The limits of partnership: an exit-action strategy for local democratic inclusion

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Abstract

The challenge of enhancing the 'democratic anchorage' of partnerships has become a central concern in policy studies. Radical reform proposals designed to level the deliberative playing field include community veto powers and the appointment of neutral arbiters. Welcome as they would be, however, it is questionable whether such reforms would overcome power asymmetries in the partnership arena. A study of the local politics of social inclusion in two UK cities, Dundee and Hull, suggests that managerialism, driven by national governments, is eroding the prospects for partnership democratisation. But more significantly for the reformist agenda, public managers and community activists think in incompatible frames about the role of partnerships and in ways that are not understood by the other party. Non-communication undermines the prospects for an equitable deliberative consensus. Insights from Bourdieu suggest that even in more favourable deliberative environments than those in Dundee and Hull, subtle manifestations of power in culture, discourse and bearing would undermine the potential for a Habermasian consensus between radically unequal actors. In a radical departure from the network governance paradigm, it is therefore argued that empowerment may depend less on enhanced network democracy than on strong independent community organisation capable of acting separately and coercively against governing institutions and elites – an exit-action strategy. These preliminary conclusions point to a substantial research agenda on the politics of the state-civil society nexus.

Introduction

In response to widespread concern about the democratic deficit in partnerships, or governing networks (Rhodes, 1997), critics have begun considering how better 'democratic anchorage' might be achieved in local collaborative institutions.[1] Scholars including Diamond (2004), Skelcher (2005), Skelcher *et al* (2005) and Sorensen and Torfing (2005) argue for radical reforms aiming toward inclusive and accountable networks. They believe that despite the difficulties inherent in democratising a polycentric governing system, communities can be empowered within democratised networks. This paper challenges these claims, arguing that reformist scholars underestimate the challenge of democratic inclusion. Instead, it proposes a radical break from the network 'orthodoxy' in UK policy studies (Marinetto, 2003), advancing a case for 'exit' by groups unable to secure full democratic inclusion in the partnership arena.

The argument derives from Bourdieusian and Habermasian social critique; the former in an account of how class domination is secured in the 'habituation' of social practice (Noble and Watkins, 2003), the latter of the corrosive effects of capitalist modernity on democracy. Their insights help explain deliberative failure between public managers and community activists, revealed in an ESRC funded study of partnerships in Dundee and Hull. The study illustrates that managerialism has eroded the prospects for partnership democratisation. But more significantly, it reveals that public managers and community activists have contrasting commonsense understandings of partnership which, being unspoken cannot be articulated or deliberated. This finding lends provisional support to the Bourdieusian idea that even if measures to enhance deliberative democracy were implemented, they would still reproduce inequalities rooted in the cultural and material resources of powerful actors; in this instance, local public service managers (Bourdieu,

1984, 1990a). If power relations are embrocated in language and communication, then the possibility of rationally motivated consensus among unequal protagonists is radically restricted (Crossley, 2004). This conclusion is a challenge to the partnership principle and points toward the need for effective 'restraining barriers' to protect civil society from state domination (Habermas, 1987a: 364). It suggests that community activists would be well advised to consider exiting partnerships, even in better deliberative conditions than those pertaining in Dundee and Hull. This strategy finds support from theorists (Kohn, 2000; Medearis, 2005) who argue that disempowered actors who carve out autonomous spaces and act coercively against dominant interests can influence governing outcomes better than those collaborating with governing elites. This case for 'exit-action' strategies opens up a challenging research agenda on the study of power at the state-civil society nexus (Mettler and Soss, 2004).

The challenge of network democratisation

Since the 1960s, UK governments have sought to promote collaborative local governance, successively involving local government and other public agencies, the business and voluntary sectors and community activists (Davies, 2002). Governing networks, or partnerships, are hybrid organisations typically comprising state, market and civil society actors. The most recent examples, like English Local Strategic Partnerships (Johnson and Osborne, 2003), are complex bureaucracies run by dedicated public managers. It is widely accepted that there is a democratic deficit in these governing networks, despite community involvement. For Skelcher *et al* (2005: 586) managerialism has become a dominant trend: 'technical expertise is privileged and decisions proceed through a rational process little impacted by the political world'. Perrons and Skyer's study of the Shoreditch New Deal for Communities regeneration partnership found that

[1] The terms 'partnership' and 'governing network' are here coterminous.

government imposed performance management regimes render 'the task of adequately representing the community difficult – "virtually impossible"' (2003: 278).[2] Such observations are common (Taylor, 2000; Amin, 2005).

Managerialism can be justified on efficiency grounds and by appeal to the democratic legitimacy of elected governments. Skelcher *et al* (2005) describe an 'agency' model of partnership where the tasks of joined up governance, public responsiveness and effective performance management require strong public managers. In this scenario, if community representatives impede effective programme delivery, managers and politicians may feel justified in circumventing local democratic procedures to secure public value from the public pound (Stoker, 2004: 190-1). However, this argument fails where efficiency requires responsiveness to citizens. Creating 'public value' (Moore, 1995) demands participatory governance. Managers 'can only know the meaning of public value … through dialogue with citizens' (Lowndes *et al*, 2006: 552). For Sen (1999: 154), democracy is a crucial means by which public goods are defined and secured. In this light, partnership democratisation is a key governance challenge.

What, then, are the strengths and weaknesses of proposals to democratise networks? The argument proceeds in three steps. First setting out key ideas for network reform, the discussion then turns to a critical evaluation of these ideas in light of Bourdieu's analysis of how class power is secured through cultural capital. The case is then advanced for alternative exit-action strategies to be pursued by disadvantaged groups in the event that democratic inclusion in partnership is unfeasible. Key issues in this three-part discussion are then framed as questions examined in the study of Dundee and Hull.

[2] New Deal for Communities is a 'flagship' regeneration programme, emblematic of the government's determination to engage communities in local governance.

Enhancing the democratic anchorage of partnerships

What would democratic partnerships look like? Dryzek's definition of deliberative democracy holds that 'the essence of democratic legitimacy should be sought … in the ability of *all individuals subject to a collective decision* to engage in authentic deliberation about that decision' (Dryzek, 2000: v, cited in Medearis, 2005: 54 *emphasis added by Medearis*). Deliberative democracy demands not only participation, but also equal access to decisions by all citizens with a stake in them. In partnership, however, this is impractical. At best, equal access to decisions for democratically selected, accountable and recallable community representatives would be informed by prior deliberative exercises with constituents.

Generating an equitable democratic consensus in a radically unequal society requires a 'counterfactual' space where real-world 'status distinctions are bracketed and neutralized' (Fraser, 1990: 60). Habermas's *Theory of communicative action* (TCA) (1984, 1987b) suggests that this space exists in the rules internal to discourse. He argues: '[o]ur first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus' (1971: 314). Consensual aspirations are internal to the practices of communication, beyond the influence of values or socioeconomic structures. They are the 'telos', the raison d'etre, of any communicative encounter (1984: 247). From this abstract principle, Habermas derives the claim that communicative reason, the disposition to engage in unrestricted, uncoerced deliberation, permits a discourse where participants overcome subjective bias 'in favour of a rationally motivated agreement' (1987a: 315). For Habermas, deliberation flourishes in 'lifeworld', the 'informal and unmarketized' domains of social life: political life beyond organised parties including voluntary organisations, trade unions, clubs and (in a bygone age) the media (Finlayson, 2005: 51). Lifeworld is the realm of freedom

(Cook, 2005: 57) where unconstrained deliberation can take place between unequal actors on equitable terms.

Following the spirit if not the letter of Habermas, scholars have taken up the challenge of enhancing the deliberative context in which partnership operates – what Sorensen and Torfing (2005) call 'democratic anchorage'. Sorensen and Torfing specify normative regulations for the formation, functioning and output of governing networks. First, all affected actors should be included in the construction of an open ended policy discourse. Oppositionists should have a voice and the opportunity to form an 'alternative governance network'. However, they may still be excluded by non-decision making, or preference manipulation. Therefore, the agenda must be 'so broadly and vaguely defined that it is accessible for all the included actors' (2005: 213). Second, each protagonist must show 'agonistic respect' for other opinions and be committed to transparent, responsible decision making. Network actors may engage in robust discussion, but they should be committed to reaching a 'rough consensus', for which all share responsibility (2005: 213). These procedures are Habermasian in that they are deliberative and uncoerced; depending on integrity, reflexivity and mutual respect among democratically minded interlocutors engaged in relatively unconstrained debate.[3]

Other scholars, sceptical about the efficacy of normative regulation alone, argue that institutional reform is required to level the playing field. Diamond (2004) argues that supervisory boards on which local residents form a majority should monitor the performance of public agencies, supported by community facilitators capable of shoring up resistance to overweening managers. Similarly, Klijn and Koppenjan (1999)

recommend the appointment of neutral arbiters to maintain a level playing field in debate and arbitrate disputes between network actors. In a more radical vein, Skelcher (2005) advocates a consociational solution, where community representatives would be given a veto over partnership decisions as a guarantee against domination by powerful others. He believes that consociationalism (Lijphart, 1968) could underpin a democratic 'polity forming' model of governance, where disadvantaged groups can have an equal voice (Skelcher, 2005: 101). While consociationalism violates Habermasian discourse ethics, relying on a coercive non-deliberative mechanism, the purpose would be to build confidence in the deliberative environment, making the veto redundant. As such, the function of institutional reform is to ameliorate inequalities in the deliberative arena so that relatively open, uncoerced debate becomes feasible.

Cultural capital and the limits of democratic deliberation

The authors discussed above have done much to highlight the democratic deficit in governing networks and they set demanding criteria against which the democratic credentials of partnerships can be judged. However, they may still underestimate the difficulty of bracketing social inequality to the extent required for deliberative equality. The protagonists could be persuaded to the virtues of deliberation, be trained in empathy, impartiality and non-coercive deliberative techniques (see Innes and Booher, 1999) as required by Sorensen and Torfing and be delegated sufficient political autonomy to take meaningful decisions. Class and other inequalities might be ameliorated through the institutional reforms discussed above. However, even in these favourable circumstances equitable deliberation might be foreclosed by subtle manifestations of power in culture.

[3] Sorensen and Torfing reject 'the forceless force' of Habermas's communicative rationality. They rely instead on what they call 'contingently constructed democratic norms' (2005: 210-11). However, they do

For Habermas, the potential for consensus lies in the pre-conscious rules inherent in any conversation. However, he has been criticised for failing to show how the abstract, de-contextualised principles of communicative action impact on real lifeworld conversations. Bourdieusian scholars have drawn attention to a major problem with the TCA. Where Habermas contends that the grounds for communicative reason lie in the rules internal to discourse, Bourdieu argues, based on empirical observation, that domination is 'linguistically inscribed' and secured (at least partly) in the sub-conscious (Hayward, 2004: 5). Crossley argues that 'communication is always systematically distorted since the possibility of undistorted communication, if that means communication not structured through socially shaped habitus, is nil' (2004: 108).[4] Bourdieu's *habitus* calls into question the redemptive qualities of deliberative reasoning among radically unequal interlocutors (Fraser, 1990; Hayward, 2004). How can deliberation recognise and overcome inequalities embodied in cultural capital (Crossley, 2004) if cultural capital is inscribed in language and embedded in the sub-conscious commonsense? The consensual aspirations embodied in Habermasian conversations maybe trumped by the cultural distinctions imprinted on accent, body language, posture and taste and which constitute the *habitus*.

Bourdieusian thinking represents a serious theoretical challenge to advocates of a reformed network polity. By whom and against what criteria would a neutral arbiter be appointed? How might she recognise and enter into a struggle with her own class or

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not specify alternative mechanisms through which these norms might be constructed and sustained.

[4] *Habitus* refers to sub-conscious dispositions '*acquired through experience*' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 9). Interestingly, in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas (1987: 326) describes lifeworld in terms resembling a collective habitus. It is 'an intuitive, unshakeably certain, and holistic knowledge, which cannot be made problematic at will'. It is an 'amalgam of background assumptions, solidarities, and skills bred through socialization'.

gendered *habitus*? If she could be trained to do this, how would she recognise and overcome the cultural power exercised by others in what might appear to be an open debate? If a veto was conceded to community activists, what would govern the interpretation and exercise of that veto? For Bourdieu, it would be determined by convention and commonsense; the cultural capital accruing to actions in different social positions over time.

The conundrum posed by cultural capital also highlights barriers to the construction of an open ended policy discourse around broad and vague problem definitions (Sorensen and Torfing, 2005: 213). Bourdieu (1990a: 16) comments that 'enlightenment is on the side of those who turn their spotlight on our blinkers', arguing that people of a 'critical and reflexive disposition' can reflect on and challenge their commonsense. But continuous self-criticism of sufficient sophistication to reveal nuances in the exercise of power would demand extraordinary skill from parties unfamiliar with Bourdieusian procedures. For Bourdieu, even if reflexive parties could establish open conditions for debate, equality would demand that the terms of the ensuing discussion should be scrutinised and re-scrutinised to disclose the cultural capital embedded in the procedures of scrutiny. If this critique stands up to empirical analysis, then partnerships may have little potential as vehicles for democratic inclusion

The case for exit and coercion

Advocates of partnership might object to the Bourdieusian critique on the grounds that it is better for marginal actors to be empowered imperfectly inside managerialist networks than not at all. Given the defeats inflicted on the organised working class during the 1980s and the evisceration of communities through industrial retrenchment, surely participatory partnerships represent progress (Amin, 2005: 618)? The answer depends

on the viability of alternative community empowerment strategies. One possibility is that exit from partnership, combined with coercive action to counter exclusionary practices, would enhance the influence of citizens in the governing arena in a way that partnership cannot. Put another way, might 'principled exit' combined with coercive action be an effective, non-deliberative mode of communication for groups disadvantaged in the distribution of cultural capital?

In her critique of deliberative democracy, Kohn (2000: 425) argues that separation or critical distance permits the creation of protected space where social movements can 'explore and test genuinely alternative ways of framing collective problems'. If governing institutions tend to reproduce the interests of dominant groups, then the disempowered have to build new institutions, incubating alternative approaches capable of gaining widespread acceptance (see also Fraser, 1990). Habermas too is sensitive to the way instrumental rationality, exemplified by managerialism, undermines communicative rationality. Agents within state and market 'adopt an instrumental relationship towards nature and a strategic orientation towards each other in order to further their own success' (Cook, 2005: 57). The instrumental rationality of state and market encroaches on lifeworld in a 'parasitic' relationship which undermines communicative reason (Finlayson, 2005: 47). Habermas calls this phenomenon 'colonisation'. He therefore argues for 'restraining barriers' to protect lifeworld against the tendency of capitalist development to erode communicative reason. Lifeworld has to 'assert itself *against'* the colonising subsystems of capital and state power, if democratic impulses are to survive and thrive (Habermas, 1987a: 363-4 *emphasis added*). Whether or not the system-lifeworld distinction stands up theoretically (see Cook, 2005 for a critique), the colonisation problematic is suggestive. If lifeworld is undermined by state and market, then

governing networks which bind them together in hybrid form may lead to the further erosion of democratic space.

Though separation is a necessary condition of democratic autonomy, it is insufficient. Says Kohn (2000: 426), '[r]ealizing abstractions such as reciprocity, equality and opportunity is usually a process of historical struggle rather than theoretical consensus'. This struggle takes place not fundamentally through deliberation, but at 'concrete sites of resistance, the literal, symbolic, and imaginary barricades, forums, and fortresses where the people mount challenges to currently hegemonic visions of collective life'. Separation is a form of resistance, but political influence requires coercion.

A powerful case for coercion has been made by Medearis (2005), who rejects the prohibition on force in deliberative theory. He starts with Dryzek's above quoted definition of deliberative equality arguing that where hierarchical power is pervasive in public discourse, 'marginal groups have no choice but to act coercively to achieve democratic aims'. Democratic theorists who value inclusive politics should therefore treat coercive tactics including strikes, demonstrations, pickets, blockades and other forms of civil disobedience with 'great sympathy'. Legitimate coercive action is 'necessarily strategic and non-deliberative but still thoroughly entwined in public discourse' (Medearis, 2005: 55). Medearis moves beyond 'agonism', which celebrates the inherently conflictual nature of politics (Dryzek, 2005: 220-222), to embrace 'antagonism'; the notion that where democratic inclusion cannot otherwise be secured force is legitimate.

Medearis contends that coercion is justified when it is 'reasonably oriented' toward democratizing institutions and social relations which 'oppress and disadvantage some

groups, hindering their inclusion in political contention on equal terms' (2005: 74). He argues that coercion has been used to great effect by social movements like the US civil rights movement, fighting for democracy (2005: 75). He argues that coercion can

> …restructure discourse and coercively alter the social relations in which discourse is situated …threaten crucial interests, disrupt customary alliances and ordinary ways of doing things, and create crises. As a result, problems are made to seem more urgent, interlocutors are pressured to argue consistently, and parties are compelled to take actions and enter arenas of contention that they have avoided (Medearis, 2005: 55).

Similarly, autonomous community, interest group or workplace organisations using coercive tactics might build powerful restraining barriers against state and market elites, legitimate from the standpoint of democratic inclusion.

This discussion highlights important questions for research on partnerships. Is the reform agenda advanced by Skelcher, Sorensen and Torfing and others feasible as a strategy for partnership democratisation? Or would it be thwarted; if not by the hegemony of managerialism then by power inscribed in language and culture? Does Bourdieu exaggerate the subconscious determination of cultural practice and underplay individual autonomy and our capacity for conscious reflection (Hayward, 2004: 12-13)? If not, might community activists secure greater leverage through exit-action strategies than through participation in partnership? These are big questions which the study of Dundee and Hull begins to address.

The Local Politics of Social Inclusion in Dundee and Hull

Hull (England) and Dundee (Scotland) are coastal cities which suffered disproportionately from industrial retrenchment in the 1970s and 80s. Both feature prominently in government deprivation indices and are major tests of government policies for social inclusion and partnership. The research conducted between June 2004 and July 2005 explored the political dimensions of partnership often buried under formal, abstract consensus (Davies, 2005; Fairclough, 2000). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984: 460) argues that the political environment tends to produce closure by 'tacitly presenting the universe of realized possibles as the universe of possible possibles, thus delimiting the universe of the politically thinkable'. The study sought to counter this tendency by posing open questions such as 'can partnership contribute to the creation of a more inclusive society'? The questions sought to draw respondents into a dialogue about the local politics underpinning the 'social exclusion' discourse and the efficacy of partnership for 'social inclusion'.

The author conducted 53 interviews, 28 in Dundee and 25 in Hull, with respondents drawn mainly from local authorities, public agencies and community groups. Interviewees were enlisted from the city strategic partnership CityVision[5] and the East Area Partnership in Hull; and the city strategic Dundee Partnership and the neighbourhood based Social Inclusion Partnership in Dundee. The research focused primarily on the perspective of public managers and community activists, reflecting their numerical preponderance in the partnership arena.[6]

[5] Recently renamed the *One Hull* partnership.
[6] Two Hull city councillors were interviewed, but none from Dundee. There were no elected councillors on the bodies responsible for the day to day management of the Dundee Partnership, or on the Social Inclusion Partnership Board.

Interview transcripts were coded thematically and analysed using NVIVO. Unanticipated themes emerged inductively during coding, including the problem of 'non-communication' between public managers and community activists discussed below.[7] NVIVO analysis revealed that key terms in the language of management like 'performance' and 'deliver' were used almost exclusively by public managers. Terms in the lexicon of democracy such as 'listen' and 'involve' were used more frequently by community activists. Analysis of the text around key terms highlighted the communicative disjuncture which is illustrated below using quotations.

The function of strategic partnerships

All cities in England and Scotland have strategic partnerships; Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) in Scotland (The Dundee Partnership) and Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in England (Hull CityVision). English LSPs evolved in the late 1990s as part of the UK government's strategy for more responsive, better coordinated public services (Johnson and Osborne, 2003; Russell, 2001). Both LSPs and CPPs are charged with bringing together local agencies, voluntary organisations, businesses and community activists to formulate a coordinated approach to public service delivery and meet social, economic and environmental needs.[8] Crucially, they are expected to engage local communities as core partners (DETR, 2001; Scottish Executive, 2002). They are also expected to produce community plans in consultation with relevant stakeholders and citizens.[9] A typical community plan specifies five or six key priorities identified by a wide range of 'stakeholders' in often extensive consultation exercises. Once a plan is agreed,

[7] The paper is now presented in the form of deductive analysis because the research cast light on important theoretical questions which had not been uppermost in the author's mind at the time of the study.
[8] LSPs have no statutory duties, unlike CPPs under the Local Government in Scotland Act, 2003.
[9] In England, formal responsibility for developing community plans lies with local authorities. However, the process is often led by LSPs.

the partnership is charged with ensuring that it is delivered; all partners, including community activists, must work toward specified goals and targets.

The limits of deliberation (1): Creeping managerialism

Partnership arrangements in both cities were undergoing reorganisation during the study, a consequence of perceived ineffectiveness in delivering national targets and local community plans. In Dundee, the restructuring marked the closure of the Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP) and the establishment of the statutory CPP in 2005. The Dundee SIP was established in 1999 to administer the Social Inclusion Partnership Fund, a Scottish Office regeneration programme. SIP had a strong community focus and community activists formed a majority on the Board. Nationally, however, the SIP programme was judged not to have delivered national or local strategic priorities. For Communities Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2003: 12), future programmes should articulate a 'clearer, more defined link between national, local and neighbourhood priorities'. The absorption of SIP by the Dundee Partnership was a step in this direction.

This development was a major source of controversy in Dundee. Local public managers agreed that community planning would enhance the coordination of mainstream agency spending. Through SIP, community activists had hitherto enjoyed formal control over an annual budget of some £2.5 million. A senior City Council manager explained that community control had been conceded by a local authority keen to overcome accusations of Council control-freakery. However, s/he thought that community control had gone too far; 'we're in danger of going the opposite way … we've lost strategic influence... and maybe the pendulum needs to swing back a bit more towards fifty/fifty but it was absolutely right in my mind that it went towards community control…'.

The Dundee Partnership was the instrument designed to reassert strategic influence. Community representation was to be organised through a system of community regeneration forums in five deprived areas of Dundee, each of which nominated one delegate to the *Building Stronger Communities* strategic theme group of the Dundee Partnership. In an organisational hierarchy, the strategic theme groups sat fourth under the Dundee Partnership forum, management and coordinating groups with community regeneration forums effectively a fifth tier. Primary responsibility for partnership decisions lay with the management group of senior managers and responsibility for delivery with the coordinating group of middle managers. Community representation was limited on the former group, non-existent on the latter.

The above quoted manager argued that while the closure of SIP meant that community activists would have to give up 'sovereignty over decisions of a smaller nature', community planning should 'increase community decision making over strategic decisions ...'. However, s/he acknowledged that public agencies under financial pressure would seek to 'realign Social Inclusion Partnership funding' against priorities set by the Scottish Executive. Community activists were thus 'quite rightly' concerned.

Community activists from the SIP Board were indeed concerned. One activist already concerned about a 'them and us' relationship between activists and public managers feared that community planning would lead to 'an even higher them and us'. For a second activist, 'I don't think there's going to be any community involvement. As a matter of fact … They shouldn't have put 'community' in there at all, like. They should have just made it "The Partnership"'. Such concerns were shared by a wider group of community activists, project workers and community regeneration managers. An anti-poverty project manager concluded:

> … you get people … being used and abused by, em, officers of the Council and others, em, while they were saying all the right things and doing all the right things that they wanted they were fine, when they weren't they were discarded like snow off a dyke on a hot day.

The tension between community empowerment and strategic coordination was even more pronounced in Hull. Hull was the only English city council condemned as 'poor' in a 2004 government inspection (Lowndes *et al*, 2006: 550).[10] This stigma led to the imposition of special measures and intense government scrutiny. Hull may be exceptional in this regard but at the same time may highlight the relative priority accorded to democratic deliberation and managerial control in localities judged to be underperforming.[11]

In response to this crisis, city councillors and public managers, supported by central government advisors, recognised that CityVision needed restructuring. The goal, as in Dundee, was to improve strategic focus and create structures functional for effective decision making, public service coordination and performance management. The managerial rationale for restructuring was partly the poor relationship between the city council and community activists (see Lowndes *et al*, 2006: 554) and partly the failure of performance management. One partnership manager connected the two issues:

[10] English local authorities are required to submit to 'Comprehensive Performance Assessment' by the Audit commission.

[11] Lowndes *et al* (2006: 554) are unimpressed with the political culture in Hull, describing a 'paternalistic, patronage-based form of local politics that continues to dominate, despite recent changes in formal political structures'.

> … and so you had a network team,[12] you know, able to operate completely in isolation of any sort of performance management or need to demonstrate what value it was adding to the LSP … The community network doesn't want to co-operate, because I think it's frightened that if it really does look hard it might find it difficult to demonstrate, in the terms that the NRU[13] measures us against, exactly what impact's being made.

With community activists viewed as an impediment to effective partnership, one priority for restructuring was to reduce the size of the Board and reduce community representation on it. Said a leading city councillor on CityVision:

> I mean, putting it bluntly, there's too many of them. We have three members of the private sector around the table and something like eight members of the community and voluntary sector, so they can dominate things.

A partnership manager anticipated a struggle over the restructuring and warned that a forceful approach would be taken if necessary:

> … we're not going to be going to the Board with a sort of 'what do you think about this'? because it just… we won't get anywhere. … I think what we will have to say is, 'Look, you know, this is some work. It's based on best practice. NRU wants this to happen and it's going to happen. … And I think, you know, then just be prepared for all sorts of you know, awful sort of repercussions.

[12] Representatives on CityVision from the Hull Community Network. This organisation was financed from the UK Government's Community Empowerment Fund, designed to involve the community sector in LSPs.
[13] The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit within the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

In addition, agenda quality control procedures were to be enhanced following several instances of what one manager called 'really appalling, badly thought out and completely irrelevant presentations' from the Hull Community Network. These procedures were intended to ensure that presentations conformed to professional standards and perceived needs. The same manager explained that government advisors had been 'very clear that this is the way that the LSP is going to operate in future'. So, if community presentations do not pass the quality check, the Board will say, 'no thank you. … And I mean this was absolutely, you know, startling to the Network '.

As in Dundee, community activists were critical of partnership arrangements, wanting a greater say, not less. One community activist complained: 'I've been a victim of social exclusion'. Arguing that he had been prevented by a Council officer from chairing a partnership committee, he concluded 'that is more than insulting, degrading ...so to me, that's social exclusion ...'. Another Hull activist argued similarly that CityVision itself 'promotes exclusion … tremendous exclusion'. S/he continued '…I think if the body that is set up to try to tackle social exclusion, from a strategic point of view, can't be inclusive itself, then I think you've got no chance'.

The processes described in Dundee and Hull are evidence of agenda gate-keeping (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962), where basic organisational principles are placed beyond deliberation. The democratic legitimacy of community activists is open to question; in neither case were they elected from the publics they purported to represent.[14] At issue, however, is that as government funded 'stakeholders', activists were excluded from

decisions they would have been party to given equal access. If misgivings were expressed in a forum where all had equal access to decisions and unrestricted deliberation was possible, the sceptics could hold sway through argument where in reality they could not.

These examples challenge deliberative democratic theory only insofar as they highlight the erosion of deliberative space and the advance of instrumental reasoning in the partnership arena; a process suggestive of 'colonisation'. The question at this juncture, however, is not whether democratic deliberation might be possible in a permissive context, but what are the prospects of a permissive context being created? The advance of managerialism in Dundee and Hull suggests that they are poor. However, the study also identified cultural barriers to equitable deliberation, which would be hard to overcome even in more favourable circumstances.

The limits of deliberation (2): Non-communication

In addition to creeping managerialism, both cases highlighted a lack of mutual understanding between activists and managers, revealed through contrasting commonsense readings of the purpose of community regeneration funds – and by extension of partnerships. In Dundee, this was discernable in the tendency of activists to identify the term 'social inclusion' with SIP programme funds or with democratic voice, in contrast with the typical managerial identification of social inclusion with access to socioeconomic goods. The management perspective on SIP emphasised value for money. Said one manager:

[14] The case of New Deal for Communities suggests that similar managerialist trends are encountered even when residents are elected to partnership Boards (Perrons and Skyer, 2003; Lawless, 2004).

> … certainly it's very frustrating, em, seeing all these applications for relatively small amounts of money, em, coming forward without any, em, apparent, em, link to any of the strategies or strands and it's difficult to say, "well, how does this address, em, deprivation in a strategic way?"

A second manager, referring to the variable quality of network projects commented:

> there was no kinda rhyme nor reason really to why the network had got involved in all of them, so that raised a bit of an issue about, "well, wait a minute, we're doing an awful lot of stuff here, but should we be doing it?" Because we guessed like that the regeneration funding is not a bottomless pit, so we had to be able to demonstrate that what we do with our allocation of taxpayers' money is actually making a difference...

The activists, on the other hand, bemoaned the barriers to accessing SIP funds. Asked whether s/he found the idea of 'social inclusion' helpful in addressing Dundee's problems, one activist gave this characteristic response. 'Well I think it's just another, eh, fund that people can tap into … to improve their area'. Interpreting SIP this way, activists became frustrated at perceived bureaucracy. Said a second activist comparing SIP funding unfavourably with an earlier programme: 'we got on wi things, we didnae have this kinda hassle for funding. I mean, you wouldna believe the hoops and the agro I've had ower twenty-five thousand pound funding'.

These comments point to contrasting understandings of the function of the SIP programme. The activists saw it as a resource to support community projects, demanding looser financial control. Public managers saw it as a vehicle to deliver the

strategic goals set out in the community plan, demanding tighter financial control. Crucially, each party lacked a basic understanding of the rationale of the other, a communicative gap attributable to contrasting cultural interpretations of SIP: coordinated governance on the part of public managers, community led regeneration on the part of community activists. Perhaps the most interesting feature of this gap was what it revealed about contrasting understandings of 'social inclusion' itself. Nominally the common value at the heart of partnership in Dundee, the terminology meant different things to different actors at the level of commonsense, beyond immediate deliberative reach.

In Hull, conflict over government funds revealed a similar communicative disjuncture. The Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) was allocated to 88 deprived local authority areas in England, including Hull to fund experiments in joined up, responsive public service delivery (Wallace, 2001). Localities are expected to use it to achieve central government 'floor targets' – the baseline standard in domains against which deprivation is measured.[15] However, NRF was the subject of a political struggle. Hull City Council's perspective was explained by a senior Councillor:

> …the community and voluntary sector have seen it as their own bank account, which it isn't. There's been endless wars … about how much of NRF is spent in local government ... there's this constant row about what schemes have got it and who's going to get it next year and who didn't get it this year.

A partnership manager commented on starting work in Hull:

> …I thought, 'Well this is a piece of cake because it's so obvious what the priorities are.' But what I hadn't bargained for was that the interest groups that were lobbying so hard to make sure that their sort of area of influence wasn't left out. And yet this was exactly what Joe Montgomery was saying we hadn't got to do.[16]

S/he continued '…we do have a particularly unpleasant relationship with our community network … the, sort of, the power politics that are really quite unpleasant and you wouldn't expect to get them from the network':

> And I mean LSPs aren't about voting. They are about consensus politics, but unfortunately, with our Community Empowerment Network there is a real desire to, you know, dictate the agenda and to behave in ways that aren't conducive to partnership working.

The activist perspective was very different. One said of NRF:

> …the LSP guidebook says, you know about this neighbourhood... NRF, neighbourhood renewal funding … where local people from their own areas will decide, get together and help create, um, you know… close your eyes for, err, five minutes and see how you're estate would look in fifteen years time, how would you like to look.

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[15] The principle domains are health, housing, jobs, education and crime (Johnson and Osborne, 2003).
[16] At the time, Joe Montgomery was head of the NRU.

He felt that this vision of NRF had 'gone off the track a little bit', arguing of the community 'just built in them is that they think they're never going to be listened to'. A second activist argued:

> What neighbourhood renewal funding and the LSP has done is pull that money back under the City Council control and (inaudible) area … and they allocated little bits to the various different areas, but they've kept the bulk in the city centre to support the local services …

He intimated that local activists were surprised at this behaviour: '[w]hether they[17] actually appreciated that they would actually hand over control of the bulk of neighbourhood renewal money to their local council ...? No. Definitely not'.

As in Dundee, these comments illustrate the lack of understanding each party had for the rationale of the other. The councillor/public manager perspective reflected frustration at the seemingly incomprehensible behaviour of the activists. Among activists, there was suspicion and mistrust of Council and CityVision managers; a feeling of marginalisation mirroring frustration and lack of comprehension on the management side.

Rethinking community empowerment

The study suggests that the prospects for partnership democratisation maybe thwarted at two levels: the continuing advance of managerialism and the intractability of cultural inequalities. While local managers typically shared the managerialist ethos, the main drivers of partnership restructuring were national governments. Arguably, debate was hobbled at the outset by the managerialist governance paradigm currently ascendant in

the UK (Skelcher *et al*, 2005). The findings support Jayasuriya's point that the dominant network paradigm globally is 'tethered to a broader pattern of economic constitutionalism'. Hence, network governance is designed to 'activate modes of conduct appropriate to an efficient market economy' (Jayasuriya, 2003: 5). In this paradigm the normative framework is pre-given and closed to deliberation (Amin, 2005). Marquand accuses the UK government of augmenting the 'monarchical' state tradition in the UK, intervening coercively in every corner of social life and reducing public debate to 'monochrome monism' (2004: 126-7). From a prominent scholar of moderate political views, this is a damning indictment and it suggests that the prospect for reversing managerialism is remote in the foreseeable future. If government is part of the problem, an alternative agent of change is required.

However, communication failure between community activists and public managers points potentially to a more intractable problem with partnership. Crossley's Bourdieusian analysis (2004: 108) explains how cultural power inscribed in language closes communicative channels:

> The perceptual and linguistic schemes of the habitus shape the ways in which agents make sense or fail to make sense of each other's communications. … It may mean that they 'miss the point' or just fail to make any sense of what is communicated. Whatever the details, however, communication is always a meeting of habitus and the chances of a consensual meaning being arrived at are always less likely if interlocutors are more distant in social space.

[17] 'They' meaning local communities.

The sources of communicative failure in Dundee and Hull can be traced to contrasting understandings of the language of empowerment based on the cultural pre-suppositions of the protagonists. The main function of strategic partnerships in Dundee and Hull appeared to be not democratic 'cogovernance' but managerial 'coordination' (Johnson and Osborne, 2003: 151). This nuance in governmental thinking might be apparent to a public manager with a compatible feel for the governance game, but not to a community activist who sees 'social inclusion' as a way to gain a voice or access project funding. Skelcher *et al* (2005: 590) support this interpretation, finding that public managers expressed 'puzzlement' when asked about the public accountability of partnerships because the very question was incongruent with their managerialist assumptions. In Dundee and Hull, because the inherent rightness of each perspective was taken for granted and beyond conscious reflection, deliberation was precluded. The language of community empowerment was contested, but the protagonists did not share a common discursive repertoire sufficient to grasp why they differed, let alone achieve a rationally motivated consensus.

These insights suggest that the implications of Bourdieusian theory should be taken seriously, both analytically and in determining the most effective strategies for disadvantaged groups. The study did not achieve great insight into the *habitus* of the protagonists, a much more substantial research endeavour (Hayward, 2004). However, communicative failure, which derived from the distinctive commonsense understandings of public managers and community activists, can be sourced to *habitus* (see Painter, 1997).

These conclusions suggest that the reforms proposed by Skelcher, Sorensen and Torfing and others underestimate the challenge of network democratisation. Where incompatible commonsense understandings of purpose combine with both blatant and subtle

inequalities in political power the prospects for an equitable consensus seem poor. The Bourdieusian extension of this argument is that even if in favourable political weather new procedures were introduced to regulate and enhance network democracy, power asymmetries would still be reproduced in those very procedures by actors oblivious to their cultural capital. This conclusion cannot be inferred directly from Dundee and Hull, but the study is evocative of the challenge to deliberative democracy posed by cultural capital and points to the need for substantial research around these questions.

The feasibility of exit from partnership

Whether or not the argument can be generalised to more favourable deliberative situations, the combination of advancing managerialism and communication failure suggests that community activists in Dundee and Hull would do well to consider exit-action strategies. The notion that community organisations should exit partnerships and act coercively against governing institutions to secure a democratic voice violates Habermasian discourse ethics and the tenets of deliberative democracy. But if Medearis is right, it might be an effective way of resisting managerialism and holding government to its democratic commitments.

The question of where actors should position themselves in the democratic process requires a situational analysis of power: an agent's capacities in a given social context (Callinicos, 2006: 188-189). What, then, makes partnership exit attractive from the standpoint of democratic empowerment? First, the principle of partnership itself forecloses coercion as a political strategy: its customs and procedures abjure coercive practices (Collins, 1999). Commitment to partnership entails *a priori* recognition of partners and cedes the right (if not the inclination) to act coercively against them in favour of persuasion or respectful agonism. The freedom to act coercively therefore

depends on the would-be antagonist separating herself from partnership arena and partnership ethos.

Collins' (1999) study of the Ferguslie Park regeneration partnership in Paisley (Scotland) highlights the situational advantage that partnership confers on public managers and political elites when conflict occurs. He explains how the Scottish Office attempted to establish a shared language of partnership during the late 1980s, with some success. However, with the onset of the struggle against the Poll Tax, angry community activists turned to a language of confrontation, challenging the partnership ethos. This development created a crisis and the only solution available to governing elites commensurate with the partnership agenda was to marginalise the activists. The system of community representation from local action groups was replaced by a 'community forum', a top-down manoeuvre which effectively eliminated community representation because of the delay in creating the new structure (Collins, 1999: 85-6). In this scenario it is arguable that activists would have been well advised to exit on their own terms and use the momentum generated by the anti-poll tax movement to campaign for a different politics of regeneration.

Second, alienated community activists in Dundee and Hull might be open to the idea that they would be better off organising than participating in partnership. Bourdieu, despite facing accusations of 'fatalism' (Callinicos, 1999: 295), specifies ways that *habitus* can be transformed. Critical subjects have greater agency than the credulous (see also Crossley, 2003), but perhaps more importantly there is no necessary adjustment of individual

habitus to a *field* of social action in which it is situated (Bourdieu, 1990a: 108).[18] The 'game' begins to feel uncomfortable when it presents unfamiliar challenges and the rules may then be challenged. What was commonsense then resurfaces in political contention (1990a: 101). This maladjustment of *habitus* to *field* was evident in Dundee and Hull. While virtually all the community activists were committed to the principle of partnership, their expectations were frustrated and they articulated a critique of partnership practice from the standpoint of democracy. These perspectives were illustrative of what Crossley (2003: 52) approvingly calls 'perceptual-cognitive schemas which dispose agents to question, criticize and distrust political elites and processes'.

The effectiveness of exit-action strategies hangs, thirdly, on the potential for reviving and radicalising community based organisation in the UK. Do community critics of partnership have, or have an outlook favourable to developing, the political inclinations necessary to transform critique into action (Crossley, 2003: 52)? There have been few direct action movements in the UK in recent years. The victorious anti poll tax movement of 1989-1992 is the most recent example of a major locally based campaign using coercive tactics: non-payment, courtroom disruption, physical defence of property against bailiffs, mass demonstrations and a riot against police and property in Trafalgar Square (Burns, 1992). Despite relative quiescence since, there is no reason to think that exit-action strategies cannot secure political influence. The Citizen Organising Foundation is one prominent community group critical of strategic partnerships and networking, which it labels 'not working' (cited in Dobson, June 2005). It has shown that organising and campaigning can win concessions. For example, the living wage campaign organised by an affiliate organisation TELCO, was instrumental in securing a

[18] By *field*, Bourdieu means a structuring arena external to the embodied *habitus*. The network arena constitutes a political sub-field. The distinction between *habitus* and *field* is that between 'history made body

significant pay rise for cleaners at Canary Wharf, in alliance with the Transport and General Workers Union.[19] The campaign was only mildly coercive, relying on agitating, lobbying and naming and shaming, but it illustrated the power of autonomous organisation and is one practical example for disillusioned partnership activists to emulate. The redemptive capacity of the public sphere(s) should not be overstated (Edwards, 2004) but such mobilisations may be more empowering than the experience of frustration and effective subordination in depoliticised partnerships, regardless of outcome.

The task therefore falls to local movements and activist critics to show that exit-action strategies are more empowering than partnership. But it also falls to scholars with ample opportunity to contribute to public debate. Much intellectual energy has been dedicated to the challenge of building democratically anchored networks and enhancing community participation. Similar scholarly energy could be put into developing 'good practice' for autonomous community organisations acting as a bulwark against colonisation and as part of a public sphere where 'citizens can debate the ends and means of governance' (Edwards, 2004: 14-15; Wills, 2004).[20]

One regeneration manager commenting on this paper said: 'whilst communities in Dundee will take the money they still stubbornly from a statist perspective refuse to swallow the propaganda'. Exit may therefore have costs and activists may think it advantageous to participate in order to access government funds, even if they do not buy into the partnership ideal. But such a strategy may not be sustainable, given increasing

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and history made thing' (Bourdieu, 1990a: 190).

[19] TELCO is The East London Community Organisation.

[20] Scholars urging communities to take direct action are unlikely to be taken seriously without first earning their respect. This was Bourdieu's achievement as a public intellectual.

pressure on local partnerships to deliver national targets. Stoecker (2003), exploring the dialectic between community organising (resistance) and community development (partnership) in the US, suggests that communities can both organise and participate. He argues that communities need to organise to 'get the power', but that community development, the procurement of technical and financial resources, is necessary to keep it. Nevertheless, he cautions that where community organising and community development are fused in hybrid organisations, development tends to proceed at the expense of organising (2003: 496-7). Moreover, these examples of 'maximising' behaviour mirror the instrumental rationality of managerialism, violating the principles of deliberative democracy in equal degree. Ultimately, the choice between participation and exit is tactical and context specific. But in Dundee and Hull, the case for exit-action strategies is strong. Partnership seemed very unlikely to enhance democratic inclusion.

Conclusion

There is a substantial body of research supporting the notion that local governance is following a mangerialist path, with political power increasingly concentrated in the hands of local public managers charged with interpreting and delivering the agenda of national governments (Perrons and Skyer, 2003; Lawless, 2004; Davies, 2005). But creeping managerialism is not necessarily fatal to the case for partnership democracy unless it is a symptom of ineluctable colonisation – a matter for further research. If we allow that a favourable political environment might be created, then the question is whether inequalities between partners could be bracketed to the extent necessary for equitable deliberative decision making (Fraser, 1990). The finding in Dundee and Hull that inequalities are re-enforced by communication failure lends provisional support to the Bourdieusian conjecture that they would not. However, the validity of this conjecture can only be determined through substantial and rigorous research. It might usefully be

reframed as a hypothesis: *in radically unequal societies, the inscription of political power in language and culture means that structures designed to be inclusive and empowering will tend to reproduce the inequalities they seek to overcome.* Hence, in seemingly inclusive institutions achieving an uncoerced deliberative consensus (if such exist in the UK or elsewhere), the challenge would be to determine how far consensus was open and equitable; achieved by reflective and reflexive actors capable of bracketing status or distorted in virtue of the distinct cultural capital possessed by each. Such research could be conducted in a range of encounters between state and civil society, casting light on the tractability both of cultural capital and of colonisation.

The incompatible commonsense framings of collaborative purpose found in Dundee and Hull are perhaps the least challenging elements of *habitus* for research. Understanding the impact of accent, posture, body language, movement - the signatures of cultural distinction – requires the development of nuanced research methodologies. Here, engagement with Bourdieu's empirical research may prove fruitful (Crossley, 2003: 63-4). Hayward (2004: 18) suggests that the methods of cognitive science could also be helpful in conducting research on the impact of cultural capital in state-citizen interactions. Other approaches might include conversational and textual analysis, observation, deliberative experiments and interviews. Such research programmes examining class, gender and other forms of cultural distinction could add much to our understanding of whether participative environments empower or subordinate active citizens.

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