



The place of politics and the politics of place: Housing, the Labour Party and the local state in England

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that geographical research needs to pay greater attention to political parties and their relationship to local governing. In returning to, and updating the concept of the local state, analysis of local socio-spatial and political relations reveals the quieter registers of political power in local governing, and in turn what this means for the condition of local democracy. The long-term housing regeneration of a neighbourhood in Gateshead, North East England is used here as an optic to do just that. Through moments of housing activism, the social and political relations between and within a local Labour Party and local state are considered. A local manifestation of a growing trend that questions the representation of mature structures of power that the Labour Party holds in deindustrialised areas of the UK is considered through struggles over decision-making, belonging, representation and legitimacy. Such accounts of the local scale are critical in relation to global political trends; where apathy, cynicism, lack of expectation and representation and insurgent populist parties are increasingly framed as potential political crises of mature western democracies.

1. Introduction

Amongst a growing literature in political geography that considers political party movements (Page, 2019a; Airas, 2018; della Porta et al., 2017; Scott & Wills, 2017), lies space to consider political *immovement* and *local* political parties, their evolution, embeddedness in place and their role in local governing. When the presence of political traditions and familiar voting patterns are ingrained in local cultures and are slower to change than societal changes (Johnston et al., 2016, pp. 1–9; Johnston & Pattie, 2008; Scott & Wills, 2017; Wills, 2018), where does this leave the condition of local political parties? What happens to local democracy when long-standing political parties have become ingrained as forms of identity but politically dormant and managerial? Through examining the entwinement of local politicians and housing regeneration, this paper returns to the long-standing questions of who is governing, and how does power unfold (Dahl, 1974)? This paper sets out the importance of analysing socio-spatial and political relations in local politics and decision making, by examining a local Labour Party's hand in the long-term governance of housing in a neighbourhood in North East England. Because housing is intrinsically bound up with the economy across various scales, its unequal distribution and the governance of it render it deeply political. Housing is thereby a useful optic through which to examine the relationship of local political parties to the local

state.

By focusing on a mainstream political party at a local level, this paper advances recent moves to invigorate 'a research agenda on the geography of political parties' (Halvorsen, 2020, p. 243; Wills, 2019), and de-centres a focus on the national scale that can dominate political party thought (Johnston & Pattie, 2008; Scott & Wills, 2017). There has been a growing sense in wider political literature that there is an increasing dissonance between political parties and people (Katz & Mair, 1995; Crouch, 2004; Smith 2014). Declining party membership, fracturing of political identity, parties becoming homogenous, dominated by elites, failing to engage with/relate to the electorate, are all increasing disillusionment with, and mis-trust of, political parties (Pemberton & Wickham-Jones, 2013; Clarke, 2015; Mair, 2013; Bale et al., 2020). As publics across western democracies have been understood to increasingly detach from partisan politics (Mair, 2006a; Walby, 2015), in post-political times (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015), there is a danger that neat synopses of national and inter-national pictures can overlook the complex and on-going local political struggles, and the quieter registers of political power (Allen, 2016).

Despite work on governing and local politics (Tomaney, 2016, 2018) and politicization/depoliticization (Hay, 2014; Flinders & Wood, 2014), there is less work on the relationship between political parties – often understood as 'elusive characters' (Low, 2007) – and local governing. Do

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local politicians govern places, or do they serve and answer to the electorate (Copus, 2004)? How visible and inclusive is local political power in decision making? This paper examines the relationship of a political party to local governing, by bringing together strands of thought from state theory on a strategic relational approach (SRA) and more forgotten debates on the local state. It thereby moves beyond the helpful work in electoral geography (Agnew, 1996; Johnston & Pattie, 2006; Warf and Leib, 2011), and builds on recent work seeking to understand political parties organisation and democratic functions by analysing socio spatial relation and local 'political biographies' (Halvorsen, 2020, p. 243) to better understand a political party and their relationship with the local state.

With a growing need for geographical research to pay greater attention to mainstream political parties and their effects (Wills, 2019), analytic focus here is on the English Labour Party, not as an abstraction of scale for the national political context, but as relational. For at a time when we see political imaginations, dogmas and power-relations within the UK Labour Party shift nationally, it is surprising to see less attention paid to the relational and scalar geography of the Labour Party (Duncan and Goodwin, 1988). Particularly since support for the Labour Party has exhibited a distinct political geography: historically maintaining strong-holds in cities and urban areas nationally, especially in coal mining and heavy industrial areas of the North. This is particularly significant within broader geo-political shifts, such as the UK's 2016 decision to leave the European Union, in part attributed to rising inequality and a disconnect between citizens and governments (Dorling, undated; MacLeod & Jones, 2018; Bromley-Davenport et al., 2018), with the North being problematically labelled as Brexit heartlands (Dorling, 2016), and the loss of historic Labour strong-holds in the recent 2019 General Election.

In examining state-party relations at a local level, it is recognised that such relations are interconnected beyond this scalar focus. The local is by no means ontologically privileged here as *the* scale of enquiry, nor is it implied that the local is somehow more democratic or an inherently (and uncritically) *good* scale at which decision making or politics occur (cf. Jessop et al., 2008; Purcell, 2006). Instead the local is positioned in this paper as a vital and yet overlooked scale of focus that democracy depends on. Analysis can therefore inform current debates on national and international politics by offering a more situated analysis of people's engagement with local democratic procedures, practices and key political issues.

In the following section, the concepts of the local state and SRA are brought together as a framework to examine the socio-spatial and political relations between a political party and a local state. The third section focuses specifically on the Labour Party in the UK, its emergence and how we can conceptualise key political moments and fluctuations. The fourth section examines the politics of place through the historic development of the local Labour Party in Gateshead, North East England and long-standing political tensions which resonate in political and place identity today. The fifth section considers the place of politics via two different examples of housing activism, both waged within the Labour Party but with divergent political outcomes. These examples reveal local political aspirations as deeply intertwined with the socio-political selectivity of a local state (cf. Jessop, 2016). Finally, the conclusion draws together the significance of understanding the relationship between political parties, direct representatives and the state, and what these can reveal about the condition of local democracy, power, representation and belonging.

2. Local state-party relations

Political geography has seen a curtailment of political economy approaches which examine state form and functioning (MacLeod & Goodwin, 1999) towards Foucauldian understandings of the state as a site of statecraft and power (Foucault, 2008 [1979]; Danaher et al., 2000). Yet works from both theoretical leanings have sought to bring

these approaches into dialogue, offering a plurality of ideas which avoid both reifying the state and disavowing it entirely (cf. Jessop, 1990; MacKinnon, 2000; Painter, 2006 and Dittmer, 2017; Jeffrey, 2013). Such efforts have re-invigorated the state within political geography by re-thinking state practices and imaginaries as power moving through social relations. For example, in bringing together everyday politics and state theory through geopolitical affect and assemblage, the state can be seen as an effect of the political world, rather than only an institution that orders the political world - what Dittmer (2017) calls 'the new statecraft' - often in performative ways (Jeffrey, 2013).

Such contributions have nuanced an imagination of hierarchical state scales (Marston et al., 2005) as more relational (Jones, 2009), recognising the 'translocal nature of social phenomena' (Dittmer, 2017, p. 5). Various locals are therefore understood to be enmeshed with, shaping and being shaped by each other and larger scales. Accepting the messiness of relational and translocal stateness, however, does not move away from scale entirely. Indeed it is the aim of this paper to hold onto the more fluid conception of the state offered in the above debates, whilst turning to the local as a point of focus which is alive to the politics and economics of particular places (Pike & Tomaney, 2009). It is within such scalar debates on state, policy and civil society that political parties are often overlooked. This is somewhat surprising given that they form, operate and evolve within such contexts; shaping governments, politics and citizenship - in what Wills (2019) has recently called the 'geo-constitution'.

Halvorsen (2020) has recently examined the organisational strategies of a political party in Argentina and highlighted the significance of local socio-spatial relations between parties, the state and civil society. This opening up of space to understand the geography of political parties through socio-spatial relations draws on Jessop's (2008, 2016) strategic-relational approach (SRA). SRA shifts analysis from the state in general to a site of political practice and potential conflict, whereby individuals exercise power in relation to others (through complex social relations) but the state does not exercise unified power. For Jessop (2008), the state is embedded in, but analytically separate from a wider political system, and the nature and impact of state power depends on the relations (the capacities and liabilities) between the two, as well as broader society. For example, crises in political parties are often associated with a crisis in the state (around representation and legitimacy), linked to economic or fiscal crises (Jessop, 2016). Political parties organise and secure the social base of the state, and so analysis of 'the role of parties in political power would encompass all aspects of the state.' (Jessop, 2016, p. 76).

Whilst state power is connected to political parties through strategies and resources (and offers both 'structural constraints' and 'conjunctural opportunities' (Jessop, 2008, p. 29)), this does not unfold in a linear way, and care must be taken to specify the consequences of power within these relations. Moving beyond common ways to encounter the exercising of state and/or political power - as unified, controlling, coercive - allows us to see the more subtle, 'quieter registers of power' (Allen, 2016) that come to the fore in contemporary forms of local governing. For as a peopled ensemble that functions through social relations, the local state includes those who are working both 'in and against' it (The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1979).

A seminal text that explored the relationship of political parties to local governing was Cynthia Cockburn's 1977 book 'The Local State: Management of Cities and People'. This in-depth empirical account sought to understand the intricacies of local governing and politics in the London Borough of Lambeth, at a time of significant restructuring, through the concept of the local state. Consisting of local government, other local state authorities and businesses, with connections to central government, the local state is understood to be a complex set of relations, made up of people as much as the structures they operate within. The local state offered Cockburn a way to analyse the 'job' of both local governing and politics and the relationship between the two (ibid:41).

Drawing on Ralph Miliband's (1972) conception of parliamentary

democracy, and specifically the Labour Party as revisionist rather than revolutionary, Cockburn argues that the political party structure in Britain is used to legitimise the local state and manipulate local working-class interests, through a process of cultural persuasion (rather than oppression). Describing the condition of Labour controlled Lambeth as having low party membership and activism, cliques of councillors and low voter turn outs, alongside politicians becoming involved in management systems, Cockburn concludes that there is a narrowing of political power within such a 'co-ordinated and closed council machinery' (Cockburn, 1977, p. 93). Local government restructuring at this time was importantly understood to recede local power, motivated by the central curtailment of local reformist labourism movements:

'Above all else the object of corporate managerialism was to conceal the political character of the activities of the local state and to 'depoliticize' its activities' (Byrne, 1982, p. 75).

The balancing of politicization and depoliticization in transforming local states is not a new phenomenon. The pressure for local governments to become more innovative, outward looking and entrepreneurial, through various forms of public-private partnerships has been previously understood to 'hollow out' the state (Jessop, 2004). However, Helga Leitner (1990) and Jamie Peck (1995, and with Tickell, 2002) were amongst the first to develop thinking of business interests as being drafted into a remodelled state, with power 'licenced' by the state through 'the power of institutional position' (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 42). Local state development projects can thereby become symbols of state (i. e. officers and politicians) success; self-legitimising and politicized in very particular ways that feed pro-growth agendas (Leitner, 1990).

Drawing together these earlier accounts of the local state and Jessop's SRA, political parties and the state are intrinsically entwined, but analytically separate, with power moving through social relations differentially, and with varying degrees of visibility. For Cockburn (1977) and Byrne (1982) political parties and the state culminate in a narrowing of local political power, an argument which resonates with subsequent work on the severance of politics from decision making (Cochrane, 1993; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Raco, 2013; Flinders & Wood, 2014). The internment of party into the state was understood by Michels (1959 [1915]) (in his analysis of the German Social Democratic Party) to be a co-option which divorces the party from its wider socialist aims, transforming people 'from dangerous adversaries into zealous defenders and partisans' (ibid: 186). However, this argument has been subject to much critique in political science on the 'iron law of oligarchy' (Brym, 2010), and is a reminder of the dangers of collapsing the nuances of political moments into flattened and fixed accounts of the state, and institutional structures.

In this paper, the concept of the local state and SRA are used to examine the relationship between a long-standing political party and a continually changing local state. Analysing local socio-spatial and political relations allows us to better see the process of decision making and how the capacity to shape policies and outcomes moves within and between state and party institutions. It situates *elected* politicians as part of the local state, without conflating political parties with the state in general. This enables us to more closely understand the relations and power dynamics between such actors, and what the implications of this are for governing and the condition of local democracy more broadly. In the context of England, understanding the recent shift in the Labour Party's post-industrial heartlands through understanding ongoing local issues (in this case, long-term housing regeneration) can reveal senses of political alienation and familial voting patterns which are critical in understanding local democracy.

3. Changing politics and the Labour Party

Scholars have widely interpreted a condition of 'anti-politics' across western democracies (Clarke, 2015; Boswell & Corbett, 2015; McDowell et al., 2014); a growing apathy and negativity towards more established political parties, underpinned in part by scepticism of the rising

professional politicians (Allen & Cowley, 2018; Bromley-Davenport et al., 2018) and general mis-trust (Bale et al., 2020). Whilst some position this rise in populism as inherently political (Mouffe, 2018), Crouch's (2004) 'post-democratic' thesis positions such changes as symptomatic of mature systems of democracy, where working class identity is increasingly fractured, and certain people are being pushed back to the margins of political importance. Here, traditional political parties are understood to be less relevant in times of political dis-engagement and falling voter turn-out, creating a political void which becomes filled with characterful individuals peddling other forms of identification, such as nationalism. Drawing on Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia party, Crouch charts the rise of an entrepreneurial and anti-political *character*; a political trajectory which resonates with Nigel Farage's nationalist UK Independence Party (UKIP) in the run up to the 2016 European Union 'Brexit' Referendum. UKIP rapidly became the third largest party by popular vote, gaining particular strength in Northern, economically depressed areas of England (Dorling & Hennig, 2015).

The rise in populist movements, whether to the right or the left of the political spectrum also has a broader international resonance (Page, 2019b; Pemberton & Wickham-Jones, 2013). Clarke et al. (2017, p.13) attribute such political transformation to the changing 'spaces of political encounter'; campaigning and debates have changed political interaction, reducing politicians to give performances to be judged by citizens in a theatrical 'spectator sport' (Mair, 2013, p. 44). The use of data profiling/analytics, of social media, the rejection of experts and the rise of so-called 'post-truth' and 'fake-news', for example, have undoubtedly changed political engagement and forms of politicking. Yet research still points to the significance of personal encounters (through political party canvassing and campaigns) and networks in electoral turn out and decision making (Cutts et al., 2014; Page, 2019b; Scott & Wills, 2017; Webb et al., 2020). Political parties are often understood to 'perform a gap' (Page, 2019b, p. 99) or 'linkage' with civil society and the state, be that through campaigning, participation, ideology, representation or policy. Democracy is said to suffer when one or more of these linkages deteriorate (Dalton et al., 2011; Lawson, 1980).

From its beginning, the Labour Party - formed at the turn of the twentieth century through a collection of trade unions and socialist parties - has had to balance the grass-roots social movements from which it grew alongside realising national political power. This has led to fluctuating divisions of ideology, power and sweeping electoral wins and losses over the years (see Scott & Wills, 2017; Pemberton & Wickham-Jones, 2013). Following a period of significant constitutional reform in the 1990s under the dynamic leadership of Tony Blair, 'New Labour' moved into a closer relationship with business through partnerships and privatisation, often framed as becoming a 'centrist' and 'neoliberal' party (cf. Hall & O'Shea, 2013; Minkin, 2014). Such policy reform attracted wider support than the traditional social-base of the Labour Party and led to electoral success in 1997 amidst widespread popularity. Simultaneously, party membership numbers fell (from 405,000 members in 1997 to 165,000 members in 2010 (Scott & Wills, 2017)), and voter turnout lowered, which Pattie and Johnston (2001) attribute to the ideological gap between the main parties, and an anticipated landslide for Labour. The Local Government Act 2000 created indirectly elected powerful political executives (Copus, 2004), and New Labour was the beginning of successive consensual modes of managerial governance and privatisation in the UK, understood to weaken the public sphere and erode democracy as a new way of politicking sees the state become 'a contract-manager' (Raco, 2015, p. 43).

Such de-democratisation, or a 'post-political' climate is one wherein spaces of contestation - the political - are increasingly narrowed by 'technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics, and cosmopolitan liberalism' (Wilson & Swynge-douw, 2015, p. 6). That is not to render the political as fully foreclosed, as scholars have indicated (Larmer, 2015; Ormerod & MacLeod, 2019),

indeed recent spaces of protest, uprisings and social movements can be understood to be a return to - or rendering visible of - the political, part of the dynamic flow between politicization and depoliticization (Flinckers & Wood, 2014; Hay, 2014).

In the context of the Labour Party nationally, a resurgence of grassroots activity emerged following the 2010 general election defeat (Scott & Wills, 2017; Pemberton & Wickham-Jones, 2013). Heavily influenced by Momentum, an internal grass-roots movement, the party saw a period of rapidly rising membership from 2014, accelerated by the 2015 general election defeat and calls from the grassroots to depart from the 'New Labour' years (Bale et al., 2020). This movement resulted in the election of the long-standing left-wing MP Jeremy Corbyn as party leader in 2017, enabled through a surge in membership which reportedly peaked in 2017 with 575,000 members, gradually falling thereafter, to 480,000 in July 2019 (House of Commons Library, 2019). The rejection of 'New Labour' policies and rising social movements, has therefore framed this current leadership as a re-claiming of the Labour Party for some members, but equally a loss of the Party for others. And these internal divisions continue to pull the party. This is particularly so in the wake of the 2019 General Election defeat where the Conservative government's win was comprehensive, taking 43.6% of the votes across the country, levels of support which surpass Blair's 1997 victory for Labour (43.2%) and coming close to Thatcher's 1979 win for the Conservatives (43.9%) (Baston, 2019). The geography of this electoral win is particularly notable, with long-standing Labour seats in the North of England turning to the Conservatives. In the North East the Conservatives gained seven seats and places like Bishop Auckland, Durham North West and Redcar went to the Conservatives for the first time ever. These results demonstrate an historic shift and whilst likely to be linked to issues like Brexit, political and economic alienation and hope for an alternative future, these are complexities amongst others that will only be understood in time and by talking to people in such places.

Recent research has considered a post-political structure of feeling; that collective negative feelings of political alienation, frustration and even despair have been central to the rise of 'democratising movements and mobilisations' internationally, as people express discontent towards (often neoliberal) forms of governing (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015, p. 3). A body of recent scholarship makes a strong contribution to the geography of political parties by drawing on affect to understand political moments. In the context of the Labour Party in the UK, Airas (2018) has looked at the role of affective atmospheres at political events, considering the 'Corbyn phenomenon' as a hopeful and optimistic corollary to neoliberal governing. Page (2019a, b) also understands Corbyn's campaign specifically as an affective 'event'; an assemblage rather than a party, trying to mediate various scales of society and state. Such readings of affect can helpfully frame our understanding of the Labour Party and its relationship to civil society. What is perhaps deliberately less explicit in these accounts, however, is the nature of the state and its relationship to a political party, which is the focus of this paper. Taking a less abstract approach to the state to understand local state-party relations, the following sections of this paper engages the concept of the local state, analysing socio-spatial and political relations in the long-term governing and democratic practices of a neighbourhood in North East England.

4. Housing Labour in Gateshead: the politics of place

The evolution of the local Labour Party in Gateshead is considered in this section to contextualise local political identity, senses of belonging and representation alongside wider socio-economic and political relations. Before doing so, it is important to note that the selection of this case study was not done in order to test particular research questions on local politics, rather it grew from an interest in the place itself and on-going housing regeneration. Taking a grounded approach to researching this place, theoretical claims made here are based in empirical observations, in a way that understands local politics relationally; as a

product of interconnections with individual agency, social structure and place. Applying a flexible approach to building a conceptual framework (Robson, 2011) importantly makes space for reflexivity and my own positionality and embodiment in the research (Crang & Cook, 2007). It is therefore important to acknowledge and accept that my embeddedness in this research as a researcher, a resident and an ex-local authority planner in Gateshead has been an important part of the process; one that has been open through disclosure to participants as far as possible and has meant a continuing deep critical reflection of my own knowledge and beliefs. Whilst all responses have been anonymized here to protect what is sensitive local political relations, some participants could be identified by their role for which they were being interviewed, and this was explained in advance, and the appropriate consent was given.

The research findings presented in this paper are based on wider empirical investigations conducted between 2014 and 2016. In this paper, I particularly draw in depth on five interviews with local Labour Party members: the then Leader of the Council, two local councillors, and two resident association members as well as document analysis and archival research. Drawing in detail on these interviews gives a close insight into the experiences of encountering power within a political party, on decision making and senses of inclusion and exclusion. Whilst this small sample is not representative of Labour Party members even in this place, they are key accounts of particular moments, or stories, of housing contestations that resonate with broader political accounts of the state. In focusing on a de-industrialised town in North East England where industrialisation was instrumental in shaping the local landscape of housing and politics, we can see an inherited political economic history that continues to resonate with the present day.

By the late 1800s, the strong Whig/Liberal constituency of Gateshead was seeing shifts towards the rising national Labour movement, although not yet a formal party. There were local tensions in splitting votes between Liberal and Labour, but a key moment in the growing success of labourism was the Durham Miners Association's support for their affiliated Miners Federation of Great Britain, which pledged support to the Labour Party around 1908. However, local miners in Gateshead, 'considered to be the most solidly working-class constituency on Tyneside, reverted to liberalism' (Manders, 1973, p. 279). Byrne (1982) describes the period from 1890 to 1945 as a political and ideological struggle in Gateshead. He identifies three factions in the Council: first, the 'urban bourgeoisie' comprising the landlords, a grouping which resisted social reform and had controlled the Council for some considerable time. This gave way to a second group, the 'urban capitalists', consisting of professional and industrial representatives and also a third group, the emerging labour movement. Importantly, Byrne also notes the presence of influential political families in the town, including social reformers like the Spence Watsons. These social, political and class-based networks in Gateshead were central to a 'cultural revolution' which 'displaced reformist liberalism as the class ideology of the bulk (certainly never all) of the working-class' (Byrne, 1982, p. 73). Reformist labourism led to local control over housing, health and transport in Gateshead by 1923 (Byrne, 1982). By 1945, under the control of national Labour Government such key functions were centralised, forming part of the cyclical central-local tensions within the party in the transition to the welfare state. Gateshead became known as one of the safest Labour seats in the country from 1950 onwards, but at the same time voter turnout in the town was declining; from 83.9% in 1950 to 66.7% in 1970 (Manders, 1973, p. 284), and local political struggles continued.

In the neighbourhood of Bensham and Saltwell,¹ a strong Labour majority has been maintained albeit with a falling turnout, which is almost consistently below the national average. Of particular note in this neighbourhood's recent voting history (Table 1) is the gradual decline in

¹ A neighbourhood made up of part of two electoral wards: Lobley Hill and Bensham, and Saltwell.

Table 1

Bensham And Saltwell Election Data: Statistic source Gateshead Council and Electoral Commission, compiled by author and rounded.

Local Election Year	Lobley Hill & Bensham Ward		Saltwell Ward		National Average Total Turnout
	Turnout	Labour Majority (UKIP share)	Turnout	Labour Majority (UKIP share)	
2007	37%	44%	31%	60%	38%
2008	36%	46%	29%	62%	36%
2010 ^a	56%	54%	53%	58%	63%
2011	37%	75%	36%	78%	43%
2012	29%	74%	27%	81%	31%
2014	33%	49% (UKIP 29%)	32%	62% (UKIP 21%)	36%
2015 ^a	56%	53% UKIP (21%)	55%	57% (UKIP 14%)	65%
2016	30%	58% (UKIP 20%)	30%	57% (UKIP 13%)	34%
2018	28%	62%	30%	62%	35%
2019	29%	49%	28%	51%	–

^a General Election Year, showing increased turnout in line with national voting pattern.

voter turn-out over the last decade, with spikes in the number of votes for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), linked to the 2016 referendum on exiting the European Union (which had a high turnout at 70% across Gateshead, with 57% voting to leave the EU). UKIP had not stood in the area until 2014–2016, and significantly reduced Labour's majority at this time, which is part of a national trend in deindustrialised areas of the UK (see [Dorling & Hennig, 2015](#); [Goodwin & Milazzo, 2015](#)) and mirrors international political shifts that were outlined earlier. In the 2019 General Election, Labour held its Gateshead MP (a Saltwell ward councillor for 27 years before becoming MP in 2010), albeit with a receding majority (65% in 2017 and 54% in 2019) and a growing Conservative presence (24% in 2017 and 35% in 2019).

John [Tomaney \(2017\)](#): no page) has considered the North East to be losing its grip on the electorate, meaning 'UKIP is best placed in the North East to feed off working class anger even if it does not have a credible policy for regional development.' Indeed, the North of England became a party-political battle ground over Brexit as UKIP, the Conservative and Brexit Parties sought to gain support in such economically 'left behind' places. With worsening socio-economic conditions, an increasingly detached polity and on-going local (and central-local) political party struggles, it is necessary to broaden the analysis of local politics and include a peopled account of the culture of local politics and the local state, as Tomaney's work goes on to do.

The past success of the North East's Labour Party was hard won through localist self-organisation, and local political families and key individuals were significant in this. [Tomaney \(2017\)](#) has recently considered the relationship of coal mining and the Labour movement, remembering Peter Lee, a county Durham miner turned politician who he describes as a 'political colossus' whose 'life bears scrutiny for the light it sheds on how Labour won and used power in Durham' (*ibid*:78). The history lessons of the Labour Party in the North East are considered to have contemporary resonance. Peter Lee and others 'added the power of the nascent local state' (*ibid*:80) to progressive localism and self-organisation, and as such the Labour Party is intrinsically embedded within North Eastern governance and identity through its historic and on-going class-based struggles. It has remained a Labour heartland because, in part, 'it still draws on the diminishing moral and physical capital accumulated during the era of Peter Lee' (*ibid*: 81). Research on Brexit in the North East has considered the way in which the vote was entangled with identity, history and context ([Bromley-Davenport et al., 2018](#)) and the coexistence of different modes of uncertainty and political identities ([Anderson et al., 2020](#)). Nostalgia was foregrounded in Brexit campaigns and became an opportunity for voters to register political dissatisfaction, to disrupt the status-quo of long-standing Labour areas.

Such senses of nostalgia and ancestry had 'little if any recognition of the racial and gendered hierarchies that marked this [industrial] era' ([Bromley-Davenport et al., 2018](#), p. 10). The emphasis in history of *strong male* characters' influence ought not to be overlooked. This industrial masculinity resonates today alongside the region's working class identity, it refuses 'to be written out of existence' as 'past cultures

continue to be etched into the present, to be embodied by a new generation' ([Nayak, 2006](#), p. 828). There has been much sociological research on the felt declining social and political relations with regard to post-industrial labour. For instance, the 'end of work' debates consider nostalgia for a perceived loss of dignified and solid 'graft' and associated loss in identity and spirit ([Strangleman, 2007](#)). Grayson Perry's 2016 documentary 'All Man' featured the North East's post-industrial masculine identity, described as a 'skin' that is built on the past, but ultimately becomes a burden ([Hard Man, 2016](#)). It is vital to understand the nuances and heritage of class-based political struggle in relation to place identity. In the North East, Labour has arguably been more entrenched as a form of identity rather than purely a political ideology for a long time. The notion that one's relatives 'would turn in [their] grave if I voted anything but Labour' ([Byrne, 2018](#)) has been a long-standing consciousness in this region. Although research by [Mair \(2006a\)](#) points to a fall in the sense of identification/belonging with political parties over the past two decades in many Western democracies, political entrenchment has mattered for a long time in certain places, and still matters to some people.

5. Socio-political relations in Gateshead: the place of politics

As well as being a Labour strong-hold, with low electoral participation, the neighbourhood Bensham and Saltwell - with a striking resemblance to [Cockburn's \(1977\)](#) description of the political climate in Islington - also has long-serving Labour councillors. Some of these have family predecessors in local politics, for example two ward councillors had parents who had been councillors and have themselves been sitting, one for thirty-two years and another for seventeen years. Some are also close friends, examples of local 'political dynasties' and 'kindreds' which have proved problematic for Labour elsewhere ([Copus, 2004](#)). Ward councillors in this neighbourhood are very active and committed to the place, with a strong presence on boards of local schools, charities and community organisations. In the time spent with some such councillors during this research, they undoubtedly deal actively and considerately for individual constituent's concerns and situations. They feel a strong sense of pride and protection over the neighbourhood and maintain a strong local social network. This was described by one councillor light heartedly and positively as an 'inner circle'; an insight that is equally felt by other 'political families' in the neighbourhood who, despite being networked and politically active, are positioned outside of such a circle, as we will go on to see.

The following sections examine the socio-spatial and political relations in two different examples of contestation over housing. The first examines the political journey of a local activist who challenged the local state and in doing so achieved a position of power within it. The second example considers a group of residents whose opposition to state-led housing regeneration was denied either political voice or position within the state. Whilst not seeking to demonise local politicians, but to understand their motivations ([Hay, 2014](#)), both examples raise

questions about political representation and suggest – through fluctuating moments of politicization and depoliticization – a dilution of local democracy.

5.1. From political activism to entitlement: becoming the local state

Gateshead by the 1970s was facing rapid economic decline and a reliance on central government funding which had for many years enabled various slum clearance and urban improvement programmes. Bensham and Saltwell were the recipients of some such funding through the 1979 Avenues Environmental Improvement Strategy, a scheme which improved selected streets of older terrace housing. Other streets in the neighbourhood did not receive investment, however, as plans for major infrastructure upgrading meant they were instead earmarked for demolition. By the early 1980s such plans had not come to fruition, and a group of local residents campaigned against Gateshead Council's resultant neglect of these houses by virtue of their ineligibility for grants to improve them. Arguing that the Council had 'inadvertently blighted the area'² over the years, a small group of residents became active in pushing for improved housing conditions and the protection of older terraced housing. The organisation Save The Avenues Campaign (STAC) was set up in 1986, led by an active member of the local Labour Party who lived in one such blighted street. With both his parents having been local councillors in Gateshead, there was in his own words, a political 'heritage there' and a strong sense of activism, even towards the Labour Council.

Despite the Council's opposition to STAC as an organisation, the activist describes being careful to 'work *with* colleagues in the Labour Party, so it wasn't against [them]'. Drawing on socio-political relations in this way, activists organised a large-scale public meeting in which they presented an action plan and 'managed to persuade' key local politicians, and subsequently the wider Council of the need for action. There are two significant outcomes of this local campaigning worthy of note here. Firstly, the lead activist of STAC became a local councillor for the neighbourhood in the same year, going on to become Leader of the Council from 2002 to 2016. Secondly, the Avenues Agency was formed to renovate older terraced housing across the neighbourhood; an early public private partnership, consisting of Gateshead Council, Government Department of Environment, building society Northern Rock and housing association North Housing. The Avenues Agency was understood locally to offer dexterity in bypassing the need to rely on central grants. It was held up to be a local success, until funding was withdrawn by the Conservative Government at the time;

'I was extremely annoyed and upset about it as a ward councillor and we have been working ever since to get that area regenerated.'

This political journey, or 'political biography' (Halvorsen, 2020), of the Leader of Gateshead Council is an important one in understanding the context of decision-making on housing and power struggles in the Labour Party that followed. To stay with the concept of the local state, the activist's strive for reform - achieved through social and political persuasion - significantly culminated in his inclusion within the local state ensemble, alongside Council officers, and partner organisations. His long-standing desire to improve local housing conditions, and frustration with central-local state relations that thwart it are equally significant. Such experiences and local rootedness underpin his personal sense of political legitimacy.

In 2002, the same year that this ward councillor was made Labour Leader of Gateshead Council, the national Labour Government announced a centrally funded housing regeneration scheme aimed at renewing 'failing' local housing markets. The Housing Market Renewal Initiative (HMRI) injected £2.2billion to replace or refurbish what was understood to be 'obsolete' housing in areas with 'low demand' (ODPM,

2003, p. 24). Because house prices are strongly linked to labour markets, there are broad geographical patterns of low house prices being concentrated in ex-industrial areas (Dorling, 2014; Cameron, 2006), and thus HMRI was concentrated on the north and midlands of England. Delivered nationally through nine Pathfinder public-private partnerships, made up of local authorities and key local and regional stakeholders, such as housing corporations, Regional Development Agencies, the police and the private sector, Pathfinders were ostensibly state actors. At a local level, the combined authorities of Newcastle and Gateshead became one Pathfinder and following a series of evidence collected largely by private consultants, specific housing markets were targeted for regeneration intervention (Ormerod & MacLeod, 2019). Bensham and Saltwell became one such area, with specific streets identified for improvement, or demolition. A total of 440 dwellings were designated for demolition, many of which were homes that had failed to benefit from improvements under earlier rounds of funding such as the Avenues Agency.

HMRI is widely understood to have been an evidence-led regeneration scheme (Cole & Nevin, 2004). However, a closer reading of social relations within local politics and the state can paint a slightly more nuanced version of events. For, according to the Leader, Gateshead Council were not technically eligible to participate in the scheme; they were both late to apply and did not have areas of market failure sufficiently large enough to meet the criteria. And so, the Leader capitalised on the local visit of a Minister to Gateshead, whom he had met before as elected members of the same political party. Deploying remarkably similar tactics to his earlier political career entry activism, the Leader describes the way in which the government Minister was 'persuaded' by presentations and site visits that not only could Gateshead work successfully in partnership with Newcastle Council, but that the town had specific 'needy' neighbourhoods that required intervention. The Leader again draws on party-political affiliations alongside his past experiences of housing in Bensham and Saltwell, which had left residents 'let down' and him feeling a personal responsibility: 'I needed to do something about it ... it seemed like the Housing Market Pathfinder would enable it'. This example of local political opportunism via networked social relations moved to maximise central state funding for housing regeneration locally through collaboration with Newcastle City Council. This is the relationality of party politics in action; local politicians drawing upon connections and party-political affinities to influence and shape central government decision-making and allocations. More subtle social relations and networks are drawn upon by the Leader because of his sense of political responsibility and legitimacy within the local state. This helps us move past the formal-informal binary that is constructed in political thought (Low, 2007), to better understand the fluidity, and quieter registers of political power which is not necessarily structurally enshrined within the party or state. Housing regeneration of this neighbourhood is being understood by the Leader as a symbol of his own political success (Leitner, 1990), heightened through his local embeddedness in place and sense of legitimacy.

This smaller, more subtle account of local state power confronts understandings of meta governance or strategic selectivity (Jessop, 2016), and even strategic direction for local state policy. For when asked if he had known at that time whether HMR would involve the mass demolition of houses in the neighbourhood the Leader replied:

'No...I wasn't in that sense expert. I never felt they needed demolition in the area ... we just needed some funding, some resource to tackle the problems of older area housing.' (September 2015).

Having built a political career out of protecting older housing in the neighbourhood, using his political influence as both an activist and then elected politician to persuade both local and central government to do the same, the Leader then retreats from being an 'expert'. Instead, in the strive for funding to regenerate housing, the Leader surrenders his local knowledge and expertise - his power in some sense - to professional

² Direct quotes in this section are taken from an interview with the Leader of the Council in September 2015.

officers/experts and evidence. This resonates with Cockburn's (1977) proposition that party political action can be channelled into institutional moulds:

'A Labour leadership showing any tendency to socialist zeal is quickly cured by the decision-making power of senior permanent officials.' (ibid:49–50)

Yet such depoliticization is not driven by a removal of political power in his understanding, but a surrendering of it in order to maintain the job of the state. This was also seen through other examples of local politicians surrendering their left-leaning political views on housing to increasingly market driven approaches. For example, whilst other ward councillors described wanting to see more Council and affordable housing in the neighbourhood and 'struggled' with the market driven arguments of HMRI that would raise house prices: 'I don't think the market should lead' (Ward Councillor A, March 2015), they nevertheless went on to support the development on two main grounds. Firstly, despite being more expensive, the replacement houses would be more energy efficient, thereby acting as an economic counter-weight.³ Secondly, there was a desire to 'show as a Council we can work in partnership with the private sector' (Ward Councillor A, March 2015), which they did through a public-private-partnership following the withdrawal of central government funding for HMRI in 2011. The pressure for politicians and other local state actors to work in increasingly entrepreneurial ways in the governing of housing, particularly at moments of central-local state tension - is resulting in a suspension or surrendering of their political beliefs and values. Despite their ideological misgivings and underlying concerns about the regeneration, local councillors worked to gain community consensus through drawing on their networks and trying to smooth the path of resistance, justifying the development to those 'who have argued' otherwise (Ward Councillor A, March 2015).

Although local politicians can bring a sense of legitimacy to state projects, their relationship with officers within the state is in constant tension. As one respondent in the partnership that is delivering the replacement housing in the neighbourhood put it, 'the Council is in the complex position of having to bring our councillors along with us' (Respondent in Gateshead Regeneration Partnership, 2016). Understandings local politicians as a barrier to be overcome, and politicians own surrendering of political values to officers actively depoliticizes the local state and leaves a façade of political power and representation.

5.2. Encountering entrenched party politics and struggles over representation

Questions of political power and representation are often revealed in the relations and outcomes of contestation, of moments of 'proper' politics, through political action (Zizek, 1999; Swynedouw 2010). The following section builds upon the earlier examples of transferable political power in relation to the housing regeneration of Bensham and Saltwell to consider a later but related example of resident activism and what this reveals about the condition of local democracy.

In 2005, when Bensham and Saltwell was announced as a HMRI regeneration area, a small group of local residents immediately formed a resident's association (RA) to oppose the demolition of housing in the neighbourhood. Leading members of the RA were also active members of the local Labour Party, and this was as much a political struggle within the party as it was a struggle over housing. Much like some of the local councillors, key members of the RA also had family members who

had been elected local councillors in the past and were known to be part of one of the *political families* in the area.

The RA did not have a formal structure, but their membership was said to be 1400 people, a number which was drawn from the amount of people that signed their petition, rather than a formal membership. Led by a smaller group of people, the RA were an active organisation, campaigning locally in various mediums (petition, media reports, blogs, meetings, stalls at local fetes and letters of objection) and mobilising residents to object to the demolition of housing on the grounds that it was neither necessary nor wanted. Specific objections that regeneration was unsustainable environmentally (though demolition), economically (as replacement housing would be unaffordable for many local people) and socially (though displacement) were overridden locally as they directly opposed the expert constructed evidence: that this was a neighbourhood with a failing housing market. Despite evidence to the contrary – that house prices were rising, and properties were occupied – we saw earlier that elected politicians suspended their political beliefs on housing and uncritically followed the economic reasoning of officers and consultants. By rendering technical a politically contentious moment, the RA were positioned by the local state as a small group of residents who were 'not representative' of the wider community (Leader of the Council, September 2015). Unlike the Leader's experience of local resident activism being incorporated into the local state in the 1980s, here such activism was denied, and residents were explicitly framed as a 'political pressure group' rather than a resident's association (RA member A, March 2015).

Labelled as unrepresentative and political, the RA were thereby denied legitimacy and very clearly positioned in antagonistic terms (Mouffe, 2005; Zizek, 1999). From a position of local exclusion, the RA elevated their campaign in association with national campaign organisation SAVE Britain's Heritage through judicial channels of appeal, including the High Court in London. By 'jumping scales' (Smith, 1993) in this way, the RA attempted to gain a position of power at national level for this local struggle. However, this campaign was ultimately lost, and resultant delays in the demolition of housing went on to incense local state actors (and many local residents) as the neighbourhood became suspended in a semi-derelict state. Economic and technical assessments were applied to define what is locally valid and legitimate, depoliticising this resident group. But how did this politics of representation play out within the local Labour Party specifically?

The Labour Party constituency in Gateshead is split into smaller branches, and Saltwell branch meet in the Local Authority's civic centre. The networked nature of local politicians in this neighbourhood was revealed earlier through the sense of an 'inner circle', and involvement on local boards. One ward councillor for this neighbourhood, as Leader of the Council, also held prominent positions on many local and regional bodies (including, Vice Chair of the North East Combined Authority, representative of the Council on the North East Local Enterprise Partnership, Chair of Northumbria Police Authority and Association of North East Council, Board member of BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art). Demonstrating a strong commitment to local issues, this networked nature of local politicians and distribution of power beyond the local state is often characteristic of place-based politics and people's political journeys. It is however felt by those positioned outside of the network to conversely be a point of impenetrability:

'The residents association were not allowed to meet on council properties. The problem is the Council is everywhere. The councillors are on the board of everything, so we are immediately blacklisted.'

(RA member C, March 2015).

Coming uncannily close to Cockburn's (1977:33) description of Islington as a 'co-ordinated and closed council machinery', the RA were even described by local government officers as 'detractors' deploying 'guerrilla warfare tactics'. Within the Labour Party, some members of the RA described being targeted at party meetings for actively resisting the regeneration, blamed for slowing the demolition process down. Positioned as outsiders of the state within the party, a clear divide was

³ This economic justification for inflated house prices falls far-short considering the average price of a home demolished under HMRI was £70,000 and the starting price of a replacement home was £155,000.

drawn between those party members who were opposing the development in the RA and elected party members who defended it. This local activism caused internal party conflicts, revealing dominant and subordinate party networks (Copus, 2004), that were not allowed to spill into a wider party movement (della Porta et al., 2017). The disagreement between market-driven and more socialist-leaning ideologies was reduced to the existence of two logics: right and wrong. These binaries of right/wrong and inside/outside the state did not allow for channels of agonism or disagreements to take place, but shifted the political into the moral sphere in antagonistic terms (Mouffe, 2005). Here the RA were rendered a political enemy within the Labour Party, broadening the dispute from one of housing to one of political representation and entitlement through understandings of *local belonging*:

‘I always have disagreed with them ... I lived there in the Avenues for a long time ... so I know what people’s aspirations that live there are, the kind of things that people want ... I am basically saying that ... they don’t represent the people ... the Smith⁴ family. They live outside the area we are talking about ... I guess I am speaking as much as anything from that level as Leader of the Council, but primarily as a resident and a councillor for the area, and I think I have absolute authority and a mandate to do that.’ (Leader of the Council, September 2015).

Contrary to his earlier dispersal of political power and local knowledge to ‘experts’, in the face of perceived political opposition here, the Leader recalls his position of power, representation and entitlement by invoking his place as a local resident, a councillor and Leader. His institutional position enables him to ‘speak for’ the community through shifting the mode of power from an associational kind, which was collectively established and enabled him to achieve his political position, to an instrumental kind which is used to obtain leverage (Allen, 2003) and legitimise the states actions whilst side-lining alternative opinions. By drawing on a range of resources – heritage, belonging, political representation and institutional position – stateness is being performed (Dittmer, 2017; Jeffrey, 2013).

There are additional socio-political and personal relations at play in this process too; the presence and significance of political heritage, networks and families and his long-term position as a career politician – someone who ‘live [s] for, but also off, politics’ (Allen & Cowley, 2018, p. 221) ought not to be overlooked. The politics of place is bound up with notions of belonging, of inclusion/exclusion and nepotistic political victors/victims which people carry with them into future contestations.

These conditions are indicative of entrenched Labour Party politics of the North East and an historic dearth of party-political opposition: ‘The Labour Party is not challenged ... [it] is strong because there is no alternative’ (RA member C, March 2015). The lack of systematic rivals is one that Mair (2006b) has linked more broadly to the global acceptance of governing principles, such as liberalism (or neo-liberalism), within political systems. Such an unrivalled and entwined nature of one party to the local system of governing is uncomfortably felt in Gateshead:

‘The Council has been in power for so long that they have become managers of the Council, it’s not so much about politics ... When an officer came up with this [HMRI] recycled plan for demolition probably no-one looked. No one asked, they just went along, as there was a pot of money and a rough plan. It’s dangerous.’ (RA member C, March 2015).

The belief that such a managerial mode of governing is dangerous has been explored in the literature on post-politics (see Mouffe, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2011). But when this is found in places with a deep party political strong hold, with low voter-turn out and a conflation of party politics with identity, alongside narrowing spaces agonism, this undoubtedly poses a threat to wider democracy. Political parties can dominate local political landscapes, defining what is and what is not legitimate political action, whilst only moving out of ‘political dormancy’ to react to perceived challenges or threats (Copus, 2004). Despite moments of politicization, this signals a shift towards Crouch’s

(2004) post-democratic thesis, where the structures of democracy still exist – as we have seen through recent voting patterns – but the channels through which democracy is achieved in its maximal sense, through participation, deliberation for example, are increasingly narrowed.

The politics that shaped this place and the cyclical regeneration of housing ever since are ingrained in the present, both materially and culturally. Struggles over representation and senses of belonging can therefore be seen less as purely political struggles, but part of long-term culturally and economically ingrained struggles, bound up with identity, social-relations and people’s relationship to the local state.

6. Conclusions

Has the political vision of some Labour strong-holds been lost as the Party has become a politically dormant, managerial part of the local state? Returning to the question of ‘who governs’ (Dahl, 1974), this paper has involved analytically unravelling the long-term relationship between a local political party and the local state, closely considering the power dynamics and socio-political relations within local decision making. Carving out space to consider the quieter registers of political power (Allen, 2016) within moments of re/depoliticization raises concerns about the condition of local democracy.

The mature structures of political-state power that the Labour Party hold in the neighbourhood of Bensham and Saltwell, North East England, has been examined through two moments of contestation in the long-term regeneration of housing. Firstly, tracing the political journey of one resident from housing activist to Leader of the Council reveals the significance of party-political and social relations in the selectivity of decision making. It also highlights the way in which the activists’ inclusion into the state can have a de-politicising effect as political values and ideology were surrendered to expert officers and consultants. Secondly, the contestation of housing demolition by a Residents Association then highlighted the way in which such political-state power can be reclaimed when faced with opposing political action and a felt threat to representation. In drawing on a range of resources and identities to legitimise state actions and perform stateness (Dittmer, 2017; Jeffrey, 2013), a swift closing down of space for agonism ensued. Political power is understood here as malleable; flowing through social relations which are underpinned by senses of representation, legitimacy and local belonging. There remain strong networks of political families that can be generative and supportive, but also exclusionary and nepotistic, constructing local binaries of political victors/victims which stick over time. Housing regeneration thereby became a symbol of state success, in part through longer-term political and personal victory.

Labour has dominated this local political landscape, grown out of long-term working-class struggle, the Party has become ingrained as a form of identity for a long time rather than a purely political ideology. When this is layered with growing political apathy and low electoral participation, party politics become entrenched. Local politicians in long-standing positions of power have defined what is, and what is not, legitimate political action. Contestations, decisions and visions for housing in this neighbourhood have culminated in socialist values towards housing being eroded by market-driven governance. Not through a consciousness of power or ideology, but as we saw, by leading with a sense of political righteousness (linked to perceptions of legitimacy and representation, but also local belonging and political heritage) that denied alternative political action, even within the same party.

Notions of local democracy being diluted (Crouch, 2004), controlling political parties becoming divorced from their socialist aims (Michels, 1959 [1915] and Miliband, 1972) and a channelling of political action into the state mould with a creation of distinct insider/outsider binaries (Cockburn, 1977) certainly resonate in Gateshead today. Yet in engaging the concept of SRA (Jessop, 2008, 2016) with the local state (Byrne, 1982; Cockburn, 1977; Leitner, 1990; Miliband, 1972; Peck & Tickell, 2002; Raco, 2013) the significance of socio-spatial and political relations have made visible the more nuanced relationship between a

⁴ Real family name not given.

political party and the local state. Paying attention to the quieter registers of political power – the art of persuasion, leaning on political connections - has revealed understandings of what it is to govern through local representative democracy over the long-term.

The growing sense that Labour is losing its grip on the North Eastern electorate (Tomaney, 2016) of course does not signal a reduction in democracy itself, indeed shifting long-term voting patterns has the potential to reinvigorate local politics and democracy. However, when this resultant political void - so strongly linked to identity and belonging – comes during a near decade of crippling austerity across the region, it creates conditions under which insurgent populism can appeal to local political fatigue/despair, and local politics can be recast to the right or the left of the political spectrum.

Whilst changing voting patterns and activism towards local state redevelopments are not insignificant political moments, what is needed beyond these is a broader understanding of how people want representative democracy to work in practice. There has been a failure of the Left to ‘defend a vision of a better, an egalitarian world’ (Dean, 2015, pp. 261–278, p. 276) which makes space for more divided opinions, debate and scrutiny within local decision-making: a lack of imagination for and bolder approaches to non-neoliberal governing. A new research agenda is required that more deeply understands the relations of party-politics and various local states, to build up a great picture of the condition of democracy.

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I confirm that I have nothing of interest to declare.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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