

'Common sense' and 'governmentality': local government in southeastern Ireland, 1850-1922

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Early paradigms in political anthropology identified formal government councils as a subject for cross-cultural comparison (structural functionalism) or as a political resource for goal-orientated actors (transactionalism). Recent concerns with power and regulation can also profit from a focus on local-level government councils by using them to explore the conceptual and empirical linkages between 'common sense' and 'governmentality'. In this article, as a point of entry, we highlight a key moment in the history of Britain's colonial and hegemonic project in Ireland, namely the orderly administrative transition from colony to state which occurred in Ireland after 1919. By constructing a historical narrative of a local government council in the southeast after 1850, and of its material and discursive bases, we show how the actions and ideologies of elite farmers were implicated in this orderly administrative transition and, therefore, how the concepts of governmentality, hegemony, and common sense might be linked.

The anthropological heyday of local-level politics from the mid-1960s to 1980 was associated with a transactional or processual, action-orientated paradigm.¹ In part it was a response to an earlier structural-functional focus on the comparative study of 'political systems' (Fortes & Evans-Pritchard 1940) and 'government'. Government had been defined in terms of its functions (Mair 1962) so that cross-cultural comparisons could be made of the diverse structures (lineages, bureaucracies, judicial institutions) which organized collective tasks (leadership), maintained order and managed disputes (law), deployed legitimate force (authority), and regulated external relations. It was in reaction to this concern with total societies, government, formal groups, and functions that the local-level politics paradigm explored micro-political processes, informal quasi-groups (factions, coalitions), and networks which were generated by the decisions of locally rooted actors (entrepreneurs, brokers, and big men) in pursuit of wealth, influence, and/or power. Politics were found whenever and wherever goal-orientated actors manipulated resources in a public domain (Swartz, Turner & Tuden 1966: 4-7).

Both political paradigms have been amply criticized for many reasons over many decades. Most critiques distil down to the failure to make historical processes, differential power, and unbounded units the bases for ethnographic description.² Thus, by 1980, a turning away from the study of both political systems and local-level politics

accompanied the fragmentation of their subject matter into such sub-fields as legal anthropology, political economy, and the anthropology of bureaucracy and of formal organizations. Since 1990, calls for a 'reconstitution of political anthropology' (Gledhill 1994: 22; Shore & Wright 1997: 12) through a focus on power have not healed the fracture. This is because power is everywhere; therefore everything is political – approachable by diverse methodologies (e.g. presentist, historical, discursive, reflexive) in all sites (e.g. transnational networks, local places, rituals, the self) and through every theoretical lens. This has meant that all of anthropology is now political anthropology, as perhaps it should be. However, it also means that the subject matter of earlier political anthropology, namely the analysis of specialized political bodies, agents, and processes, remains lost.

One of these subjects, used in both the comparative study of political systems and, later, transactional politics, was the study of local government councils and of the offices and people associated with them. In 1965 Bailey's seminal article bridged an ethnographic divide between African, Indian, and Western European ethnographies by distinguishing two ideal types of council (elite and arena) and two ways in which decisions were reached (consensus and voting) according to the public accountability of the council's members, the council's tasks (administrative or policy-making), and the council's area of concern (external or internal relationships). A 1971 symposium attempted to further this exploration into 'conciliar behaviour' and 'the council mechanism as a means of achieving results' (Richards 1971: 6). However, such exploration never went further as anthropologists became detached from the study of formal, non-judicial bodies and roles which had explicit governmental purposes and which were simultaneously implicated in political processes in part through the actions of goal-orientated individuals.³ Councils became relegated to occasional use as means for pursuing other topics.⁴ Yet, as we try to show in this article, the use of such specialized, political subject matter, in the context of historically informed ethnography, can be profitable both in exploring contemporary theoretical ideas in anthropology and in shedding light on key historical moments.

Common sense and governmentality in political anthropology

Recent concern with the cultural manifestations of power as control and regulation has led many to apply Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and, occasionally, common sense, while others have used Foucault's idea of government rationality or 'governmentality'. For most, a gulf seems to divide the two paradigms, exemplified by the extensive and often heated debates among social theorists (Dean 1994; Valverde 1994). Numerous points of contention have been raised. Foucault saw discursive rules as structuring experience and thought, whereas Gramsci stressed material conditions (Gramsci 1985: 32-3, 41-3; Simons 1995: 55). Gramsci examined the state, the education of consent, and the power of cultural ideas at particular historical moments (Gramsci 1971: 44-123, 257-64, 266) whereas Foucault emphasized 'regimes of practice' as these were located in particular conceptualizations of government (Corrigan 1994; Foucault 1978; Rose & Miller 1992: 173-5). Out of these positionings come different ideas about the vertical connections linking societal layers. Gramsci held that cultural relations and moral regulation were rooted in economic relations of production and, therefore, in the 'educative and formative role' of the state, which was to be defined in terms of its monopoly of force (Adamson 1980: 159, 165, 219; Corrigan & Sayer 1985: 4; Gramsci 1971: 158-68, 258). Foucault, in contrast, perceived verticality and society as

simultaneous and co-existing layers of government: the government of the self (the 'microphysics of power'); the government of others; and the government of the state ('governmentality') (Dean 1994: 158, 160-1; Foucault 1979). Most recently, however, both approaches have been critiqued because they insufficiently implicate political economy and discourse with each other, they have poorly developed conceptions of social relations, and they sideline agency (Clarke 2004).

Anthropologists have also waded in, mainly to interpret Gramsci and/or to apply hegemony to ethnographic cases.⁵ Less frequently, however, have anthropologists linked common sense to local-level politics or discussed and used the concept of governmentality.⁶ Importantly, too, common sense has often and unfortunately been conflated with myth, false consciousness, or, more seriously, the concept of hegemony itself.⁷ This has usually happened when common sense and hegemony are both conceptualized as co-existing synchronic ideologies which, consequently, cannot be distinguished empirically.

In contrast, following Roseberry (1994) and Kurtz (1996), we believe that it is essential to see hegemony as an ongoing political process promulgated through state projects and manifested through the relations between leaders and followers – leaders who aim to create consent among, and/or to coerce (dominate), the led. A hegemonic process is therefore social and economic as well as discursive and cultural. It is never finished. In this view, common sense is defined as how people structure and explain their world at a particular moment. It is a historically derived amalgam of ideas accumulated from numerous sources: folk ideas; material interests; segments of dominant ideologies; fragments of counter-ideologies; and so on. Common sense, embedded in everyday language and learned in daily interaction, accretes over time and must be overcome by innovative political education if radical change is to occur (Adamson 1980: 149-52).

Formal governmental structures, roles, and actors inevitably play a part in education and, therefore, in hegemonic processes and the formation of common sense. This suggests that anthropologists might usefully apply the 'problematics of government' as one means for analysing regulation, hegemony, and common sense. Following Foucault, such problematics require the analysis of three linked elements. First, 'political rationalities' are the 'changing discursive fields within which the exercise of power is conceptualised' (Rose & Miller 1992: 175). They provide the frame within which the second element, 'programmes of government', identifies, defines, represents, and configures what is a problem, ideal, or difficulty which should be addressed. Programmes 'make the objects of government thinkable' (Rose & Miller 1992: 181). Third, 'governmental technologies' are the mundane techniques and procedures (surveys, calculations, notation, training, etc.) through which the rationalities and programmes are addressed (Rose & Miller 1992: 183).

It therefore seems to us that ideas contained in both paradigms might be useful for an empirical exploration of specialized, local-level political structures. One way in which this can be done is by examining an ongoing hegemonic process and a key historical moment which developed from it.

A state project: hegemony and local government in rural Ireland after 1838

The British state, in its colonial and hegemonic project, faced intractable and disruptive poverty and distress in its Irish colony. In 1838 it therefore extended to it the programmes and technologies of the 1834 English Poor Law (Lyons 1971: 78). The Poor

Law aimed to limit the provision of publicly funded poor relief to those who entered a workhouse. For this purpose, Ireland was geographically and administratively divided into 130 'poor law unions'. Each was headed by a 'board of guardians' which was to maintain and manage the union workhouse and its associated fever hospital by fixing and collecting rates on fixed property (land, buildings). A union was itself subdivided into electoral divisions, each of which was to have at least one representative on the board (Feingold 1984: 15-16). Executive officers (chair, vice-chair, deputy vice-chair), elected from among and by board members, were to handle the routine functioning of the union aided by a paid professional clerk.

Over the next decades, as the perceived problems and programmes of the British state expanded, other responsibilities were allocated to these boards. The most important were in the areas of public health (managing medical dispensaries and personnel, sanitary inspections, vaccination), public works (providing roads, potable water, sewers), and social welfare (building labourers' housing, furnishing outdoor relief). In 1898, the Local Government (Ireland) Act rationalized this evolution by creating 'rural districts' and 'rural district councils'. The former poor law unions in rural areas became rural districts which covered the same territory, were comprised of the same electoral divisions, and were still required to act as boards of poor law guardians (when supervising the workhouse and poor relief) while simultaneously being authorized to perform the new functions which had gradually been assigned to the old unions and boards. In effect, the 1838 Poor Law and its later revisions created a local government system.

From its inception in 1838 this local government was embedded in economic and class differences, not only because it was aimed at regulating the poor but also because of the way board membership was attained. As of 1847, up to half the board was comprised of appointed, *ex officio* members who were magistrates and, therefore, usually landlords. The other half was elected from among other propertied categories (those who occupied rateable holdings valued at £20 or more). In addition, the suffrage was based on a system of cumulative voting which exaggerated the influence of the larger landowners and farmers; the greater the value of one's property, the more votes one was allocated. The local government structure thus was made to mirror and reinforce, both materially and ideationally, local class hierarchies.

The common sense implicated in this governmental structure was reproduced in subsequent years alongside a change in the nature of representation, particularly in the southern and eastern areas of Ireland, where larger farms were common. Here, until the 1870s, the class which provided *ex officio* guardians controlled board proceedings because of numbers, local influence, and presumed expertise. As this class underwent gradual impoverishment and numerical decline during the 1870s and 1880s, and as agrarian and nationalist coalitions gained momentum and influence, its members on the council were displaced by the larger farmers. It was a process of democratization-cum-elite circulation (Feingold 1984: 201-26). This change was institutionalized by the 1898 Local Government (Ireland) Act, which eliminated *ex officio* membership and extended the suffrage for local elections to all male householders or occupiers (Chubb 1970: 276).

Because in Gramsci's terms the state seeks to educate and regulate and in Foucault's view the state is the sum of its governmental rationalities, programmes, and technologies, it is unsurprising to note that boards of guardians, from their inception in 1838, had been nested within a broader hierarchy. All their administrative actions,

including appointments and financial decisions, were directly overseen by a Poor Law Commission, which, in 1872, was converted into the Local Government Board (LGB). The LGB, manned by colonial and professional civil servants in Dublin Castle – the centre of British administration in Ireland – and staffed with regional inspectors and auditors, was directly responsible to the British Parliament (Feingold 1984: 17). Minutes of all board meetings, all accounts, and all correspondence had to be sent to and vetted by the LGB, which, in its turn, had to ensure that boards, and later councils, properly carried out mandated duties, using appropriate techniques and procedures as defined by local government law. It was, even in times of the greatest distress, such as the great famine of 1845-9, an administrative hierarchy ‘notorious’ for its punctilious and detailed procedures (Vincent 1992: 89), which were, in their turn, enmeshed in economic and class-based hierarchies.

From colony to state: a historical moment in Irish historiography

The political rationality of government embodied in the hegemonic project of the British colonial state was such that programmes for managing the poor had fashioned a system of local government in Ireland. In December 1921, after a two-year guerrilla war of independence, the independent Irish Free State was founded, accompanied by a seamless administrative transition (Chubb 1970: 232; Lyons 1971: 480).⁸ Irish historians and sociologists generally have attributed this orderly administrative passage to particular values and structures. The ‘constitutionalist ethos’ (McBride 1991: 312) of the professionalized civil service and judiciary was key, as was, after 1892, their increasingly Catholic and nationalist personnel. Continuity also was effected by particular conditions and events: generous career provisions for civil servants contained in the Anglo-Irish Treaty which established the Free State in 1921 (Chubb 1970: 233); the support lent by the British to strengthen pro-Treaty forces after civil war broke out in Ireland (1921-2) between those who supported the Treaty and those who objected to many of its provisions (McColgan 1983: 86-7, 104); and the exigencies of the civil war, which prevented administrative experimentation (Meghen 1962: 47).

All these views are, of course, rooted in the idea that the past, and the reproduction of particular institutions through time, can be adequately represented by a national-level depiction of homogeneous structural conditions. From an anthropological perspective, however, what is so obviously missing are the micro-processes. How did an entire administrative hierarchy, with material and ideological roots and branches in local life throughout the countryside, make such a transition? How was the local level implicated in, and enabling of, this transition?⁹ To explore this, we turn to the historical ethnography of a rural, Poor Law union in southeastern Ireland after 1850. In so doing, we penetrate into the nature of common sense and governmentality which were implicated in Britain’s colonial and hegemonic project.

‘A respectable, nationalist board’: common sense in Thomastown Poor Law Union, 1850-1922

The Thomastown Poor Law Union, in southern county Kilkenny, was created in 1850.¹⁰ Its administrative centre, with workhouse, boardroom, fever hospital, and farm, was sited at the edge of the town of Thomastown, a small commercial centre located on the railway line connecting Dublin to Waterford. The union comprised twenty-seven electoral districts and contained a land area of 107,577 acres. Its population was 21,407 in 1861.

From its inception, and until 1881, large farmers formed a majority of its board of guardians (BOG) – a majority which increased through time even though ‘gentry’ members (landlords and their estate agents) continued to be elected as officers. By 1881, however, only one or two gentry remained active in the union, and in that year farmers took over the executive offices (*Kilkenny Moderator*, 26 November 1881). After that, a landowner who was a magistrate and, therefore, an *ex officio* member might occasionally attend a meeting, but this was unusual.

This growing farmer engagement paralleled the escalating agitation for land reform in Ireland generally. In 1876, for example, a land tenure bill was being mooted by the leader of a fractious group of Irish MPs in the British Parliament. A wealthy farmer-councillor from the Thomastown electoral division gave notice that he would present a motion that the board discuss the bill, as it had been petitioned to do by a Dublin Tenants’ Defence Committee. The chair, a landowner and *ex officio* member, stated:

I am very sorry to see you introducing an element of discord into *your* board where we have been working so harmoniously hitherto ... The subject is entirely outside the province of boards of guardians, who have no business to discuss in the board political questions of this kind ... I receive your notice, but I shall certainly vacate the chair when the subject is brought forward for discussion (*Kilkenny Moderator*, 31 May 1876, italics ours).

At the next meeting, the chair did as he had announced, stating that the ‘board should be neutral ground’ (*Kilkenny Moderator*, 10 June 1876). An estate agent member concurred:

I have been guardian of this union for a very long time, almost since the existence of the board, and during that time I was not aware of any question either religious or political being introduced here. We have pulled well together, and I am sorry to see an element introduced that might tend to interfere with the usual harmony of the board (*Kilkenny Moderator*, 31 May 1876).

The chair was vacated and the gentry members left the meeting. A farmer was elected to the chair and a motion supporting the petition was unanimously passed (*Kilkenny Moderator*, 31 May 1876).

It was such actions, and the BOG’s composition, which led a member of the public to characterize it as ‘a respectable nationalist board’ (*Kilkenny Moderator*, 4 September 1886). This was still its character when, under the 1898 Act, Thomastown union was designated a rural district. The first rural district council (RDC), elected the following year, contained fifty farmers, three retailers, and one labourer. At its first meeting, three other farmers and two notables (a tannery owner and a flour mill owner) were co-opted onto the council as per regulations requiring such co-optation. The council was thus controlled by farmers, the majority of whom held the largest farms. Eight held more than 200 acres; twenty-one had between 100 and 199 acres; fourteen held between 50 and 99 acres; and only two had less than 50 acres.¹¹ In 1913, the profile was the same, as indeed were many of the councillors themselves.¹² By then, these farmers had acquired the freehold ownership of their farms under the provisions of a series of Land Acts passed after 1880. They, therefore, saw themselves as linked through a common past, shared interests, and a patronizing prestige which came from their relationship to land. In a preamble to a motion passed unanimously in 1917, councillors proudly

described themselves as 'this Council composed principally of farmers who have purchased their holdings' (Minutes, 7 August 1917). This elitism was instantiated in practice as well. Uncontested elections were the norm as farmer volunteers for council seats were seldom opposed by their neighbours. Similarly, the chair and deputy chairships were held by those councillors who were the largest farmers, which was a feature never disputed or found to be unreasonable by the other farmer-councillors.

In all these actions, discursive depictions, and events we can see the essence of common sense as it had evolved by this time. Being a Poor Law guardian – that is, an active member of the colonial government – marked a man's superior access to the means of production, his favourable economic position, and his prestige ('respectable'). Simultaneously, being a guardian provided a man with a forum for enunciating counter-hegemonic ideas ('nationalist') and an apparatus ('the board') for exercising material control over others.¹³ This was how economic and political reasoning were interrelated in Thomastown by 1898. This common sense was reproduced during the War of Independence (1919-21) and after the Treaty established the Irish Free State in December 1921.

Governmentality and routine technologies on Thomastown RDC after 1898

After 1898, as in the decades before, the banality of routine procedures and council decision-making was striking, with all 'pulling together' and 'in harmony', as the estate agent had described it in 1876. Every fortnight in the boardroom of the workhouse two formal meetings took place. The first was that of the rural district council, which was followed by the RDC acting as the board of guardians. Each body, served by the same clerk and sometimes by the same chair, dealt with its own duties and permanent staff.¹⁴ Often a particular meeting would be attended by only a dozen or so councillors. Indeed, a few councillors seldom attended meetings, many came fairly frequently, and a small number (changing over the years) turned up regularly. It is unclear, though, just how far the councillors actively participated in routine matters. They seemed largely to acquiesce in the formal execution of the council's regular responsibilities, leaving it to the relevant official to determine and carry out what was required. This included: a medical officer to inspect and give orders on dairy sheds and pig sties as well as to report on the work of midwives and fever hospital nurses; a surveyor to check on road conditions and recommend minor repairs; rate collectors and cottage rent collectors to report on the good or bad state of collection; a workhouse master to provide accounts of numbers of in-house paupers and workhouse expenditures; and a relieving officer to report on the numbers requiring, and cost of, outdoor relief. Minimally, at least, councillors had to endorse recommendations for action so that the appropriate returns could be sent on to the LGB in Dublin Castle.

It is, however, clear from the minute books that the large majority of councillors were prepared to attend meetings when discussions were held on the details of local taxation and expenditures. In 1913, for example, during lengthy discussions about the costs of building labourers' cottages, one councillor pronounced, with his colleagues' concurrence, that 'it is the business of every ... [councillor] to see that the money is expended in his division properly ... We are here for the common interest and good of the ratepayers' (*Kilkenny Moderator*, 2 August 1913). Thus, at the annual setting of the rates, the reiterated endeavour was to keep the rates as low as possible. More than once these farmer-councillors congratulated themselves on maintaining the lowest rates in county Kilkenny.

Alongside an intense concern with setting rates was a similar preoccupation with managing non-routine and major expenditures. The latter escalated alongside the ever-widening range of sanitary and medical regulations promulgated by the central government. Building cottages for labourers under the various Labourers' Acts was the most important. The council had to: choose, value, and purchase sites; review tenders for as well as supervise and pay for building work; select tenants; and deal with rent arrears and repairs. All this necessitated written consultations with Dublin Castle bureaucrats and arrangements with surveyors, valuers, and contractors. Similar steps had to be taken, and monies expended, to furnish potable water throughout the rural district by sinking wells and installing pumps. Exceptional requests from staff in relation to road maintenance, public nuisances, or workhouse supplies elicited much discussion, as did decisions about the number of staff, their salaries, and the appointments. Such preoccupation and close involvement with financial decisions invariably meant that councillors were being educated in the programmes and technologies of government. Conversely, in their desire to keep to keep rates and costs low, farmer-councillors considered that they had the knowledge, experience, and expertise in all matters which came under the purview of the council.

All the actions of the council were continuously and closely monitored by the LGB in Dublin Castle. Copies of all minutes and routine bureaucratic returns, on standard forms, had to be sent to the LGB, whose officials sent back comments, advice, approval, or disapproval. Little that the RDC wished to do or was compelled by law to do could be accomplished without the LGB's agreement. This ranged from the annual setting of property rates, through the appointment of a matron in the hospital or a temporary engineer to supervise road or drainage works, to the travelling expenses (a few shillings) of a nurse accompanying a patient to hospital in Dublin. The LGB was, evidently, prepared to query everything, although a good deal was allowed as a matter of routine. New laws and regulations were explained in circulars and letters from the LGB. Sometimes the council in turn sought advice or legal clarification. Its accounts were checked half-yearly by an auditor appointed by the LGB, which also sent an inspector to hold a local inquiry when, for example, land was to be acquired for new cottages. In addition to income from the local rates, the RDC received grants and loans from the LGB, and these could be withheld until LGB requirements had been met.

From 1850 on, then, farmer-councillors experienced the programmes and technologies and the rules and practices of government, advised by the council's professional clerk and supervised by the LGB. Although the LGB was an agent of colonial administration, although it frequently disapproved of the council's actions and requested it to modify them, and although it wielded final authority over local issues, seldom was there open conflict between it and the council and never was resentment or anger publicly expressed by councillors (at least as recorded in the minutes or newspaper accounts). This was because negotiation was always possible and both parties could make concessions. An example of this began in February 1910 when the council and the LGB disagreed over the rents to be charged for labourers' cottages (Minutes, 24 February 1910).

The LGB noted in a letter that the RDC intended, as per its minutes, to set rents at $10\frac{1}{2}$ d. a week for cottages on an acre of land and $6\frac{1}{2}$ d. for those on half an acre. Under the Labourers' Act, however, this would disqualify the council from obtaining another loan to build more cottages because a rent of 1 s. 4 d. (on one acre) was required. After some discussion, councillors passed a motion rejecting the higher rent because sitting

tenants had already agreed to the lower rent with an LGB inspector, although they did stipulate that new cottages, soon to be built, would attract a rent of 1 s. In reply, the LGB stated that its inspector had not questioned prospective tenants but that, in any case, 10½d. was too low. On 21 April, the RDC passed a motion reiterating its earlier opinion. The matter lay dormant until September, when the RDC set cottage rents at 1 s. for those with one acre and 6½d. for those with a half acre (Minutes, 27 September 1910). In October, the LGB gave its approval but insisted on a rent of 10½d. for half-acre cottages. The RDC rejected this in a motion which expressed both regret and opposition and which included the point that 'we also consider it late for the LGB now to interfere' (Minutes, 25 October 1910). More than a month later, the RDC considered another letter from the LGB noting that rents in other rural districts in county Kilkenny were higher and that a rent of not less than 7 d. for cottages on half an acre was 'reasonable' (Minutes, 6 December 1910). The letter requested the RDC's compliance, 'otherwise the Board will be obliged to take steps to compel the Council to perform their statutory duty' (Minutes, 6 December 1910). In April 1911, the council passed a motion rejecting the LGB's ultimatum and refusing 'to break agreement with the labourers' (Minutes, 11 April 1911). In May, the RDC learned that the LGB had appointed an inspector to make a local inquiry 'as to the reasonableness of the rents' proposed by the council (Minutes, 9 May 1911). In December, almost two years after the start of the dispute, the LGB reiterated its stand as a result of the inquiry and the RDC complied (Minutes, 5 December 1911).

These negotiations over the rents were conducted in leisurely and bureaucratic fashion, without rancour, among sensible, capable men seeking to define what was 'reasonable'. Allowances could therefore be made and programmes carried out. Elitism and deeply embedded, routine technologies underlay such assumptions and processes, all of which point clearly not only to the ongoing reproduction of a shared governmental rationality at all levels of the local government hierarchy but also to a process of mutual education by actors at all levels.

'We, the elected representatives': elite leaders and public issues after 1898

Like the former *ex officio* gentry guardians, rural district councillors saw themselves as linked through common histories, material interests, and prestige. They saw the council on which they served as having the requisite expertise for governing, both in relation to the hierarchy in which it was enmeshed and in relation to its public. They also believed that, as councillors, they represented and led public opinion, having both the opportunity and responsibility to do so. Such elitist common sense in relation to both themselves and the council found expression, for example, in a unanimous resolution in 1911 which began: 'We, the elected representatives of the Thomastown Rural District Council, the principal public body of South Kilkenny ... give our views with respect to ... the future well-being of our county' (Minutes, 28 March). Such common sense inevitably led the council, from time to time after 1898 and with rather greater frequency in later decades, to pass motions on issues which lay outside their statutory governmental obligations.

Some of these issues were local. The council's comments reflected the nuances of local life, both present and past, particularly the contemporary respectability of councillors as indigenous elites and leaders *vis-à-vis* both local people and the colonial state. They also reflected the agitations of the late nineteenth century which had engendered the various Land Acts from which the farmer-councillors had so clearly benefited. Thus

cases of farmers evicted from their lands, a shopkeeper evicted from a town field, and the failure of a few remaining landlords to sell their agricultural lands to sitting tenants under the Land Acts elicited motions from the councillors, who clearly believed that it behoved them to make public comment. However, although the evictions were deplored, the language of censure was restrained. In one case in 1906 the motion read 'we must strongly protest' and 'respectfully call on the Estate Commissioners' to investigate (Minutes, 22 February). Another case in 1910 concluded with 'we earnestly hope that a satisfactory settlement will in the near future be arrived at between the parties by which the good relations hitherto existing between landlords and their tenants ... will not be marred with an unpleasantness' (Minutes, 21 May). Such moderate language complemented the somewhat fulsome terms in which were recorded the death of the 'benevolent' wife of a local landlord (1909), the agreeable sojourn in the locality of Lord Southampton, a fox-hunting enthusiast (1911), and the elevation of the Earl of Carrick (a major employer of labour) to a United Kingdom peerage (1912).

In contrast to the moderation of these locally inspired motions, resolutions on non-local issues were couched in the dramatic language of protest in both earlier and later years. These motions concerned national, nationalist, anti-landlord, and anti-English matters. In 1901, the council unanimously approved 'the noble and gallant effort of the brave Boer farmers to uphold the independence of their country' (Minutes, 4 July) and called for peace in the Boer War. Councillors in 1904 resolved that 'we see no reason to be delighted with royal visits when the countries [*sic*] blood is floating away by English misrule' (Minutes, 18 March). In 1912, a motion expressed 'the deepest gratitude' to the Irish Parliamentary Party and its leader, John Redmond, for their efforts in respect of the Home Rule Bill (Minutes, 23 May), which was to grant limited self-government to Ireland. The motion added that 'the hand of fellowship and good will is extended to all provided they are true to Ireland, the mother-land of them all' (Minutes, 23 May). A motion in 1915 denounced the new duties on liquor, the product of 'practically the only industry of which the English have not robbed us' (Minutes, 28 January).

There was no indication as to the authors of these motions; many were received from other councils. They likely came from nationalist activists and interest groups which were circulating such motions to councils, as well as to sympathetic councillors, in the effort to disseminate information about iniquities which had happened elsewhere, to obtain publicity in local newspapers through the reports which always were made of council meetings, and to build up public support and harvest protest. Clearly they tapped into, and enhanced, local nationalist sentiment. Thus, a motion favouring Catholic university education (1905) was passed by the RDC, as was the above-mentioned motion on liquor duties, even though these issues were of minor material concern for those in a district which had no public secondary schools and no distilleries.

It is important, however, not to over-emphasize, as have many historians, the role of nationalism in local government at the time. For example, in his imposing survey of modern Irish political institutions, Chubb declared that '[b]etween 1898 and independence local government was dominated by national political issues and movements' (1970: 277). For southern county Kilkenny, this is clearly a considerable exaggeration. There were about twenty-five council meetings each year in Thomastown and most meetings did not table such motions, even during peak periods of anti-colonial struggle. In the first nine years, between 1898 and 1907, there was only one

such resolution each year. After a flurry in 1908, that paucity resumed until concern over the Home Rule Bill brought nine during 1913. Growing nationalist fervour throughout the country brought eight in 1917 and eleven in 1918. Resolutions emanating from non-governmental, local issues were even fewer. Indeed, as uncontested owners of extensive farms, the councillors were predominantly interested in their rates and thus in proper government, even though their anti-English sentiments accompanied them to council meetings. This was the structure of common sense and of political rationality.

Alignments and coalitions: local ties and national ideologies, 1898-1918

Councillors were large farmers and constituted an elite carrying out administrative functions, yet they often had disagreements which had to be settled by open voting rather than by the predictable consensus. Voting tended to occur when a decision required a choice rather than a continuation of current practice and when a decision was being made without clear direction from the LGB or emphatic advice from the council's clerk. Some examples are: whether to provide street lighting in the towns; where to locate a water pump; where to build a labourer's cottage and which farmer's labourer should be the tenant; who should form the council executive and who should be co-opted onto the council; who should fill the council's administrative positions; and whose tender for supplies or work should be accepted. The voting which ensued had a pattern, based on the intersection of locality, personal ties, and the prestige associated with wealth.

Councillors saw themselves as custodians of the rates for their own local, electoral divisions. They therefore had to make strategic decisions about which improvements, if any, should go to which divisions while wanting to prevent costs being charged against the rates levied in their own divisions for expenditures made in more distant divisions. A councillor was therefore inclined to support a colleague from the same part of the rural district as himself. In addition, neighbouring councillors were often interconnected through kinship or labour exchange networks. At the very least, they brought their milk to the same creamery and their livestock to the same mart, unlike farmers from several miles away, who were, in a sense, 'strangers'. Kinship, too, had its obligations, and a farmer-councillor was also inclined to support a colleague from another part of the rural district if he was kin or the kin of kin. Relative prestige could also garner support. A councillor who was a 'strong' farmer could often capitalize on this, gaining votes at the expense of another councillor who was less esteemed.

Clearly, then, the norms and strategies associated with voting were well understood. In the earlier years of the rural district council, no persisting cliques emerged, nor was there any sense among councillors that this might be the case. It was only in 1912, with the passing of the Home Rule Bill in the British Parliament, giving Ireland a degree of autonomy, that councillors began to coalesce into two more or less distinct voting groups.

All RDC members were clearly and unanimously in favour of political autonomy but, like the Irish more generally, were divided on the conditions of autonomy, the celerity of the Bill's passage, and the effectiveness of John Redmond and the Irish Parliamentary Party in pressing the case. This division was apparent in May 1912 when some councillors, opposed by recalcitrant colleagues, insisted on including in an otherwise laudatory motion a clause calling for amending the Bill as recommended by the Council of County Boroughs. It became clearer in June 1914 when councillor John

Murphy, a committed Redmondite and conservative, was only narrowly elected chair by twenty-five votes to twenty-three. The next year, Murphy lost re-election by twenty-five to twenty-two votes. Virtually the same councillors voted for him and for his successor, Michael O'Neill, on each occasion, as they did again when O'Neill won the chairship in 1916. On his re-election in 1917, O'Neill touted his membership in the radical nationalist movement, Sinn Fein, and his misgivings as to the effectiveness of the Irish Party (*Kilkenny Moderator*, 16 June 1917).

By this point, the Sinn Fein-Irish Party division was altering the earlier logic underlying voting patterns and, thus, the outcome of local issues such as choosing tenants for labourers' cottages. Such division persisted. In April 1917, the RDC discussed whether or not to respond to an invitation to send delegates to an Irish Party meeting in Dublin. O'Neill, from the chair and in opposition to the invitation, suggested that the matter be held over. The Irish Party supporters insisted and, by thirteen votes to nine, passed a motion to send delegates (*Kilkenny People*, 7 April). The following month, councillors had a lengthy debate over the Irish Bishops' Manifesto opposing the partition of Ireland. Whilst all councillors were opposed to partition, some would not agree to a motion to censure the Irish Party for being engaged in 'a treasonable project'. The council meeting broke up in disarray when the chair ruled that further discussion was out of order. After some time, it reassembled. The chair re-read the motion, stating that the censure 'was a caution and not a condemnation of the Irish Party' (*Kilkenny People*, 9 May 1917). A year later, the two groups were still recognizable. The vice-chair (a supporter of O'Neill) declared that 'a good many members of the Council did not cherish the idea of Sinn Fein', but he asked for all to sink their differences and 'present a united front to the enemy' (*Kilkenny People*, 20 May 1918).

From colony to state: the administrative transition, 1919-21

This united front had emerged by 1919 as massive support for Sinn Fein was mobilized for the parliamentary election and, in association with this, the Irish Party was eclipsed by the increasingly strident demands for immediate self-government developing in the aftermath of the 1916 Easter rebellion. The dissension among councillors, typical of the previous years, disappeared. Instead, between 1919 and 1921, a number of motions were passed unanimously denouncing the British government or its particular actions. In June 1920 the RDC went further. It unanimously moved to 'recognise the Republic established by the will and vote of the Irish people as the legitimate government of Ireland' (*Kilkenny People*, 19 June; Minutes, 10 July 1920). The chair declared that 'we now have a full Republican Council' (*Kilkenny People*, 19 June; Minutes, 10 July 1920) and the RDC instructed its clerk to send copies of its minutes and routine returns to the local government department of the newly established *Dáil Éireann* (DE), the constituent assembly of Irish nationalists who had unilaterally declared political independence.¹⁵

What followed was a period in which everyday practices in relation to the LGB were applied to the council's relationship with the new DE while, at the same time, the RDC continued to send its minutes, monthly financial statements, and other returns required by British law to the LGB in Dublin Castle. The RDC also sought advice and funds and considered comments and letters from both superiors. This strategy permitted a good deal of symbolic battle whilst simultaneously allowing the councillors to navigate an unclear political situation. Thus, an LGB circular in July 1920 notified local councils that no loans or grants would be made to any local authority unless it

agreed to submit its financial accounts to routine audit and to abide by the rules set out by the LGB (Minutes, 30 July). Strong protest ensued from among the councillors. 'Are we going to sell ourselves for a few pounds? We would have to sign that we would be good boys in the future before they give us anything' (*Kilkenny People*, 7 August 1920). According to the minutes, the LGB letter was ordered to be burned. This was done. Knowing the patterns of negotiation with the LGB, however, councillors were quite likely expecting another letter. It arrived two months later. This time, the returns were sent.

The unclear political situation also allowed the council to try for, or choose, the best terms. In July 1920, for example, it approached the DE for a loan to build more labourers' cottages in order to circumvent the high rents for cottages set by the LGB (Minutes, 2 July). That same month, the council considered the LGB's new salary scales for employees. Although the chair objected to the RDC being directed by the LGB, asserting that the council should fix the scales autonomously, it agreed to follow the LGB's relatively low scales for the matron of the workhouse and the midwives whilst ignoring the higher scale for the workhouse master (*Kilkenny People*, 7 August 1920). Similarly, when the LGB queried the need for the RDC to employ a permanent clerk of works (Minutes, 5 November 1920), the council appealed to the DE for permission. In December 1920, the RDC accepted instructions from DE to receive a LGB loan (Minutes, 17 December).

Throughout this same period, relations with *Dáil Éireann* not only resembled those with the LGB but followed precisely the same technologies and practices, as the DE itself insisted upon when, in March 1921, it informed the RDC that 'the former code of local government laws' was to remain in force until altered by DE (Minutes, 11 March). A few months before, the RDC had requested advice from DE concerning the size of a quorum. The DE replied, referring to section 10 of the Local Government (Ireland) Act of 1900, that 'the regulations ... to meet weekly were still in force' (Minutes, 22 January 1921). The clerk of the RDC commented to councillors that the DE was 'strictly adhering' to the LGB regulations, adding that 'in fact they [DE] are a little more strict than the LGB' (*Kilkenny People*, 22 January 1921).¹⁶

This dual administration did not last. Both the minutes and local newspapers show that the RDC moved progressively under the authority of the DE just as the DE grew increasingly authoritative in its instructions to the RDC. In November 1920, it ordered a severance of relations with 'the English LGB' (Minutes, 13 November). All half-yearly returns were to be sent only to the DE, and LGB auditors were to be refused access to RDC accounts. The LGB tried to continue its supervisory role. As late as March 1921, the clerk of the council received a letter from the LGB; but the council would not allow him to read it to the meeting (Minutes, 19 March). By the end of the War of Independence, in July 1921, the RDC received a letter from Dublin Castle demanding repayment within six days of an instalment of a loan under the Labourers' Acts. The DE advised that no such payment should be made. None was.

Thus, after about one year, as the War of Independence closed, the RDC was completely subsumed under the DE and detached from Dublin Castle whilst its programmes of government and governmental technologies continued unchanged. During the following months, the council met regularly, albeit with some diminution of attendance,¹⁷ and continued its administrative responsibilities of setting and collecting rates and expending funds to carry out its numerous functions. Its relations with, and dependence on, the Ministry of Local Government of the DE were identical

with what they had been with the LGB under the English colonial regime. This reproduction, wrought in large measure by local meanings and practices, continued until 1925, when rural districts were abolished by the Irish Free State.

Conclusion: political anthropology, historical ethnography, and local government

It is generally accepted that political anthropology as a sub-discipline emerged in 1940 with the publication of *African political systems* (Fortes & Evans Pritchard) and with a focus on structures which functioned to organize collective tasks, maintain order, manage external connections, and, sometimes, deploy force. Later, focus on goal-orientated, decision-making actors and on local political processes also was concerned with governmental structures in order to show how they could be used as resources by political entrepreneurs. In this article, we too have focused on a specialized government structure and on elite actors. We aimed to show how such foci, if used for a historical ethnography of hegemonic processes, might contribute to reconstituting political anthropology. Such use, we suggest, requires a simultaneous exploration both of political rationality ('governmentality') and of 'common sense'. This is because governmental structures play an important part in hegemonic processes; as they strive to educate consent, they encounter common sense. Common sense, in turn, affects how actors will take part in government. Common sense and governmentality thus entail each other and affect each other through time.

In the present article, we used a key moment as a point of entry for exploring this process in a local government council. Because it was a site where local, national, and colonial interests intersected, it was possible to use it in order to penetrate, in part, the common sense and governmentality implicated in Britain's colonial and hegemonic project in Ireland. The key element, that of administrative persistence through colonialism, an anti-colonial war, and independence, had been highlighted by Irish historians, who sought its explanation in national-based and structural features. Instead, we queried how local government, administered by local elite farmers and aided by locally based, specialized officials, continued in its essentials and in most of its detailed implementations throughout that time.

Large farmers in Thomastown, and likely elsewhere in Ireland, had long experienced the programmes and technologies of local government. They had developed a clear political rationality which framed their ideas about such administration. Since 1838, when the local government structure was itself created to mirror local class hierarchies, and after 1850, when such a structure was implanted locally, the farmer-councillors had shaped, and been shaped by, the mundane routines of local government practices and beliefs which arose from this rationality. At the same time, they gradually explored the potential for using the local government council as a discursive platform for moulding local public opinion and for influencing national debates and issues. Such exploration led, at various times, to conflict within the council, as did support by individual farmer-councillors for localized interests, projects, and networks. In other words, the idea of the council both as a discursive platform and as a base for furthering localized and individual interests became part of local governmentality.

Thus was political rationality directly and assiduously shaped not only by the programmes and technologies of government but also by the farmers' material and ideological experiences, interests, and goals as landowners (i.e. their right to property

and, thus, their suitability to govern and to lead), as ratepayers (i.e. the need for low taxation, careful expenditure, and neighbourhood representation), as elites (i.e. as well-off and prestigious and sharing a common past of agrarian agitation), and as individuals. Both common sense and political rationality were intimately implicated with one another, as were the discursive and material bases of local life, the economic relations of production, the 'educative' role of the state (Adamson 1980: 159, 165, 219), and the links between various layers of governmentality (Dean 1994: 158, 160-1). In other words, to understand the reproduction of the state in its administrative capacity requires an exploration both of the regimes of both governmental practice (Foucault) and of common sense (Gramsci). Thus, it may be questioned whether the concerns of social theorists to highlight the differences between the two paradigms is immediately relevant to political anthropology when, in fact, political anthropologists might find it helpful to mine both paradigms equally.

What, however, of common sense? Should it be conceptualized separately from hegemony? This is an issue which has been little discussed in anthropology. In the present article, the Poor Law (Ireland) Act of 1838 was clearly part of a hegemonic project wrought by the English colonial state. From this premise, the rise of agrarian agitation and, later, of nationalism can be posited as counter-hegemonic movements. In this view, two ideologies and two cultures confronted each other: action, reaction; imposition, resistance; colonialism, nationalism. How would Thomastown's farmer-councillors fit here? They engaged in colonial administration at the same time that they discursively challenged colonial rule. They did this for decades. With a view of hegemony based on culture contact, their actions can only be explained in terms of their being cleverly duplicitous or ideologically confused. The former clearly over-emphasizes their agency whereas the latter under-estimates it. Instead, it is far more useful to explore hegemony through historical narrative (Donham 2001) and to see it as a temporal process involving socio-economic relations and agents as well as discursive/cultural confrontations (Kurtz 1996; M. Silverman 2001). In such an approach, Gramsci's distinction between common sense and hegemony is essential. It provides an analytical layer which allows political economy, social relations, discourse, and goal-orientated actions to be introduced into cultural analysis (Clarke 2004). The actions of Thomastown's farmer-councillors thus become reasonable. Common sense, changing in its turn over time, articulates with the ongoing hegemonic process. The concept of common sense would thus seem essential for the anthropological analysis of hegemony.

In all these various ways, local common sense and governmentality, produced through a historical trajectory which implicated local, formal political structures and the actions of goal-orientated actors, informed the orderly administrative transition from colony to state in the Republic of Ireland. The analysis of this transition suggests possibilities for a contemporary political anthropology.

NOTES

¹ The complexities of this approach are described in Vincent (1978).

² Classic examples include Asad (1973), S. Silverman (1974) and van Velzen (1973).

³ Councils which had judicial (dispute settlement) functions continued to be studied by legal anthropologists. This article, however, refers to local councils which had administrative or governmental functions along with political implications in that members were accountable to a wider public. Indeed, efforts to differentiate 'politics' from 'administration' have a long history in political anthropology – from Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's early distinction between 'constitutional arrangements' and 'how they work in practice'

(1940: 12), through M.G. Smith's detailed discussions of power/politics as against authority/administration (1974: 176), to Bailey's use of normative as opposed to pragmatic rules (1969: 4-7). They are found also in recent writings on such topics as bureaucracy (Heyman 1995: 264) and policy formation (Shore & Wright 1997: 7). The most useful tactic, and the one taken here, follows the transactional and many of the recent power-focused approaches. The former associates politics with competition for public resources (Swartz 1968: 4) and the latter, following Wolf (1990), sees power as inhering in numerous analytical levels: in personal potency, inter-personal transactions, organizational processes, and modes of production. From both perspectives, local government councils are invariably political.

⁴ Councils have been used as sites for the study of, for example, network formation (Jongmans 1973), factionalism and class conflict (Bujra 1973; Schryer 1980; M. Silverman 1980), and, more recently, discourse analysis (Hayden 1987), class formation (M. Silverman 1995), state formation (Venema 2002), and subaltern studies (Vincentnathan 1996).

⁵ Examples of such interpretation are Comaroff & Comaroff (1992; 2002 [1991]), G. Smith (1999), and Kurtz (1996). Ethnographic studies include Brow (1988), Lagos (1993), and M. Silverman (2000).

⁶ Examples of the ethnographic use of common sense include Gordon (1995), Linger (1993), A.L. Smith (2004), and M. Silverman (2001). Among those who have applied governmentality are Appadurai (2002), Ferguson & Gupta (2002), and Nuijten (2004).

⁷ A good example of this conflation of common sense with hegemony is Comaroff & Comaroff (1992: 28-9).

⁸ Twenty-two of the twenty-six Irish counties formed the Free State. In 1949, these twenty-two counties declared themselves a republic.

⁹ Studies of the Irish state and government generally fall within three areas – administration, public policy, and electoral politics. Local-level administration or politics has received little attention.

¹⁰ Data for this paper come from a larger research project in the Thomastown area (e.g. Gulliver & Silverman 1995; M. Silverman 2001; M. Silverman & Gulliver 1992) and are mainly extracted from the official minute books and surviving letter books of the Thomastown Board of Guardians/Rural District Council. All references in the text to Minutes are from these books, held in the County Library, Kilkenny. Information also comes from the three county newspapers published at the time. The Minutes usually recorded only formal motions and voting although, occasionally, formal rectitude was breached and councillors' statements were noted. The newspapers, however, published reports of all council meetings, including purportedly verbatim accounts of discussions. Finally, these documentary sources are complemented by other data from the project, such as parochial records and land valuation records.

¹¹ In County Kilkenny in 1895, of holdings larger than 15 acres (i.e., holdings which were viable farms at the time), 60 per cent were 15-29.9 acres in size; 27 per cent were 50-99.9 acres; 10 per cent were 100-199.9 acres; 3 per cent were over 200 acres (United Kingdom, Parliamentary Papers 1895, Agricultural Returns). Thomastown's councillors were clearly 'strong' farmer elites.

¹² Not all holdings could be traced. Moreover, some of these figures are under-estimates because it was not always possible to trace councillors' landholdings outside their home places. Nevertheless, the figures highlight the centrality of the larger farmers, although, of course, not all larger farmers were actively involved in the RDC.

¹³ All councillors were men, with the single exception of one woman, the widow of a farmer-councillor, who temporarily substituted for her deceased husband in 1913.

¹⁴ In this article, 'RDC' refers to both the district council and the board of guardians. All councillors were also guardians.

¹⁵ The *Dáil Éireann* was founded in 1919. The term was (and is) commonly used to refer to the administrative and political institutions of the Free State, including the new Ministry of Local Government modelled on the LGB of British rule. According to Chubb, 'Local Government was the most successful and least shadowy' of DE departments (1970: 277).

¹⁶ Farrell has commented on 'the early Dáil's commitment to the preservation of the institutional status quo' (1971: 74).

¹⁷ Like all Irish, councillors were divided on whether to accept the Treaty with Britain. The diminution of attendance was the result of the small minority of councillors who were anti-Treaty.

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Résumé

Les anciens paradigmes de l'anthropologie politique voyaient dans les institutions gouvernementales un objet de comparaison interculturelle (fonctionnalisme structurel) ou une ressource politique pour des acteurs poursuivant une fin (transactionnalisme). L'intérêt récent pour le pouvoir et la réglementation peut aussi profiter de l'analyse des conseils de gouvernement locaux, qui permettent d'explorer les liens

empiriques entre « sens commun » et « gouvernementalité ». Les auteurs du présent article commencent par mettre en lumière un tournant de l'histoire du projet colonial et hégémonique britannique en Irlande, à savoir la transition administrative en bon ordre de colonie à État qui s'est produite après 1919. En construisant le récit historique d'un conseil de gouvernement local dans le sud-est de l'Irlande à partir de 1850, nous montrons comment les actes et l'idéologie des gros exploitants agricoles ont pesé dans cette transition administrative et, de ce fait, comme les concepts de gouvernementalité, d'hégémonie et de sens commun peuvent être liés entre eux.

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