

Resisting the ‘long-arm’ of the state? Spheres of capture and opportunities for autonomy in community governance

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Abstract

Efforts to promote community empowerment within regeneration management have been persistently critiqued. Particular concern regards the potential capture of civic organizations into the sphere of influence of more powerful governance stakeholders, leaving communities marginalized and frustrated. Although such ‘capture’ is a discernible threat, this article presents a more nuanced perspective demonstrating the scope for community-based organizations to dissent from seemingly inexorable regimes of power. The article details a series of tensions that emerged across the evolution of a community-led regeneration partnership. It then outlines how civil society organizations challenge ‘partnership orthodoxies’, seeking autonomy albeit nested within—and relative to—formal bureaucratic and administrative regimes. Community partners can therefore assume a hybridity of capture and autonomy—or a mutuality—that is rarely acknowledged by accounts that critique regeneration governance.

Keywords: community participation; neighbourhood governance; civil society; regeneration; partnerships; governmentality; autonomy

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Introduction

Despite the opportunities for civic engagement emerging from the ‘retreat of the state’, regeneration initiatives are widely critiqued as being disempowering—even alienating—for the very communities supposedly at their forefront. Rather, it is proposed, they represent ever-more sophisticated strategies to subjugate the public within restructured governance regimes (see e.g. Kokx and Kempen, 2010; Huxley, 2013; Doering, 2014). Such accounts, often derived from Foucauldian and more recently post-political and post-democratic interpretations of governance, have significant explanatory potential, demonstrated by their prolificacy through the academic literature (Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000; MacLeod, 2011; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014; Parker *et al.*, 2017). But although attuned to the pitfalls of governance, these analyses almost entirely overlook the scope for autonomy by community actors. This article challenges these interpretations of community engagement for offering coarse and fatalistic explanations of community governance dynamics. Despite existing against unpromising contexts and within ostensibly paternalistic governance arrangements, community activists can contest ‘partnership orthodoxies’, often seeking autonomy while nested within formal administrative regimes.

Supporting this argument, the article refers to more optimistic accounts of community involvement in governance (Taylor, 2007; Doering, 2014) and insights from accounts of subversive or contested practices (Holdo, 2016; Arampatzi, 2017). Such insights are infrequently derived from accounts of formal or statutory regeneration initiatives. Additionally, many examinations of community governance emerge from national and local tiers of administration, with less attention paid to community engagement originating from ‘higher’ governance scales, despite their reach into neighbourhood initiatives. Similarly overlooked are longitudinal studies from the perspective of communities or civil society organizations; that is, from the grassroots, that pay regard to the evolution of groups across time and within local ecologies (Deener, 2016). In contrast, focusing on an inorganic community organization negotiating (and renegotiating) the interface between civil society and the state and using a detailed, longitudinal qualitative inquiry, the article offers a novel and critical perspective on governance interactions. Nested within complex, differentiated layers of regeneration governance, the article examines interactions extending across a community-led partnership’s life course rather than treating such entities as a snapshot in time. It consequently illuminates the multiple—frequently competing—nodes of responsibility and accountability fostered by intensive contemporary regeneration governance.

The article commences by outlining the promotion of ‘community’ as a rhetorically unassailable dimension of regeneration governance. It proposes that accounts of governance arrangements are treated in a rather binary fashion, between *community-led* regeneration and what is referred to here as *regeneration-led* communities; entities contrived by other regeneration actors with serious concerns regarding their autonomy. In so doing, the article references some of the many academic accounts that either lament the loss of community through regeneration or that castigate their subjugation by other governance partners. These accounts undoubtedly provide useful appraisals of the motives of statutory actors, funders and facilitators in regeneration partnerships, lending a distinct criticality to analyses of governance. However, they are overwhelmingly pessimistic, too readily resorting to outright dismissal of community engagement as a cynical attempt to neutralize local activism or to simply extract legitimacy for regeneration programmes. This treatment of communities as *entirely* passive subjects of regeneration governance is itself dismissive of their efforts to seek recognition through governance. Instead, this analysis proposes that relations between community actors and statutory bodies is more dynamic than is conventionally assumed. In particular, the article notes how community activity transcends efforts to seek mere accommodation by statutory actors, while civil society may become a forum for challenge and antagonism. Autonomy is

possible, although it is also both *relative* and *temporal*, fluctuating across the actors and tiers of governance intersecting community regeneration initiatives. In such contexts, civil society actors appropriate the legitimacy conferred by aspects of engagement in formal regeneration programmes, often applying this to other activities and engagements by way of validation of their efforts. In short, civil society organizations can contest agencies of the state, while *simultaneously* engaging regeneration management, assuming considerably more variegated identities across diffuse agendas than is usually believed to be the case.

The article therefore counters highly generalized, abstract and binary theories of governance that are insensitive to the varying and sometimes contradictory relationships apparent in community regeneration. That is not to say the analysis naively ignores such critiques. The study acknowledges that the ‘long arm’ of statutory entities within regeneration governance do restrain and condition community partners, at least partially. But the account details how, despite the patterns of dependency for community partners negotiating governance assemblages, the activities of community partners are not *necessarily* predetermined. Groups can negotiate concessions and exploit opportunities from within regeneration partnerships. They can resist hierarchical demands and develop adversarial—even conflictual—relationships with governance partners and other actors. Ultimately, they can pursue alternative aspirations and contrary articulations of community governance, albeit in a limited manner, providing a more optimistic understanding of contemporary governance relationships.

The civic turn in regeneration governance

Civic participation is integral to the contemporary ‘partnership and network orthodoxy’ (Doering, 2014), becoming both a prerequisite and a barometer for governance interventions. Local people—deemed expert not due to professional credentials but local lived experience—acquired privileged access to decision making, often forming the nucleus of *community-led* regeneration partnerships (Mackintosh, 1992; Hastings, 1996; Perrons and Skyers, 2003). This trend is formalized through new institutional arrangements between scales of governance, redefining relations between the state and citizens. Consequently, the term ‘governance-beyond-the-state’ gained conceptual currency, caricaturing the encroachment of civil society actors into activities hitherto provided by the state (Swyngedouw, 2005). Such efforts transcend administrative tiers, creating multilayered governance; polities composed not of discrete regimes, but of dynamic interaction with subnational entities engaging directly with supranational governance structures (Marks *et al.*, 1996; Hooghe and Marks, 2001). Of specific interest here are efforts to pioneer governance ‘fixes’ to redress uneven spatial development, fixes that have often located communities at their core (European Commission, 1997; Brenner, 1999; Atkinson, 2000; Geddes, 2000; Marshall, 2005).

Although their arrival was marked with much promise, initial optimism regarding ‘new spaces’ of governance quickly subsided. This stimulated an analytical tradition that continues to pervade academic evaluations of partnerships, catalysing essentially asymmetric explanations of governance (Davies, 2002; Bache and Flinders, 2004; Geddes, 2006). Despite the dynamism of governance initiatives and the supposition that ‘the state’ segments and weakens, such accounts maintain that statutory power does not dissipate. For instance, governance arrangements have been critiqued for supporting creeping centralization, stifling the horizontal networking that new modes of governance pertain to deliver (Lowndes and Skelcher, 1998; Jones, 2002). Extending this analysis, others have doubted the scope for autonomy for ‘civic’ participants suggesting state power is merely reconstituted, rewriting the means, though rarely the ends, of governing (Marsh *et al.*, 2003). Hierarchies might be less obvious, yet there remain severe curtailments on the activities and independence of community players. Consequently, analysts have questioned the sincerity of community engagement in

governance transactions, proposing they occur under a ‘shadow of hierarchy’ (Whitehead, 2003; 2007).

It is asserted, therefore, that a rescaling of governance has not recalibrated power, but instead has bound deprived and politically isolated ‘partners’ within statutory spheres of capture. These and similar meta-governance interpretations articulate a paradox for governance actors, suggesting the facilitation of local networks simultaneously threatens the autonomy of actors. Commensurately, conditions conducive to the stimulation of empowered civil society actors are severely curtailed, fostering intense critiques of community integration in regeneration governance.

Regeneration-led communities?

Against broader critiques of governance, there is significant concern that contemporary regeneration partnerships represent sophisticated strategies to subjugate and co-opt community actors. These characterizations are symptomatic of governmentality, often explained using Foucauldian analytical frameworks that suggest power is at least a form of social production if not social control (Taylor, 2007). More recently, the post-political turn has explained these dynamics further, outlining how conflict and contestation are managed and subsumed through technical and managerial regimes that aspire to consensus (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). Such foreclosure of the democratic political (Swyngedouw, 2010)—what has elsewhere been referred to as post-democratization (MacLeod, 2011)—means that differences in opinion might be acknowledged, but ultimately that dissensus is ‘radically displaced, disavowed, or silenced’ (Haughton *et al.*, 2016: 477).

Such academic accounts have significant explanatory potential, demonstrated through their prolificacy in the literature. From an analytical perspective, they often lament the loss of community in ‘invited’ spaces of governance, reducing their status to mere clientelism. For example, governance ‘fixes’ conceived at higher tiers of governance are imposed on communities (Phil and Bailey, 2012), generating a range of restrictions and compromises. In this respect, governance transactions only compound hegemonic power relations (Uitermark *et al.*, 2007; Wallace, 2010; Doering, 2014), creating essentially elitist spaces where government persists (McAreevey, 2009; Blakely, 2010). From an administrative perspective, the state retains effective control of initiatives through the management and manipulation of local policy and institutions (Davies, 2002; Milligan and Fyfe, 2005; Fuller and Geddes, 2008; Parker *et al.*, 2017). The co-optive tendencies of statutory agencies are emboldened through the very discourse of partnership which implicates local stakeholders ‘into a more direct relationship with government and involve them in supporting and carrying out the government’s agenda’ (Newman, 2001: 125). Citizens can, for instance, be ‘drawn into an organisation’s own discourses and institutional practices through repeated cycles of exchange’ (Newman *et al.*, 2004: 214). Their rubric notwithstanding, sceptics elaborate, even participatory practices, instead of eroding governmental power, can ‘bond’ state and society ‘together in the process of creating governance’ (Pierre and Peters, 2000: 35), underwriting the aforementioned critiques of regeneration dynamics.

In a practical sense, the ‘modulation’ of community activity takes place through a range of coercive and limiting strategies that penetrate the development and existence of community organizations (see Parker and Street, 2015). Elsewhere, studies have elaborated upon how funding and facilitation have a particular influence on community activity. Indeed, community organizations often only ‘exist by virtue of their ability to attract governmental funds’ (Davies, 2000: 417–18; Coen and Katsaitis, 2013). Communities subsequently tailor activities not to meet their own goals but to converge their aspirations with supporters and sponsors. Moreover, the bureaucratic burden of partnership consolidation is often exhausting, frustrating community partners who are ‘infantilised’ through ‘unnecessarily strict systems and controls’ (Rowe,

2006: 211–12; Richards and Smith, 2002). This creates ‘dysfunctions’ between the need to meet targets and keeping audit trails rather than satisfying local needs and priorities (Bristow *et al.*, 2008). For example, nongovernmental organizations exposed to programming, partnership and stringent accounting procedures often adapt their efforts ‘in return for adherence to the principles of partnership and strategic programming’ (Marshall, 2005: 679). In this sense, ‘capture’ occurs through the sheer existence of the partnership, with strains exacerbated by intricate, divergent and ultimately distracting accountability arrangements—a hallmark of partnerships framed by multilevel governance and their associated reciprocity.

As is evident across much of the academic literature, spaces of community governance have become sites of exclusion for alternative opinion and sites of colonization, defining and constructing communities and ultimately reproducing hegemonic power. Under these circumstances, community-led regeneration may in fact be more accurately characterized as ‘regeneration-led communities’. Statutory actors may well have assumed a steering rather than rowing role in governance initiatives, yet it seems they retain a heavy hand on the tiller of community-led regeneration practice.

Toward autonomous communities?

Although many theoretical and analytical discussions of governance initiatives assume community partners are destined for co-option and disempowerment, more optimistic accounts also exist. Despite operating within unpromising and restrictive contexts there is, it has been asserted, ‘ample room for negotiation and strategic compromise’ (Purcell, 2009: 160). In such spaces alternative agendas and competing objectives can be pursued. Elsewhere, it is similarly proposed that although community actors risk co-option in new modes of governance, maintaining a critical distance enables the pursuit of more resistant agendas (Coaffee and Healey, 2003) or even the manipulation of governance discourse to suit their own ends (Jones, 2003; Raco, 2003).

Emphasizing the co-produced dimensions of governance (Kooiman, 2000), similar insights suggest that legitimacy is exchanged between governance partners (Doering, 2014; Holdo, 2016). In this sense, governance is ultimately considered to be inherently complex, or even contradictory. Although this can frustrate participation, the skilled navigation of technocratic governance arrangements (Ghose, 2005)—what has been described as ‘the strategic manipulation of distance and proximity’ (Jones and Evans, 2006: 1506)—provides citizens with opportunities.

Several of those acknowledging these opportunities have solicited insights from social movements theory (e.g. Tarrow, 1994) that outline how citizens and collectives can stake oppositional claims to the city (Novy and Colomb, 2013). For instance, participants can become active citizens through the adoption of resources, alliances, power realignments and institutional provisions for participation (Taylor, 2007). With time, these challenges can themselves transform institutional practices creating governance spaces through which new opportunities can be exploited (Belda- Miquel *et al.*, 2016). A recent strand of work has proposed the respective virtues of agonism or ‘agnostic debate’ in highlighting the role of contention in potential counter-hegemonic politics (Ploger, 2004; McClymont, 2011; Mitchell *et al.*, 2015). Drawing inspiration from the work of Chantell Mouffe (2005), they critique the hegemony of consensualism, suggesting that contestation has a place in contemporary decision making (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012; Bradley, 2015). Such accounts challenge post-political frameworks, arguing that they downplay the role of movements and groups in challenging the dominant discourses and actors of governance (Nolan and Featherstone, 2015).

To varying degrees, these and similar accounts provide more hopeful accounts of governance, with community activity becoming a site for some form of challenge to partnership orthodoxies or to realize a degree of autonomy. The recreation of state power in new

governance spaces may not, therefore, be entirely inevitable. Yet many such analyses of social movements and protest tend to examine extra-institutional forms of dissonance, often operating almost completely independently from the state. Instead, groups that diverge from these consensual arrangements of governance must engage in extra-institutional action to voice discontent and to pursue equality (Houghton *et al.*, 2016). They are, for instance, referred to as being emergent, insurgent or from the grassroots, being quite distinct from the activities of the state or with an emphasis placed on progressing adversarial forms of activism (Swyngedouw, 2014; Arampatzi, 2017). Accounts are rarely found within the literature discussing regeneration governance, which tends to be dominated by governmentality-orientated accounts of engagements. Where they do exist within mainstream community regeneration literature, this hopefulness is often buried deep within the detail of accounts. This has not gone unnoticed, with some scholars recently suggesting that research must pay greater attention to less striking or revolutionary articulations of politicization (Darling, 2013: 74) with a view to challenging binary articulations of consensus and dissonance (Nolan and Featherstone, 2015). It is to this challenge that this article responds with a view to countering broad conceptual explanations of governance that lack a sensitivity to the subtleness of community partnerships.

Analysis: tensions between capture and autonomy

Case study: key questions and methods

Against the context of reconfigured governance arrangements, communities are targets for—and agents in—local governance. Yet accounts of governance arrangements have predominantly (though certainly not exhaustively) treated governance initiatives with scepticism. Taking these as a departure point for analysis, the article interrogates key factors acknowledged to constrain partners, namely their agendas, their funding and facilitation, and their accountability and partnership arrangements. The case study asks if community ambition is destined to be inhibited, or if governance arrangements permit civil society organizations to pursue their own objectives. To this end, the account examines not just the establishment of the community partnership, but how interests evolved with time in order to assess the extent of divergence and convergence with fellow governance stakeholders across the trajectory of the partnership. Moreover, the analysis asks how the circumstances of multilevel regeneration governance foster or exacerbate these circumstances.

The study was conducted from a ‘grassroots perspective’, animating the interface between civil society and statutory agencies populating multilevel governance. The group was observed for 14 months during 2005–06 through attendance at the group’s internal management meetings and encounters with funders, local service providers and ‘partners’. The subsequent analysis is therefore furnished with a longer-term and more reflective assessment of governance interactions. Observations were complemented with 21 qualitative interviews and a detailed analysis of the group’s minutes, records, correspondence and contracts. Honouring assurances to participants, both the case study organization and the region in which the research was conducted are anonymized.

The analysis commences by outlining the restrictions encountered through the group’s engagement with regeneration management, acknowledging how this remains an enduring dimension of regeneration practice. However, a longer-term reflective examination of the group, its activities and remit, and their engagement with other governance partners provides a more nuanced insight into the group’s propensity and capacity for autonomy. It explores the dynamic between community partners and fellow governance actors, particularly ‘moments’ when the independence of the former is either infringed or nurtured. Conflicting logics and rationales are apparent across the partnership’s existence, particularly regarding how the purview of the group evolved from its initial remit. Attention is also paid to how the group

achieved concessions beyond the restrictions imposed by regeneration managers, funders and facilitators, helping trustees pursue autonomous objectives and activities. As demonstrated, relationships and agendas diverge and converge over time, fluctuating across agencies and bodies. The group ultimately sought alternative approaches to regeneration, bringing conflict with other governance ‘partners’. Throughout, attention is paid to how the circumstances of multilevel regeneration governance framed these exchanges, *simultaneously* restricting community autonomy *and* facilitating independent action. Later, the article examines these intricacies against the context of the aforementioned literature which, it is proposed, offer coarse binaries that must be sensitized to the complexities and paradoxes of community regeneration governance, more accurately reflecting the multifarious contexts within which partnerships operate.

The case study was a community group central to a regeneration partnership financed by European Union (EU) structural fundsⁱ (Objective 1), with matched funding from the local authority and ‘in-kind’ contributions. One of three priority strands of EU structural funds designed to address inequalities in regional development, Objective 1 addresses regions (NUTS: 2) with a GDP of 75% or less of the EU average. The neighbourhood was defined as a ‘small rump’ⁱⁱ of deprivation. On discovering eligibility for funding, local authority officers convened meetings with residents with previous involvement with local civil society, five of whom became trustees. In interviews, trustees listed their interests as sustaining a community centre and second-hand shop; youth work; providing training for local residents; the organization of ‘open’ public meetings; and conducting consultations on what became controversial local planning issues.

Within a month of the group’s inception, supported by a local authority community development officer and a representative from the local Community Empowerment Network (CEN),ⁱⁱⁱ a consultation workshop identified ‘community priorities’. These informed a formal ‘business plan’ for £100,000 submitted to Objective 1 regional coordinators. This was augmented with £100,000 ‘match funding’ from the local authority (a prerequisite of objective 1 funding), permitting the group to retain premises and employ a two-person community development team.

Another regeneration-led community?

As noted, community partnerships are frequently critiqued for existing in the shadow of statutory agencies. A significant restraining force emerges from partnerships’ financial arrangements, particularly how this influences agendas and activities. Much evidence suggests this case provides a classic example of co-option in this regard. Interviews and observations confirmed the local authority orchestrated the group’s establishment primarily to access EU regeneration funding. The nascent partnership was hurriedly formalized with local authority officers reporting that funding would *only* be granted if the new community-led partnership was *quickly* established to meet stringent spending deadlines. At an early juncture, a development worker from the city’s CEN was seconded to liaise between trustees and Objective 1, establishing the group’s initial scope, supporting the group’s organizational capacity and assisting their navigation of complex multilevel governance arrangements. As detailed in formal minutes, the newly constituted group was implored to ‘work toward’ formal status, by becoming either a ‘company limited by guarantee’ or achieving charity status. Clearly, though, trustees found this exacting. Consequently, the partnership’s 10,000-word business plan was hastily arranged, displaying characteristics of what has been termed a ‘shotgun’ partnership (Rowe, 2006).

The business plan detailed commitments to host several smaller ‘self-help’ groups, to act as a conduit between local people and the funders and to *facilitate* service delivery. However, predominantly drafted by the CEN development worker, the plan was not well

understood by trustees, who reported they only realized the extent of their (now contractual) obligations months after funding was granted. The business plan was perceived as incredibly restrictive—even unnecessary—by trustees. This was acknowledged as having a curtailing effect on the group, with their development worker stating ‘it is very difficult to criticize those who hold the purse strings’. A trustee also commented how this impacted on their aspirations:

The government keeps saying ‘we want to get the community involved’, [but] it talks with a forked tongue ... It’s saying we want communities to run themselves and be answerable to the people where they live. Yet, on the other hand they make rules and regulations that make it too difficult (interview).

Groups receiving funding are obliged to encounter stringent and complex accountancy procedures. In this case, the ring fencing of funds, the imposition of a finite timespan for expenditure, and a pressure to construct a sustainable income were referred to regularly by trustees as immensely challenging. In an interview, a local authority officer described funding ‘as over directed’ and ‘overwhelming’. In particular, piecing together £100,000 of match funding proved exceptionally demanding.

Without this, the group was ineligible for EU support given the preconditions for ‘partnership’ and cooperation. After time-consuming and detailed negotiations, trustees drew ‘in-kind’ contributions from volunteer time. However, these novel agreements unravelled when particular Objective 1 staff left their posts—a common occurrence as the structural funding stream approached expiration. On several occasions, the funders threatened to withhold payment, creating considerable anxiety for trustees who by now were paying the salaries of the community development team. Moreover, a community development worker observed how funders were reluctant to sponsor ‘continued’ projects, compelling community partners to ‘reinvent themselves whatever the value of [their] current activity’. This compromise was summarized by a CEN development worker, who reflected: ‘ensuring there is a group there to represent the community gets in the way of representing the community’. These challenges further frustrated trustees who were already reticent to spend as directed by funders.

Ironically, the intense support provided for trustees further circumscribed their autonomy, with trustees reporting a dependency upon facilitators. The group was *given* a constitution with trustees instructed by facilitators to adhere to administrative protocols. Group meetings—even months after the formalization of the partnership—were preoccupied with what facilitators called ‘capacity building’, familiarization with bureaucratic arrangements and understanding the business plan’s details. In meetings trustees reported feeling forced to ‘play by the rules’ of funders and requiring considerable assistance to meet reporting procedures. The chair reflected upon these obligations and their subsequent reliance upon facilitators, stating: ‘if things [were] written in plain English we could understand them better ... when [they] are jargonized you tend to rely on other people’ (interview).

Thus far, the case study portrays a conventional example of efforts to render a community governable for discrete ends in complicity with a community governance initiative. It was, in many regards, a ‘regeneration-led community’. Yet this is not to tell the full tale. Trustees were not entirely circumscribed, either in terms of their aspirations or their activities. Equally, the objectives of funders, facilitators and statutory actors did not wholly dictate the partnerships’ terms of reference. The analysis now elaborates on how the trustees broadened the scope of their activity, how they funded and pursued independent activity, and ultimately how they claimed autonomy in the context of regeneration governance.

(Re)Framing the parameters of community action

The partnership's business plan became a source of considerable contention as trustees noted that its scope diverged with the aspirations of the trustees. However, though providing a template for partnership's actions, with time trustees challenged conventional partnership arrangements and expanded their remit. For instance, the business plan and constitution stated that despite a deeply held desire to deliver services, this ambition exceeded trustees' and volunteers' capabilities and that they should only facilitate service providers. This frustrated trustees who challenged this assessment in meetings with fellow partnership actors. Undeterred, trustees investigated alternative ways of delivering services. This created further tensions with other governance actors, not least because they vocally criticized the lack of services provided for local people by a 'neglectful' city council. Yet with time, trustees generated a small amount of revenue from a second-hand shop to employ a part-time youth worker and organized an occasional youth club.

Efforts were also made to redirect ring-fenced funds, the spending of which was outlined in the business plan, contravening arrangements with funders. Trustees resisted instructions to pay a research institute to survey local crime. Believing this to be an intangible use of funds, they attempted to hire a warden to patrol the local area. However, the development worker reported that funds were not transferable, arguing the safety audit would provide an evidence base to lobby for policing interventions or for further projects. Although unsuccessful in providing a warden service for local people, trustees challenged a perceived waste of money—a report that did little to combat local crime—dismissing it in one meeting as 'money for old rope'.

Trustees similarly contested conditions placed on their employment of a development team, further challenging the parameters of their remit as construed by funders and facilitators. They wished to employ development workers to not only pursue the group's future and manage relations with fellow governance partners, but to also *deliver* youth work services, directly contravening the remit established by the funders. However, with time, and to the frustration of funders and facilitators alike, the community development team delivered IT and computing classes as well as social events for local people. Perhaps most adversarially, trustees formed an 'environmental subgroup' to vigorously pursue a confrontational single-issue campaign, 'fighting' (interviews and meeting notes) local authority plans to sell a nearby site in their possession. A subgroup was established by trustees to provide what the CEN support worker described as 'some distance' between the formal regeneration activities of the group, and other, unsanctioned protest and lobbying orientated activities. An Objective 1 representative displayed wariness regarding this momentum. Referring particularly to the group's pursuit of the single-issue campaign, the representative reported that such interests 'wouldn't meet any of our targets ... it wouldn't be something that we fund' (interview).

With time, trustees assumed a distinctly assertive posture, departing from several business plan obligations and provoking conflict with governance partners. Trustees challenged what was deemed as legitimate regeneration practice, demonstrating a dissonance between the aspirations of trustees and other governance partners. This independence, even resistance, became a key characteristic of the group's subsequent longer-term engagement within the regeneration partnership.

Funding and facilitating independent action

As acknowledged, the group's funding arrangements brought considerable spending restrictions and complex accountancy obligations that frustrated trustees. Such challenges were exacerbated, an Objective 1 representative stated in an interview, because funders and facilitators had contrasting accountancy arrangements, a challenge further catalysed by the

‘partnership style’ of the case study. This complexity led even the group’s development worker to admit confusion:

In business and other bodies ... there is a hierarchy and you know who you are responsible to and who is over you, who holds the purse strings and how [funding is] distributed. That’s just the trouble with this—you have certain floating bodies that aren’t accountable and people make decisions and others don’t even know what they are ... it is extremely unclear how everything functions and how on earth it functions under those conditions!

Over time, however, trust in the CEN’s development worker disintegrated after he admitted to making errors in the business plan and accounts. This breakdown in trust and a gradual escalation in the group’s resistance to the partnership’s prescriptive arrangements encouraged the group to develop their confidence and independence. Trustees resolved to negotiate directly with Objective 1—‘to do more things for ourselves’ ensuring ‘nothing gets lost in translation’ (meeting minutes). In an interview, another trustee stated that if mistakes were to be made, the community group ‘should take responsibility’ and to ‘learn from them’ (interviews).

As trustees became familiar with the mechanics of decision making and administration—that is, became experienced governance participants—they assumed greater confidence and greater independence. At the same time, given the strict protocols associated with spending public funds, trustees generated alternative income that would permit the pursuit of objectives more closely aligned to their own. For instance, the group’s second-hand shop raised revenue that the group spent on employing youth workers. This initiative sparked considerable concern among funders who stipulated that they would not fund commercial premises. A protracted standoff ensued, only resolved over a year into the existence of the partnership when the funders eventually agreed that a proportion of the group’s funding would be withheld. This conflict, and the stark divergence with the partnership’s activities as envisaged by the funders, was recognized by an Objective 1 officer:

No one explained to them that the money was for project management, not just to spend on whatever they wanted ... We have criteria on the eligibility of the group for European funds and [certain activities] don’t really fit in with this ... They argue that they are providing a [retail] service for low-income families in that area, which it is, but we can’t fund that.

The same officer acknowledged the inflexibility in such arrangements enforced through monitoring visits, prevented any such enterprise. Yet despite these restrictions, trustees challenged the regulations as construed by the funders. They continued to trade and generated income from activities that contrasted with those established by the formal partnership.

The provision of funding and facilitation undoubtedly captures the community-led group. Trustees unanimously perceived formalization as an unnecessary bureaucratic burden, distracting from what they considered to be more substantive aspirations. But the detailed empirics presented here demonstrate that it is inaccurate to suggest that all activities were prescribed or that these conditions entirely thwarted trustees from pursuing unsanctioned aspirations. There were efforts on the part of trustees to develop greater independence, while certain aspects of the group’s formal responsibilities were contested and even resisted. To a certain extent, the resources and support provided through the formal partnership arrangements assisted with this alternative activity, a point that is now discussed in further detail.

Claiming autonomy in the context of regeneration governance

As outlined, with time, the group assumed a rather more adversarial relationship with statutory actors than at the outset of the partnership, challenging its boundaries and reframing its initial

agenda, and developing a degree of independence. Trustees increasingly scrutinized and critiqued the performance of statutory service providers, and eventually made efforts to deliver services, an activity that itself was viewed as something of a challenge to statutory actors. This more assertive stance was praised by the group's community development worker who stated that efforts to provide services demonstrated they were assuming a role previously fulfilled by the state through sheer exasperation. If they did not attempt to provide these essential services, she continued, 'no one else would'. There were frequent arguments with statutory service providers during meetings, with trustees accusing local authority officers of neglecting their obligations to vulnerable local people. In interviews, trustees defended this role as vital in an era of public service outsourcing, insisting that as locals they had a better understanding of the services required in the locality.

As noted, trustees used the partnership as a vehicle to pursue a vigorous single-issue campaign, taking them into direct conflict with aspects of the local authority. The group solicited local opinion regarding the proposed redevelopment, collecting a petition and distributing leaflets. They attacked supplementary planning guidance for the site's redevelopment, held public meetings under the auspices of the subgroup, wrote letters to newspapers, and voiced concern regarding the sincerity of local authority planners, prospective developers, and even other civil society consultees. Referring to these activities in interviews, several trustees cited this activity as essential in checking the power of local authority members and officers, and on occasion referred to this as their 'duty' given their position in the community. Trustees also identified local groups with whom they could align their objectives and constructed alliances with others beyond those identified as key regeneration partners by sponsors and facilitators (Taylor, 2007). Trustees therefore opposed local authority agencies, providing an alternative vision of public engagement and of the activities that were considered to be integral to regeneration.

Throughout the study, trustees fiercely defended the group's independence. Acknowledging their group existed only by virtue of external funders, trustees were adamant that this would not dictate their interests. Reflecting on the risk that groups may become institutionalized or captured by state authorities, the CEN development worker stated that there will 'always be efforts on the part of the public sector to draw in and neutralize (community partners), particularly where they're too effectively challenging them'. But he continued to praise the group, 'admiring' their willingness to 'effectively challenge power holders'. Equally, the inevitability of formalization—or professionalization—was acknowledged by other interviewees. The local authority regeneration manager observed that as it 'develops and picks up responsibilities' any such group encounters 'legitimate formalities' and 'unavoidable' accountability processes 'because it has to be seen to do right things ...'. The CEN development worker concurred. Referring to the legitimacy that formalization brought to community leadership, he cited its ameliorating effect on the community sector's 'diffuse mandate', claiming this 'focused minds'. He elaborated upon this paradox:

If community activity is not professional, then [when you] come to doing the representative and participatory democracy role, particularly if you're challenging someone, it will be laughed at by the public sector—marginalized and ignored.

This benefit of formalization and legitimacy—so often a source of great tension—was recognized by trustees. In meetings and correspondence with council planners and officers, the group referred to their EU funding to lend authority to their role and position, particularly when challenging local authority officers and other local service providers. In this respect the group used (or captured?) the legitimacy provided through their formal role within the regeneration management partnership to embolden their confrontation with other statutory actors.

Groups can operate in the shadows of the state, subjected to the sphere of influence of statutory actors. However, even seemingly unpromising arrangements of governance can foster relative autonomy as is evident through the trustees' struggle to wrestle control from within circumscribed governance arrangements. Additionally, engagement is used to evolve capacity to act independently and to legitimize and justify their activities. They confronted decision makers they perceived to be neglectful, asking critical questions regarding their activities, and holding them to account. These circumstances precipitated fraught encounters between trustees and other governance 'partners' who were clearly frustrated by how trustees challenged the scale and scope of their remit. Asked to reflect upon this in an interview, a trustee suggested the local authority 'feared this group because they can't control it'.

Discussion: spheres of capture and strategies of resistance

Despite the promises for citizen empowerment through regeneration governance, the motivations of statutory actors frequently arouse scepticism as the latitude possessed by nonstatutory actors is severely curtailed. To this extent, Foucauldian explanations have been attractive frameworks to develop intense critiques, suggesting community is both constructed and then compromised through regimes of regeneration practice, rendering the public calculable and legitimizing governance regimes (Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). This case study is—at least partially—one such partnership, with community partners becoming objectified by regeneration practice through regulation, incentivization and surveillance (Richards and Smith, 2002). Trustees found accountability arrangements immensely restrictive, feeling forced to 'play by the rules' (research interview) of funders. They required considerable assistance to service stringent reporting procedures. These challenges are accentuated through the intricacies of contemporary multilevel governance, whereby governance 'fixes' are imposed on communities, often at the expense of local needs and priorities (Bristow *et al.*, 2008; Phil and Bailey, 2012). This governance congestion fosters multiple nodes of accountability overlapping horizontally (between actors) and vertically (across governance tiers), generating a disorientating array of 'pulls' upon local actors. EU regional policy, mediated through multilevel governance, thus 'tames' communities into regeneration partnerships, marshalling them as *agents of governance*, extracting political and administrative recognition in return (Doering, 2014). Perhaps such 'federal' programmes, situated within broader neoliberal regeneration practices—and at considerable metaphorical 'distance' from neighbourhoods—are reliant upon these legitimizing forces.

Critically, however, such dispiriting interpretations—a mainstay of the published academic literature—fail to capture the nuances of partnership arrangements. Many studies of governance have dismissed efforts to seek recognition or self-determination through governance initiatives. They treat groups rather fatalistically, rarely acknowledging the potential for community partnerships to move beyond the rigidity of formal regeneration practices, and neglect the scope for autonomous activity. Although more optimistic accounts of community engagement exist, they are both less pervasive, and are rarely acknowledged as situated within formal arrangements of regeneration partnerships. In contrast, the detailed empirical evidence presented here exhibits the wealth of understanding drawn from methodological approaches that interrogate governance micro relationships. In so doing, the study identifies a less striking articulation of politicization than those examined by studies of social movements or insurgent participatory campaigns.

As with any case study, care must be taken when attempting to generalize findings. Each possesses particular temporal, spatial and contextual circumstances and specificities. As demonstrated in this case, trustees bring their experiences and ambitions to community governance interactions that may not be easily subsumed by the formal obligations brought through engagement with community governance. The aforementioned governance congestion

may help to facilitate these opportunities. Moreover, local context and distinctions are identified as being crucial to understanding cases (Martinez, 2011), a point that is also often overlooked by meta-governance analyses. For instance, this case demonstrates that this place contingency is crucial to understanding community partnership dynamics (Doering, 2014), even though that same place specificity can lead to a fragmentary politics (Blokland *et al.*, 2015). Statutory agencies do not conduct regeneration in a vacuum, instead representing an effort to graft community onto already existent and sometimes longstanding networks and legacies, what Deener (2016) has recently referred to as ‘ecologies’.

In this study, engagement with a formal regeneration programme was merely the departure point—the catalyst—for the pursuit of activities that ultimately were more aligned with the interests of the trustees. Across the partnership’s lifespan its scope of interest extended beyond the narrow constituted agenda established by regeneration managers and funders. Certain terms of reference were contested, refined and extended, rather than accepted and implemented without question. On occasion, this behaviour was distinctly assertive, challenging statutory actors and their efforts to render civil society governable, representing a form of dissent (Durose and Lowndes, 2010). They developed alternative visions of community-led regeneration, opposing other agencies of the state, and carving a role as a watchdog that critiqued service providers, local decision makers, and local politicians. They aligned their objectives and constructed tentative partnerships with partners beyond those identified by sponsors and facilitators, not least in an effort to deliver services that they believed the state was incapable of providing. More fundamentally they pursued a vigorous single-issue campaign, taking them into direct conflict with aspects of the local authority. All this took place even while engaged in other quite restrictive dimensions of regeneration governance.

Subsequently, close engagement with statutory actors not only failed to preclude but, in some regards, was a precursor to dissent. Similar assessments are applicable to the group’s funding and facilitation. Though critical of the rigours of formalization and sceptical of their very rationale, trustees used newfound expertise to become more independent. Although trustees acknowledged an overreliance upon funders and facilitators, this provoked them to pursue and to express greater autonomy. They negotiated alterations to seemingly insurmountable constraints, and became reluctant to accept assistance from intermediary actors, sometimes rejecting their advice. In this sense, while certain restrictions were reluctantly accepted, other administrative procedures were challenged, infringed or even entirely subverted by trustees. Community partners were able to gain considerable concessions from those that structured their existence. In other instances, engagement with the formal processes and rigours of regeneration was appropriated to further other ends of the group, applying this to additional interests or with other governance actors, partly to validate their activities. In this regard, funding and facilitation, and accountability and professionalization represented dualities. Without support and the formal status generated through regeneration governance and without succumbing to some restrictions, trustees would have struggled to gain recognition from other governance actors and would be unable to gain a foothold in governance arenas in the first instance. They were *both* restrictive and empowering, proving to be a source of immense frustration for trustees but simultaneously encouraging them to develop greater independence and legitimizing their activities. The study also notes how autonomy variegates between governance actors, fluctuating across governance issues and time, requiring more dynamic analyses of these relations.

Co-option is not, therefore, always an inevitability. Rather, governance arrangements are perhaps better described as a form of co-dependence, operating against a fundamental tension between accountability and autonomy. The study also demonstrates how relationships between civil society actors and fellow governance participants are considerably more multifarious and differentiated than recognized by much of the academic literature that

privileges generalized post-political and governmentality oriented analyses of governance transactions. Such pessimistic accounts assume that all such efforts render communities governable through co-option or consensus building. They ultimately offer one-dimensional and temporally limited assessments of community organizations. Equally, however, the case study demonstrates a limitation of social movements and agonism literature in explaining a case of this nature. Although they offer more optimistic accounts for the potential for civil society and community actors to pursue autonomy, they must also recognize that assimilation remains a risk. Similarly, as outlined here, civil society actors were not an organic entity; they are frequently dependent upon funding and facilitation for their very existence. Engagement with regeneration activities, and to paraphrase the words of one trustee, playing by the rules of funders and facilitators became an essential dimension of their existence, catalysing their engagement with wider nonsanctioned agendas and priming their capacity to engage with alternative articulations of regeneration.

Given these insights, this analysis favours a more subtle interpretation of governance. It is attuned to some of these inherent contradictions, challenging binary articulations of consensus and dissonance (Nolan and Featherstone, 2015), and of politicization or depoliticization (Kemp *et al.*, 2015). Forums for community governance can *simultaneously* be constrained by aspects of governance, yet also become sites of potential contest, hosting struggles to renegotiate, redefine or even resist the rationales of regeneration. They are therefore, paradoxical, or ‘Janus faced’ (Swyngedouw, 2005), providing scope for negotiation by astute and wilful community partners that are themselves open to both facilitating and constraining factors (Marshall, 2005; Barnes *et al.*, 2007). Community partners assume a hybridity of capture and autonomy— or a mutuality—that is rarely acknowledged by accounts that critique regeneration governance. Community participants may become somewhat estranged governance partners; ‘caught’ by statutory spheres of power yet not necessarily or wholly submissive to their influence.

Conclusion

While debate regarding the implications for civil society actors continues, analyses often portray civil society organizations in rather binary terms, lacking sensitivity to the nuances of their existence. This study demonstrates the limitations of meta-governance explanations of the real politik of community regeneration initiatives, particularly when considering the effects on the autonomy of community actors and their strive for self-determination. Even under significant constraint from the regimes of regeneration management, opportunities for resistance—to contest ‘conventional’ practice and pursue alternative pathways—emerge. It is wrong, therefore, to assume governance ensembles are completely disempowering, or are, to use an earlier phrase, regeneration-led communities. Debate and contest is not necessarily foreclosed and capture is not inevitable. Autonomy is an identifiable characteristic of regeneration partnerships while communities are not merely passive receptors or subjects of regeneration programmes. They *both* cast a long shadow upon communities that are invited to participate, but at the same time furnish opportunities for communities to claim autonomy and to confront conventional power structures. That said, accounts of social movements and agonism are similarly limited, ignoring the symbiotic relationship evident within governance ensembles, neglecting how statutory support can sometimes catalyse more subversive, or at least contested, practices. Such accounts are only a partial explanation given that alternative movements are filled with contradictions, ambiguities and tensions (Arampatzi, 2017), and themselves may be pragmatic in nature (Deener, 2016; Parker *et al.*, 2017). Autonomy is also therefore vulnerable, reliant upon and often threatened by powers that may well be predisposed to co-opt and capture alternative movements.

Community partners must strike fragile balances to reconcile these tensions, and in this sense, civil society may also be rather Janus faced. Equally, however, autonomy exists within relatively constrained boundaries and is contingent upon local circumstances (Bailey, 2010), a condition that is not always noted by more hopeful accounts of participation and engagement on the part of community actors. Indeed, more successful forms of governance involve actors not distancing themselves from the state, but in harnessing certain aspects of state power (Jones and Evans, 2006) or through the exploitation of existing and emergent dialogical political frameworks (Parker and Street, 2015). Therein, it would seem, lie the opportunities for communities to emerge from the shadows of the often dense lattice work of contemporary governance.

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ⁱ Part of a broader global and Europe-wide agenda of 'dynamic re-scaling' or 'reterritorialization', fundamentally aimed at promoting subnational industrial restructuring and capital crisis management (Brenner, 1999).

ⁱⁱ From an interview with a development worker that facilitated the group's formation.

ⁱⁱⁱ CENs were established to help local communities pursue the UK government's Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy (through local strategic partnerships), as well as develop community engagement within other neighbourhood renewal initiatives (Home Office, 2004).