

Local Activism and Neoliberalism:  
Performing Neoliberal Citizenship as Resistance

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Abstract

This paper examines cultural and anti-poverty resistance in the City of Peterborough.<sup>1</sup> Resistance in the City of Peterborough reveals activists creatively and vibrantly responding to the effects of neoliberal policy. Rather than conform to neoliberalism, as recent scholars suggest that social movements do, they *perform good neoliberal citizenship* by discursively appropriating neoliberal goals of economic growth in the case of cultural activism and constructions of the self-sufficient, autonomous citizen in the case of anti-poverty activism. Such performances are in aid of (re)claiming public space and leveraging resources from the local state. Thus far, their efforts have rendered some notable successes, although not without challenges. Challenges include having to cope with slow change because of the time it takes to educate politicians and civil servants of the conditions cultural workers and poor people respectively face and uncertainty over who will maintain performative resistance.

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Within the practice of political economy, debate continues over the proper location for struggle for social justice, especially when issues of social justice and anti-capitalism intertwine with globalization. The Left recognizes the local, regional, national, and global as sites of struggle and there are spokespersons for each.<sup>ii</sup> Warren Magnusson notes that local spaces, specifically urban spaces, have become eclipsed as sites of political engagement with the rise of globalization discourse. Michael Peter Smith argues that globalization discourses “assume the growing insignificance of national borders, boundaries and identities,” (quoted in Magnusson 2005, 105), yet it is in local spaces that boundaries and identities marking class (e.g., “the rich neighborhood,” “the ghetto”), ethnicity (e.g., “Chinatown”), sexuality (“the gay ghetto”) continue to flourish. Local circumstances are shaped by diverse national, transnational and global scale activities, but this need not displace the locality of the urban as “a crossroads or meeting place” (Magnusson 2005, 106) that acts as a venue for these activities and for those who live within its locale. Magnusson refers to these activities as immediate or particular in contrast to the transcendental or universal activities that correspond to the global and transnational. The immediate and particular merit examination, otherwise they become subsumed under the perspective of the universal that erases specificity and diversity between localities. Further, localities are rich political spaces because the local state can potentially provide either more or less services that “make a difference to the politics of the social justice of daily life” (Andrew 2003, 311). Daily life in a particular locale that has a responsive local state can motivate residents of a municipality to act for change. This is made possible when local government provides or acquiesces political spaces where residents can be seen, heard and recognized as sufficiently knowledgeable about their demands and proposed projects or solutions.

This paper examines ongoing local resistance in the City of Peterborough.<sup>iii</sup> Resistance in the City of Peterborough reveals activists creatively and vibrantly responding to the effects of neoliberal policy in ways that reflect the attributes of a critical movement (Magnusson and Walker 1988, 60).<sup>iv</sup> Activists more than respond to neoliberal policy; they perform with it and the local state. Cultural and anti-poverty activism in Peterborough reveals intricate movement undertaken by activists. They *perform good neoliberal citizenship* by discursively appropriating neoliberal goals of economic growth in the case of cultural activism and constructions of the self-sufficient, autonomous citizen in the case of anti-poverty activism. Specifically, cultural workers (this term includes practicing artists, curators, arts administrators, and arts advocates) have been working toward increased recognition from local government in terms of funding to local arts organizations so as to maintain a thriving cultural sector in the city.

Without local cultural workers fighting for resources, more culture industry entertainment would be supported by the local state, thus squeezing local cultural workers further to the margins publicly, socially, and economically. Anti-poverty activists resist continuing downward pressure on social assistance and are demanding a public space for cooking and advocacy for the poor from the local state to empower their claims as a self-sufficient and self-empowering community. Key for both groups is their use of neoliberal discourse to claim resources for ongoing work. Thus far, their efforts have rendered some notable successes.

Two recent initiatives on the part of Peterborough cultural workers and anti-poverty activists, “artsweek,” and the work of the coalition between People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs provide case studies for how these respective groups partner with neoliberal discourse and the local state to advance their claims. Findings show that neoliberal discourse holds both opportunities and limitations for cultural workers and anti-poverty activists. For cultural workers, neoliberal discourse of market practices, economic development, and cultural development related to the broader discourse of the “Creative City” influences the way requests are made for support for local cultural production from local government.<sup>v</sup> Arguments in favor of local cultural production include generating a positive and attractive reputation for the city and nurturing and sustaining cultural production that reflects the history and uniqueness of the city. During “artsweek,” local cultural producers raised their profile as revenue generators by producing a week of arts events as partners with City Council. This heightened profile gives cultural workers the kind of leverage to push for structural changes in funding for local arts organizations, which in turn, potentially creates more resources for art that very often has social and political goals or content (Changfoot 2005, Kurasawa 2003). People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs, since their inception, have used their discourse of self-sufficiency and self-empowerment to create a community of poor people and their allies and agitate for public space from the municipality. Anti-poverty activists emphasize that poor people and their allies can organize themselves ably and independently. On the basis of their claim to be a self-sufficient group, they want the city to acknowledge the usable and available space it has and allocate a permanent public space with cooking facilities to poor people so they can continue to help themselves. This discourse dovetails well with neoliberal citizenship and creates an opening for relations between poor people and the local state.

The performance of neoliberal characteristics on the part of cultural producers and anti-poverty activists is in service of a multifaceted resistance against neoliberal policy that simultaneously strives to exact resources from the local state. Resistance takes the form of making incursions into public space in an effort to expand and secure space, even if only temporarily, transforming space into theatre that involves citizen participation and engagement, empowering the people represented, and making demands of local government. Resistance also includes willingness to work with local government via committee meetings, meetings with city officials, and making presentations at City Council meetings not only to seek resources for grassroots projects, but also *to transform* the state’s understanding of the groups involved and practices in decision-making. The challenges of such performative resistance include the relatively slow pace of bureaucratic decision making, the risk of stagnation in moving activists’ goals forward once certain political demands have been met, burnout of activists themselves or their

decision to pursue different projects that at once creates further challenges for continuing action and opportunities for new directions. Whether any performance can sustain itself and for how long is an open question for both groups. Yet, to think of resistance as performance can be productive because the evaluation of success lies not in the achievement of the goal. Both cultural workers and anti-poverty activists see successes with each of their specific actions. This motivates them to continue their performances and repeat them, changing some aspect of them with each repetition.

An important dimension of this performance is the identity of the actors themselves as activist-artist or artist-activist. The activists who perform neoliberal discourse and resist neoliberal policy self-identify as practicing artists or see themselves closely associated with the arts. This suggests that cultural politics and social justice activism are intertwined. The activist as artist, or “artist,”<sup>vi</sup> emerges as a political actor who can skillfully partner or move with neoliberal discourse while advancing social justice demands. Indeed, artists are intimately involved in performance.

#### Local Activism, Neoliberalism, and Performance of Citizenship

This section examines how neoliberalism and neoliberal policy has affected arts and culture and the poor, particularly since the 1990s. Policy changes implemented during this period have put pressure on cultural workers to act commercially and entrepreneurially with increasing intensity. Poor people increasingly have to fend for themselves as the state continues to withdraw support. Nonetheless, both groups exercise agency in ways that resist the roles neoliberal policy sets up for them to play.

Ideologically, neoliberalism valorizes selected aspects of classical liberalism, particularly ideas associated with individual choice and capacity for self-sufficiency, the reduced role of the state in its support of social and cultural activity, investment in citizens to make themselves more self-sufficient, and an overall deferral to barrier free markets for the distribution of goods and services. The thinking here is that adult individuals have the capacity and responsibility to make decisions for which they take full social and economic responsibility, and that the market, strongly resonating with neoclassical economics, will determine the optimum distribution of goods and services and the associated characteristics of them, including qualifications for labor, wages, price, and quality. The development and implementation of neoliberal beliefs begins in the 1970s with “business activism” (Carroll and Coburn 2003, 84)<sup>vii</sup> and makes an indelible mark in the mid-1990s when the federal government made significant cuts to provincial transfer payments and the Ontario provincial government dramatically cut funding to municipalities that affected education, social assistance, transit, and housing.<sup>viii</sup> With the 1995 election of the Conservative Party under Mike Harris, the Ontario government devolved the costs of most local and regional services to municipal governments. These services included assisted housing and regional commuter transportation; the latter was an area municipal governments had not been previously paying into. Social assistance was renamed Ontario Works, a workfare program. The amount of social assistance was reduced and a clawback was implemented that claimed fifty percent of earnings while on Ontario Works. Support was eliminated for new low rental housing and transit operating and capital costs.<sup>ix</sup> The elimination of the \$250/month special diet supplement for those suffering from a list of “approved” diseases in November 2005 is the latest reduction to social assistance.<sup>x</sup>

Culture was not spared either. Major cuts to cultural funding occurred at the federal and provincial level in the 1990s. The Canada Council for the Arts took a hit in funding from \$105.5 million in 1991-92 to \$88.8 million in 1997-98. This was a softer blow compared to the drop in funding to the Ontario Arts Council from \$42.6 million to \$25.3 million in a short 18 months between 1995-96 and 1996-97 (Jenkins 2005, 176). During this period the orientation of arts funding by the Ontario Arts Council adopted market practices (Godard 2001). Funding for the arts during the 1990s began to demand that performances demonstrate economic viability. Art juries increasingly included representatives from corporations. Artists were rewarded where they demonstrated commercial intentions or success.<sup>xi</sup> In contrast to the period from the 1970s to the 1980s, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for the Arts promoted arts as a capacity within citizens to be cultivated and nurtured. Since the 1990s, there has been a re-focus of arts as more a commercial enterprise (Crean 2000, 203). This is not to say that arts councils see art exclusively in this way, but the policy to promote and regulate the production of art more through market practices has resulted in regulation of citizens as arts and culture consumers, strengthening the view that art producers and cultural production are intertwined with economic enterprise. While this policy orientation might lead one to anticipate a high degree of commercialization among practicing local artists, local artists maintain a commitment to art-making stemming from their own desire that often consciously includes social and political goals (Changfoot 2005). Thus, there is a fine balance between regulation toward market practices and resistance to them. While spending on culture has risen since 2002, the increases have largely gone toward heritage institutions. Mainly culture industries have incurred decreases to broadcasting, film and video, book and periodical publishing, the sound recording industry, and performing arts (Weber 2005).

How have cultural workers and poor people responded? Wendy Larner and Miriam Smith provide insight into how neoliberalism influences the resistance against it. Larner argues that neoliberalism “involves forms of governance that encourage both institutions and individuals to conform to norms of the market” (2000, 12). According to this view, one would expect to see individuals having to demonstrate economic benefits or spin-offs when making demands from the state, situate themselves using the discourse of the market, and engage with public space in ways that conform more to market conventions. Neoliberalism, Smith notes, is “an ambitious political project that seeks to reconstitute the terms for collective political advocacy and collective action” (2005, 76). In terms of citizenship, the state during the neoliberal period has become an instrument of information dissemination, promoting what it does *for* citizens versus listening to citizens and actively seeking their input into the policy process (Jenson and Phillips 1996, 130). While the state has made itself more impermeable to consultation from citizens and become fiscally conservative, even so, the neoliberal direction of the state, Smith writes, “creates both barriers to and opportunities for collective action” (2005, 76).<sup>xii</sup> She suggests that locally based organizations are locally minded in their goals; their projects will likely exhibit neoliberal objectives of investment for a target group, market practices, and social movement activities of community building, creating solidarities, advancing interests on the part of the marginalized. Thus, there is a combination of conformity to neoliberal policy orientation that also embodies resistance to it.

In contrast to the conformity-resistance combination put forward by Larner and Smith, local cultural activism and anti-poverty activism in Peterborough is consciously anti-conformist and can be described as performative. Neither cultural workers nor anti-poverty activists agree with the kind of neoliberal attributes of citizenship that have to do with individual self-sufficiency combined with reduced state assistance in either social or cultural policy. They do not see themselves as conforming to neoliberalism, a project both groups find anathema. But, both groups recognize that in order to fight for resources they feel the state is responsible for providing them as contributing citizens, they need to create some common ground upon which the local state can be pressured to address their respective demands; this common ground occurs at a discursive level. Thus, cultural workers and anti-poverty activists perform selected aspects of neoliberal discourse so as to gain access to and build a relationship with the state. In so doing, they consciously aim to alter modes of communication and decision making structures within the state. Thus, conformity is largely not the *modus operandi*. I will outline two recent and ongoing actions that demonstrate this strategy of performative resistance. The first is called artswweek and the second is an action building toward “One Space” for poor people.

The first artswweek was presented in fall 2005, comprising several well-orchestrated arts events. This week long event provides an example of how local artists organized to raise the profile of their activity and contributions to Peterborough by creating a very public connection between, on the one hand, local artist organizations, City Councillors and officials, and on the other hand, residents of Peterborough and their relationship to the arts and public spaces in the city. The key organizers of the event shepherded the project through the Arts, Culture, and Heritage Advisory Committee that meets monthly. This committee makes funding allocations among the arts, culture, and heritage institutions and proposes policy recommendations to City Council. One of the ways in which cultural workers have altered the structure of the committee is by successfully arguing that three of twenty-two seats be reserved for practicing artists in the community. This representation ensures that perspectives and voices of local artists are heard and included in deliberations. Cultural workers feel this representation is vital in the context of the city’s higher commitment of funding to venues that import performances. Cultural workers believe that a proportion of imported performances from outside the city could be sought or created within Peterborough. Further, they believe there is a qualitative difference in social value in work produced locally. The City difference in support to outside production sources is substantial. In 2005, the city supported imported cultural production to the tune of about \$225K and local cultural production at \$69.9K.<sup>xiii</sup> Cultural workers believe they produce work of a highly professional caliber and would like to see a more balanced allocation of funding between local and imported cultural production. “artswweek” was a venue to communicate this message.

Organizers intended artswweek to transform public and private space into theatre and art spaces. There was a large scale event entitled “Imagine Peterborough” Extravaganza on September 12, 2005 that started with the entrance of the Mayor, City Councillors and senior civil servants to open the ceremonies (See Image 1). “We wanted city politicians and officials to be performers in the event where their roles were to actively promote and support local arts.”<sup>xiv</sup> The public event transformed the city hall

grounds (both inside and outside) and the main street it faces into a theatrical space for performance where the politicians and public were a part of the spectacle. The aim was to create a “super spectacular arts fantasy land”

(<http://www.imaginepeterborough.com/calendar/calendar10.htm#Sept24>). During the extravaganza active artist organizations and individual artists promoted themselves and shared with an audience of about 200 people their creative endeavor. These organizations included Fourth Line Theatre, Old Men Dancing (theatre and dance group), the Peterborough Symphony Orchestra, the Peterborough Singers, and Mysterious Entity (a theatre group).



Image 1: Imagine Peterborough

While the public space was temporarily transformed into theatre, the weaving of city politicians, residents of Peterborough, and artists represented a critical moment of relations-building that could create such a venue. The participation of municipal city councilors and civil servants signified very public local government recognition of local artists. This was performative politics where the performance was enacting the importance of local based culture to the community both economically and in terms of cultural citizenship. Arts and culture supporters have been making arguments that arts and culture generate economic and social benefits for a city, an argument made very popular by Richard Florida (2002) and embodied in the Creative City movement. The influence of Florida’s thinking and the Creative City movement on the local state helps maintain a space for relations between cultural workers and local state actors.<sup>xv</sup>

Artsweek was considered a success by the media, cultural workers, and the local state. Given its success, artists in the community plan to repeat it for 2006 and the Peterborough Arts, Culture and Heritage Advisory Committee has made it a priority

suggesting a \$35,000 budget, a significant increase over the 2005 budget.<sup>xvi</sup> The prospects are very good for ongoing support for artsweek from local government even though there is uncertainty whether there will be strong funding for the event. The downtown venue and participation of local artists will support the kind of artistic expression, political expression, and community participation that manifests in public spaces. The event plays very well to neoliberal arguments for economic investment and return, tourism, and entrepreneurialism among artists. Yet, cultural workers also feel some discomfort performing a neoliberal cultural-economic orientation. They are well aware of the contradictions embodied in artsweek. The unabashed promotional character of arts groups fed into arts and culture tourism even while it was a political move on the part of artists to get city recognition and build support for local arts. In the 1980s Su Ditta recalls that as artists “we decided to ‘whore’ ourselves even though we knew that doing so might come back to haunt us.”<sup>xvii</sup> Artists knew that by playing the entrepreneurial role the state wanted them to, they would reinforce the role in ways that would have negative consequences. The negative consequences came in funding tied to economic performance. Local cultural workers are uneasy with performing the good economic citizen. Yet, arts advocates believe this is the best option for cultivating a local cultural sector that reaps tangible benefits. For instance, the organizers and participants of artsweek felt that the art curated for specific events was of high quality with social and political content relevant to residents. As well, cultural workers were paid fairly; fair payment for cultural production is an ongoing issue in the arts community.<sup>xviii</sup> Cultural workers are ambivalent over the tenor of the cultural-economic partnership with the local state, yet artists recognize the importance of this kind of cooperation for stronger recognition and support in the future from the local state and community in general. Cultural workers expect to see stronger support in increased funding for the next artsweek, an increase in the number of calls for public art, a continued voice for artists in decision making over arts and culture, a more cohesive arts and culture community, and a stronger, more positive identity for Peterborough.

#### Food Not Bombs in Peterborough

In November 2005, two anti-poverty organizations with overlapping membership started up in Peterborough: People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs. People Putting Poverty on the Agenda is actively demanding from the local state a public communal space called “One Space” for cooking and poor people’s advocacy. Food Not Bombs is supporting this demand. The two organizations create performance spaces involving food, the primary performance being the transformation of City Hall into a vegetarian dining feast for poor people and their allies every Monday night. The Peterborough chapter of Food Not Bombs is part of a global twenty-five year old self-identified “revolutionary movement” dedicated to nonviolent social change. Food Not Bombs asserts that “food is a right not a privilege.” There are hundreds of autonomous chapters that find food, cook vegetarian food, and feed hungry people along with protesting war and poverty. It is a grassroots movement that has chapters throughout the Americas, Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Australia. The movement works to end hunger, globalization of the economy, restrictions on the movements of people, and exploitation and destruction of the earth.<sup>xix</sup> The membership of the Peterborough chapter governs by consensus and comprises primarily poor people. Its goals are to claim food that would otherwise be wasted and discarded from restaurants or growers, cook together



and foster communal cooking, feed vegetarian food to those who need it in an accessible public space, and lastly, build solidarity with other groups in the area concerned about poverty. The City health unit, Native Learning Centre, multi-faith organizations, and the public library are among Food Not Bomb's allies.

The lead organizers of People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs are self-identified practicing activists-artists; some have university degrees, or are pursuing degrees. They are very conscious of the performance element in their interventions in public space; indeed, they describe what they do as creating theatre in the claiming of public space where poor people and their allies can feel comfortable, be together, and be creative. "Food, music, and theatre are the most effective ways I've seen to bring people together for a common purpose and to build community."<sup>xx</sup> Also very key to their performances is a discourse of self-sufficiency that blends well with neoliberal citizenship.

In contrast to the view that the poor are sluggish, incapable, dependent upon "handouts," and unable to contribute positively to society, members of People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs see themselves as a self-sufficient and highly independent group providing a service to the public. They do not want significant help from the city in the procuring, preparation, or serving of food. From this position, they argue that the least the city can do is provide a public space and kitchen facility for people to do this. "We're not even asking the city to do its job which we believe is to look after its people by feeding them," says one member. "We'll feed ourselves, but the city has a responsibility to provide us the means to do this."<sup>xxi</sup> Because People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs have the people and the food resources to make healthy, nutritious vegetarian food, it would look very bad for the city not to support people's own efforts to be self-sufficient with minimal contribution from the public purse. A couple of City Councilors suggested giving the groups a small grant (e.g., \$3,000) to seek a rental space, but the groups refuse this option for two reasons. First, they insist on free public space because they believe the city has the kind of space that meets these groups' needs. As well, because the groups believe that the city does have a responsibility to the poor, the city could make space it already has available to people who want to feed people. Second, the groups do not want to conform to a rental model for space when they are providing a public service to marginal people. The time required to complete reports and paperwork for such a grant exceeds the resources of those involved. The coalition resists bureaucracy and market models for the public space they need.

Since November 14, 2005, the two groups started transforming the Peterborough City Hall into a dining hall serving warm vegetarian meals every Monday evening (See Image 2). The timing of the meal is strategic since City Council meets at the time of the meal. "We want City Councilors to be reminded of the poor; we want them to have the poor present in their minds when they make decisions."<sup>xxii</sup> By raising awareness of the problem of poverty in the city, it is hoped that the problem of poverty will be continuously in the minds of City Councilors, bureaucrats, and residents. Between twenty and fifty people show up for the servings and the people served are mostly poor with a few higher income individuals coming to support the event. A significant number of those in attendance are also associated with the Peterborough Coalition Against Poverty, a grassroots anti-poverty organization that uses direct action and advocacy to assist

individuals in dealings with social services (e.g. Ontario Works, Ontario Disability Support Program), social agencies (e.g. food banks and shelters), housing and landlord issues, police harassment, squatter's rights, and poor bashing. A few supportive City Councilors stop by during the meal to speak with spokespersons they recognize.

The meals themselves are inspired creations and demonstrate the artistic dimension of the groups. One of the lead-cooks of the meals sees herself fundamentally as a creative person. She does not and refuses to distinguish between her creative and activist identities. She sees cooking as an art form and the kind of cooking done for Food Not Bombs, vegetarian and vegan, is both an artistic and political expression of her views on sustainable agricultural production and nutrition.<sup>xxiii</sup> Indeed, the free meals served on Mondays are very economically made, but not common fare. Menus include at least five dishes: soup and bread; salad; several main dishes; dessert; and tea. A menu below gives an example of the delicious diversity of dishes that are an enticing blend of colors, textures, and smells, all made from fresh ingredients, organic where possible, and primarily sourced from reclaimed food from local growers at the city Farmers' Market and city food producers.



Image 2: Vegetarian Feast in City Hall Lobby

Menu Served February 6, 2006

*Tomato & leek soup*

*Salad with iceberg lettuce, spinach, sprouts, carrots and cucumbers*

*Button & portobello mushrooms, green & red peppers with black sesame seeds*

*Leek and cabbage mix*

*Stuffed potatoes with broccoli, roasted red pepper, & marrow fat pea sprouts*

*Roasted egg plant, sautéed green asparagus, caramelized onion, sunflower, &  
quinoa baked in filo pastry  
Curried peas and potatoes  
Apple sauce with cinnamon (no sugar)  
Baked apple crisp*

Similar to special dinners, the meals themselves are the subject of extended conversation and they elevate the mood of the gathering and the otherwise sanitized atmosphere of the City Hall lobby. The person who guides the cooking is known as a “kitchen goddess.”

A week after the vegetarian feasts started at City Hall, two members of these groups organized Poverty Awareness Week in Peterborough. The goal of the Awareness Week was to create a performance venue for cultural workers and poor people to come together to disseminate information on poverty in the city, create as broad reaching a community as possible comprising individuals concerned about poverty, attract mass media coverage, and persuade city politicians, including the Mayor to attend the largest event during the week, the “Hunger Gala.” The organizers intended the Hunger Gala to break down the dichotomy of “us” (poor) and “them” (not poor) and celebrate poor culture.<sup>xxiv</sup> Poverty Awareness Week was successful in terms of media exposure, the Mayor’s attendance at the Hunger Gala, and engaging the community. Organizers estimate about 130 people were in attendance.

People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs have been effective in using public space to strengthen its support for putting poverty on the agenda of the Peterborough City Council and the Department of Social Services. In a context where discursive and institutional spaces for expressing political grievances and demands have declined,<sup>xxv</sup> the two groups have had success in claiming both discursive and institutional space through regular meetings with the Mayor and Head of Social Services. The vegetarian feasts have raised the profile of these two groups in the city. Both groups are marginalized through their lack of resources and stigmatization related to their poor status. But, these groups’ play up their entrepreneurial efforts, their insistence on self-reliance, independence, and an ethos of “do it yourself, now” action to put pressure on City Council and bureaucracy to meet them at least part way. The slogan adopted by Food Not Bombs, “people feeding people” communicates the energy of people wanting to provide material needs for themselves and others, and their independence from government hand-outs. Within a neoliberal context, the direct action involving food and performance arguably made the City’s response to self-independence, self-reliance, and an entrepreneurial attitude that much easier, and perhaps quicker than if the two groups had relied on either confrontational protest tactics such as office shut downs, on the one hand, or more conventional tactics of letter writing, on the other hand. The appearance of a shared ideology with the neoliberal emphasis on self-sufficiency and self-reliance ironically creates a common discursive ground between poor people and the local state. I would emphasize that poor people are not conforming to a neoliberal orientation that demands self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Instead, poor people’s discourse of self-sufficiency and self-reliance comes from their daily experience of already being largely independent. Poor people are resisting a broad neoliberal state orientation by demanding a public good, i.e., “One Space,” and using neoliberal discourse to involve the local state intertwined with their direct action involving food and using public space as theatre.

One very recent development that has emerged from poor people's resistance is the emergence of a "One Space" committee comprising People Putting Poverty on the Agenda, Food Not Bombs, the Peterborough Social Planning Council, and Peterborough Social Services. This committee's goal is to work toward the instantiation of "One Space" and deal with issues concerning poor people as they arise. In this space, poor people are working to transform the patterns of communication that occur among middle class poverty advocates and bureaucrats. People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs are insisting on the following: the meetings not be held in the board rooms of Social Services and instead in a venue where poor people will feel comfortable to attend; poor people be able to speak their mind on issues that concern them; the agenda and flow of the meetings be flexible; poor people will all have the same authority in making suggestions and recommendations to the process and outcomes; all in attendance need to understand that poor people need to be able to express their rage associated with poverty at the committee meetings, and that food and music be part of the meetings. The Committee meets monthly starting April 2006. People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs insist that poor people working with the local state requires fundamental change in venue, communication, and decision-making practices and processes. So far, the representatives from Social Services, the Manager of Homelessness and Housing and the Peterborough Social Planning Council have been open to new practices, but not without a concerted education effort from poor people on why changes need to take place at the outset of working together.

#### Challenges of Performative Resistance

While activists have derived pleasure and satisfaction in their actions, they are acutely aware of the challenges of performing the good neoliberal citizen. For cultural workers, there is concern that local cultural production could become a token within the city if funding for local arts and culture remains constant while funding for arts and culture from entertainment industry grows. Cultural workers could perform neoliberalism too well in that their current success with existing funds may justify the status quo. As well, the enormous physical effort of curating and producing a week-long art project takes a toll on a community of artists that, while relatively large for the size of Peterborough, is also modest in actual numbers of people. For anti-poverty activists, one concern is to keep poor people in the minds of City Councilors and officials without City Councilors and officials becoming comfortable with their weekly performances and good citizenship at City Hall for the free vegetarian feasts. This entails continuous resistance that requires enormous energy and creativity. The activists themselves also have personal goals they want to pursue and have set an unspecified date in Spring as a deadline to end the vegetarian feasts at city hall. The warmer weather will ease the challenging conditions the poor face during winter and the prime movers of People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs want to pursue other, but related, projects. An open and unanswered question is who will continue making the demand for a communal space. Both groups need to maintain a strong presence, continuously create opportunities for political dialogue and action, and sustain the energy for these kinds of activities: tasks that require highly energetic, highly skilled and sacrificing individuals. Whether performance of neoliberal citizenship by the same actors can be maintained over the long term remains uncertain. For sustaining the energy and continuity in resistance efforts, the recruitment of new actors will be key.

The ongoing work of meeting with City officials takes time and endurance that can have a dampening effect on the energy of activists, especially in the case of People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs. Anti-poverty activists are now working with the city to secure a public communal space, however, the bureaucratic nature of this kind of work poses a challenge in that this kind of work is qualitatively different from the goal of feeding people. There are now two kinds of activism that need to be conducted: the direct action of feeding people, on the one hand, and coalition building with other anti-poverty activists in the community (e.g., the coalition's allies mentioned above) and policy work, on the other hand. The prime movers and shakers of People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs currently balance the two, however, the emergence of the policy aspect of the communal space may strain the groups because policy work does not easily dovetail with the energy of those involved. Activists who feed people do not want to become mired in a slow and regulated bureaucratic process over which they have little control. That is why they are determined to alter the place and mode of communication with city officials so that the meeting have meaning and benefits for them. The success so far in setting the terms of these efforts for poor people will no doubt influence future work between poor people and the local state. Similarly, activists representing cultural workers are committed to working with local government bureaucracy but they want to build upon their structural presence within current decision-making bodies such as the Art, Culture and Heritage Advisory Committee. They are dedicated to building support for arts and culture that does not have to compete with sports, recreation, or heritage. The representation of local practicing artists on the committee will help educate committee members on what it means to be a local cultural worker and the contributions cultural workers make to the city.

### Conclusion

The kind of activism in the City of Peterborough associated with artsweek and the “people feeding people” efforts of People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs brings to light that activists create opportunities to work with the local state by playing with and performing different aspects of neoliberal discourse to advance their respective causes. In the case of cultural workers and anti-poverty activists, they are both willing and see a need to work with the local state to meet their goals. Both groups understand their marginal position within the city landscape and recognize they need to find their own respectively peculiar ways to become involved with the local state. Performing good neoliberal citizenship is one way of entry that has resulted in some successes. These successes include structural representation on committees with altered practices that better suit the needs of the groups. For example, cultural workers have structural representation on the city's Arts, Culture, and Heritage Advisory Committee. Through this committee, artsweek became a reality. Anti-poverty activists initiated and gained support for regular meetings through the recent creation of the One Space Committee on terms they feel are key for poor people. These venues of participation for cultural workers and poor people signal openings where their respective needs can be advanced. The venues, however, come with significant and ongoing education efforts on the part of activists for the arts community and poor people. Through the process, cultural workers and poor people are seen to be legitimate citizens and engaged participants within their community. This does not mean that cultural workers or poor people accept a role of neoliberal citizenship. Instead, the successes of cultural workers and anti-poverty

activists show that the use of neoliberal discourse can leverage local state support for these groups' projects.

Cultural workers see their work as contributing to the attractiveness of the city to both existing residents and potential newcomers. Advocates of cultural workers want to ensure that local artists are hooked into revenue generation through cultural tourism. More importantly, they want to ensure that local cultural workers are a part of this government supported economic activity and maintain control their artistic decision making. Local cultural workers see themselves contributing culturally, politically, and aesthetically to city space and life, but in ways distinct from entertainment industry production. People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs are firm in their belief that poor people can and need to empower themselves as a long term solution to address their ongoing challenge with material comfort and desperation. These anti-poverty activists believe that self-sufficiency and self-empowerment are crucial as poor people and they have the capacity as a group to create the community to make this happen. Activists believe that the direct action of people feeding people in City Hall and the preparation of creative, inspired, healthy, and aesthetically pleasing food demonstrates a self-sufficient capacity among the poor. In contrast to the neoliberal conception of self-sufficiency premised upon employability, poor people are focused on self-sufficiency premised upon sustainable and organic agriculture, the reclaiming of food and usable items destined for garbage. At present, the proposal for One Space for a communal kitchen and other supports has the backing from allies in community and city bureaucracy. What the outcome will be is yet unknown, but within a relatively short four months (from November 2005 to February 2006), People Putting Poverty on the Agenda and Food Not Bombs have created momentum using a combination of neoliberal discourse of self-initiative and direct action in a performance mode that draws upon the public and highly symbolic space of the City Hall lobby to serve their meals and communicate their need for a communal space, "One Space." A combination of neoliberal discourse, multifaceted resistance, and transformative engagement with the local state in a performance of citizenship has made headway toward cultural worker and anti-poverty activist goals. In so doing, they have also created possibilities for stronger arts and social justice communities and stronger self-identification with the city and downtown space on behalf of these groups.

Nonetheless, while their performances earn them legitimacy, there are also challenges. The challenges of this kind of engagement with the local state include having to cope with slow change because of the time it takes to educate City Councilors and civil servants of the conditions cultural workers and poor people respectively face, a context where municipalities are under pressure to provide more with less,<sup>xxvi</sup> and questions over who will maintain the momentum created by these recent performances.

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<sup>i</sup> Peterborough is about 180 km northeast of Toronto, about a 1.5 hr commute by automobile, and has a population of about 75,000. Situated relatively close to the Greater

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Toronto Area, Peterborough is a place of residence for commuters to Oshawa and Toronto, retirees, and people who desire to be close to Toronto, but sufficiently removed from it.

<sup>ii</sup> For commentary on the proper site of struggle see Joel Davison Harden, “Comment: Ruthless Empire(s), Activist Subcultures, or New Solidarities? Choices for Today’s Global Radicals” in *Studies in Political Economy*, Autumn 2005, 145-147. Harden argues, along with Sam Gindin, for the nation-state as a more convincing site for strategic reasons, although he recognizes that “local populations have comprised the largest part of recent anticapitalist and antiwar demonstrations and events” (147).

<sup>iii</sup> Peterborough is about 180 km northeast of Toronto, about a 1.5 hr commute by automobile, and has a population of about 75,000. Situated relatively close to the Greater Toronto Area, Peterborough is a place of residence for commuters to Oshawa and Toronto, retirees, and people who desire to be close to Toronto, but sufficiently removed from it.

<sup>iv</sup> The characteristics of an “open and experimental movement” include thinking local space anew, networking and fostering identity-formation that goes beyond the primary action in question, and focusing on self-empowerment and relatively small scale production. (Magnusson and Walker 1988, 60)

<sup>v</sup> For discussion on the Creative City movement see “Creative City Network of Canada” <http://www.creativecity.ca/>, Florida (2002), Gertler et. al. (2002), Grundy and Boudreau (2006).

<sup>vi</sup> The portmanteau word “artist” appears around the same time as the anti-globalization protests starting in 1999 in Seattle. Several artist organizations are in existence. The Artist Film Festival (founded in 2003 in Los Angeles, CA) and Artist Jams (founded in 2002 in Boulder, CO) are prominent.

<sup>vii</sup> Carroll and Coburn (2003) recount the movement of Canadian neoliberalism organized by groups such as the Fraser Institute and the Business Council on National Issues.

<sup>viii</sup> For discussion on these cuts, the rise of neoliberal discourse in the 1980s and 1990s, and the impact of neoliberalism on citizens, see Brodie (2002), Clement and Vosko (2003), Kingfisher (2002), Porter (2003).

<sup>ix</sup> The federal government and Ontario provincial government had been reducing transfers to municipalities in the areas of education and transit since the mid-1970s. The 21.6% across the board reduction in Ontario provincial government spending made the deep cut that much more swift and dramatic in contrast to prior reductions. For further discussion, see Frisken (2001, 526-536).

<sup>x</sup> The Ontario Minister of Finance announced in April 2006 a 2% increase to social assistance, however, anti-poverty groups point out that it would take a 40% increase to restore welfare and disability assistance to the levels prior to the 1995 Harris cut. See

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Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, [www.ocap.ca](http://www.ocap.ca), and Peterborough Coalition Against Poverty, <http://www.freewebs.com/peterboroughcoalitionagainstopoverty/lealonnotice.htm>

<sup>xi</sup> For further discussion see Godard (2001, 74-97).

<sup>xii</sup> Smith studies the activities of the Toronto based Supporting Our Youth (SOY) an organization that offers services and support to LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) youth in the city.

<sup>xiii</sup> City of Peterborough. 2005. "Demonstration of Ongoing Commitment." Peterborough, ON: Community Services.

<sup>xiv</sup> Su Ditta, personal interview, February 21, 2006.

<sup>xv</sup> The Director of Community Services Development has been a spokesperson and provincial leader in Municipal Cultural Planning and involved in developing the artistic and cultural capacity of the city.

<sup>xvi</sup> Arts, Culture and Heritage Advisory Committee, Minutes of the meeting on October 20, 2005.

<sup>xvii</sup> Su Ditta, personal interview, February 21, 2006.

<sup>xviii</sup> Cultural workers continue to fight for fair wages through CARFAC and the *Status of the Artist Act*. See Danielle Cliche (1996).

<sup>xix</sup> Food Not Bombs website, <http://www.foodnotbombs.net/firstindex.html>, accessed January 11, 2006.

<sup>xx</sup> Rachelle Sauvé, meeting of people concerned about poverty in Peterborough, March 2, 2006.

<sup>xxi</sup> Rachel Sauvé at Food Not Bombs serving, December 12, 2005.

<sup>xxii</sup> Rachel Sauvé, personal interview.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Rachel Sauvé, personal interview.

<sup>xxiv</sup> "Poor culture" refers to an emerging set of norms and values associated with anti-mass-culture consumerism, environmental sustainability, and an emphasis on use values (e.g., the use of previously owned items). Addison-Webster (2006)

<sup>xxv</sup> See Janine Brodie, "Meso-discourses, state forms and the gendering of liberal-democratic citizenship, *Citizenship Studies*, 1(2), 1997: 223-241.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Karen Howlett and Jennifer Lewington (2006) and Jennifer Lewington (2006).



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