably but not only the railway employees, the prospect of communication of their plight to higher authorities was potentially and implicitly a possible reward. Such an agreement was most clear among those who helped with the HACC surveys, an agreement fulfilled by successful use of the survey report in bids for government funding. I maintained throughout the project an awareness of my responsibilities to local people, and at a more instrumental level, an awareness of the potential value of local feedback on my work.

Reciprocity was present throughout, as people took me into their confidence, offered information which I could reasonably infer they would not want me to reproduce, or expressed opinions which they may not want to see attributed to them. Only once did an informant ask that something not be repeated, and that was a very frank comment on the informant's feelings at a stressful moment. There has been no censorship exercised in the compilation of this work, except by myself in the selection of evidence so as to eliminate any risk of personal embarrassment among informants. Real names of public figures, the councillors and senior Council officers, are used, and statements made by them in their public roles are quoted, but identities of other informants are disguised by generalisation, usually in terms of occupation.

The data presented in this study are products of a process of development at a theoretical level during and after fieldwork.⁵ Two factors in particular moved me to sharpen the research into a study of power processes. One was observation of the depth of the political crisis I had detected before entree, a crisis apparently precipitated by the Council making a very unpopular decision on the basis of ostensibly bureaucratic requirements. Moreover, while that crisis attracted much attention and

appeared to be embarrassing prominent people, other matters were either not raised or not responded to. The other factor was the way ideas like those of the traditional wholistic community seemed to be widely adhered to and used to make sense of the social environment in one context, while in others what appeared to be real divisions were readily acknowledged.

Perhaps the most profound impression made upon me during fieldwork was the passion with which people pursued goals which had obviously unintended consequences. The most charitable people could advocate oppression when what they saw as a common good appeared to be threatened. Others earnestly believed that their interests must be pursued, to the possible detriment of others, for some avowedly common ideal. And others who could have pursued their own interests did not, either because they failed to recognise them, they did not believe pursuit to be a proper course of action, or because they were caught unwittingly in a double bind. On occasions thinking sociologically about a respected acquaintance was horrifying, and on other occasions it was very sad. Detaching individual from social structure was one of the more trying duties of data analysis, just as it is one of the most trying tasks for social theory.

The argument and structure of the book

The community power literature, most of which has been produced in the United States, has suffered from an individualistic and static approach. Some recent developments in social theory suggest a better strategy for the study of local power relations. Concepts are developed in chapter 2 which enable the exploration of structures and processes, rather than identities of apparently powerful individuals; this chapter also reviews some Australian studies which directly or indirectly tackle problems of power. Those studies suggest tentative applications of the concepts developed earlier in the chapter, and thereby direct attention to some of the dimensions of Australian local power structures.

The study of social process is a study of history which commenced long before the fieldwork for this project. To understand the events observed in fieldwork, it is necessary to establish their historical context. Chapter 3 relates a history of Cowra Shire since white settlement. It provides background to ideas and structures by suggesting antecedents to the meanings which local people attach to people and events.

Chapter 4 introduces the local political structure, as it focuses attention on local government. It offers description of the institution of local government, its place in local politics and participation in it, and briefly discusses the local political structure in terms of the reputations of political actors. This discussion offers a base for what follows rather than definition of a power structure. It draws attention to the weakness of earlier methods as it explores the ideologies associated with reputations for power.

As argued in chapter 2, explanation of power relations demands study of power processes. Chapter 5 is the first of four which do so, as it looks at the processes in which local government resources were distributed. The politics of distribution are found to have been constrained by both the administrative apparatus and the beliefs of local government members about the institution and their roles in it. This constraint raises the question of the content of local politics, for it suggests that political relations may have been structured by a process of agenda setting. Some groups who had legitimate political interests may have been unable to pursue them by raising issues.

The problem of issue raising is considered again in chapter 6, this time in relation to issues and non-issues surrounding economic development. The chapter demonstrates that while the interests of some groups were not heard in local politics, others, notably farmers, were able to create a political crisis when they felt that their interests were threatened. The political profile of business and farm people provides a striking contrast with that of railway workers. Chapter 6 repeats a theme which first appears in chapter 5: that of friction between council officers and councillors over the issues which constitute visible politics.

More non-issues are explored in chapter 7. It examines the place of human services, with consideration of the interests of women and Aborigines, in relation to the local political agenda. This examination deepens the contrast between the strong position of business and farm interests and the weakness of others. Unlike the issues discussed in earlier chapters, the non-issues of human services were not associated with conflict between councillors and officers. The agenda setting process has again been found to have determined political relations.

The importance of agenda setting raises the problem of explanation for political action: what determined the interests which gained expression by creation of issues? Chapter 8 offers background to this question with discussion of institutional factors. It looks back over some of the issues discussed in earlier chapters as well as new material. The later part of the chapter focuses on the legitimacy of conflicts, as they were perceived by councillors, to help illuminate the interests which gained expression.

Chapter 9 turns to the electors, whose general interest the councillors sought to pursue in the processes which created specialised politics, keeping some interests off the political agenda. Local politics are found to have reflected ideologies which pervade rural society and have a particular focus on local government. Beliefs which political actors interpreted from their electors and responded to in the political arena had structured the political agenda.

Without necessary conscious intention on the part of political actors, the parameters of local politics were defined in such a way that some interests were given prolific expression while others were ignored. The concluding chapter draws attention to the machinery of power: the

resources constructed, maintained and used to the advantage of some people rather than others. The study attributes cause to beliefs used as ideological resources, but recognises that beliefs have been constructed in the context of local property relations, relations between town and country, and the institutional history of local government.

Notes

- 1 Being concerned about the conceptual problem of community, and the observation that community studies assume institutions to be both locality-based and interrelated, Stacey (1969) proposed a concept of 'local social system' to replace 'community', as it obviated these problems, and suggested a less constrained agenda for locality research.
- 2 Community studies confront problems of objectivity and presentation of evidence associated with the participant observation method. These problems have been put most succinctly by Bell (1969: 418) in terms of participant observation data offering illustrations rather than proof, and the possibility of 'retrospective selection' of data. Recognition of these problems has brought forth calls for 'natural histories' of research, so that readers might fully appreciate the writer's perspective (Bell, 1969; Gray, 1980; and Wild, 1981).
- 3 These surveys were reported in Gray (1987a, 1988a). Questionnaire data were collected on local facilities, social support networks, incomes, health and housing from two sources. One was a random sample of 870 adults in Cowra Shire and some adjacent areas; the other consisted of randomly selected representatives of each Aboriginal family in Cowra (59 respondents). Both studies were aimed at considering the implications of government policy changes away from institutional care of aged and handicapped people toward home care, and found that such changes would disadvantage many people, including those who already suffered from low incomes, inadequate housing and other problems, and those who lacked personal support networks. The study of Aboriginal people revealed further difficulties, especially with health and housing.
- 4 This survey, as reported in Gray (1988b), collected data from sixteen farming couples on their family backgrounds, their attachment to farming in terms of beliefs and values, and their plans and desires for their children. It found some support for a proposition that farm couples who retain strongly rural, rather than business, values, feel they should pass their farm on to their son(s).
- 5 Other than observation, data sources used for the study include Commonwealth and earlier censuses and the local newspaper (the *Cowra Guardian*). I read every issue of the *Guardian* between 1947 and 1987, and many earlier issues of the *Guardian* and its predecessors. I was fortunate to be granted access to Council documents, including minutes of meetings. Thirty-five interviews with locally knowledgeable people were conducted. The interviewees fell into three overlapping groups: long-term residents, councillors and local organisation leaders.

The interviews, of between one and four hours duration, were minimally structured by a small number of standard questions designed to stimulate discussion as well as elicit answers. Questions about the importance and role of the Shire Council, the local status system and relations between town and country were asked of most respondents, but many of the conversations had specialised components about, for example, councillors' sources of information and organisations' dealings with the Council. Questions about the identities of influential people were put to twenty of the interviewees. I became quite friendly with many of the interviewees and spoke to them often. The interviews themselves provided revelations, but were a minor source of data overall. Spontaneous conversations, often started with an explanation of my work, were just as fruitful.