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# Local governance, disadvantaged communities and cultural intermediation in the creative urban economy

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**Abstract.** The creative economy is a key arena where austerity, localism and social policy debates are being played out. This paper explores how cultural intermediation has been captured by a broader state agenda on socio-economic exclusion, examining how these processes function at the local level in Birmingham, UK. Intersections of local cultural policy with grass-roots practice are explored in the neighbourhood of Balsall Heath, through two case studies: (1) Birmingham City Council's Community Cultural Pilot and (2) Balsall Heath Biennale. We argue that despite savage cuts the local state is still having a considerable – and not always enabling – influence on processes and outcomes of non-state cultural intermediation, directing ways in which creative initiatives function at the local level. The paper ends on a hopeful note that these unstable times offer a moment where a renegotiation of the relationship between cultural intermediation, disadvantaged communities and the creative economy beyond monetised market-value is possible.

**Keywords:** localism, governance, urban policy, community, cultural policy

## Introduction

For the last three decades, governments have been attempting to capture the activities of small independent businesses and third sector organisations in order to deliver on the aims of the state (Wolch, 1990). At the city level, the outcome has been a championing of entrepreneurial approaches to local economic intervention, along with a growing emphasis on cross-public and public-private sector partnerships (Griffiths, 1995: 253; see Andres and Chapain, 2013; Collins, 2008; Painter, 1991; Stoker, 1990). While the rhetoric has been of bringing in external expertise, in practice large sums of public money have come with strings attached, with organisations finding their own mission and operating principles being subsumed into a local state drive on economic growth and social cohesion. Perhaps, it should come as no surprise that those who control the purse strings can dictate the agenda. What is interesting, however, is how the withdrawal of public funding as part of UK central government austerity measures is failing to result in a renegotiation of social and cultural strategy by creative workers and organisations whose aims are allied but not identical to those of the national and local state.

In the changing framework of urban policy and governance, the creative economy is a key arena where these debates are being played out. On the one hand, the creative economy has been positioned as the saviour of growth in a post-industrial era. There are a continued flow of reports on the contribution that creative jobs, from computer programmers to performance artists, make to gross domestic product (see Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993; Florida and Tinagli, 2004; Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2009; Regional Observatory and Vector Research, 2012), besides the widespread policy influence of creativity advocates such as Florida (2002) and Landry (2000). On the other hand, however, there is an austerity narrative about prioritising limited public funding – why should opera or a gallery receive public subsidy ahead of a hospital that saves lives or an infrastructure project that will create

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many jobs? For instance, Loftman and Nevin have argued that flagship cultural projects in Birmingham, UK – in particular the International Development Centre and re-design of Centenary Square – were undemocratically commissioned at the expense of the city's education budgets (Loftman and Nevin, 1992; also Griffiths, 1995).

The arguments about the intrinsic versus utilitarian value of creativity and the arts are well-rehearsed, with many working in the sector comfortable with the idea that their work can show aesthetic quality as well as generating social and economic benefits. We examine the tensions of these multiple outcomes by looking at creative workers who have shaped their practices around mediating between disadvantaged communities and the wider creative economy. Building on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural intermediaries, the paper investigates the role of intermediation in local urban cultural governance networks. We argue that the role of 'non-state' cultural intermediaries serves to act as a strategic fix in straightened economic times for local state objectives on socio-economic exclusion and a broader policy narrative on localism. The lines between state and non-state intermediaries are thus becoming blurred. How these processes function are examined at the local level through a case study of Birmingham; a large, multi-cultural city attempting to re-imagine itself in the context of deep cuts to public spending. We argue that, despite central coalition government cuts crippling local government, actors in the local state are still maintaining a hierarchical relationship over arts professionals and community groups which has a considerable – and not always enabling – influence on processes and outcomes of cultural intermediation, directing ways in which creative initiatives function at the local level.

### **The role of cultural intermediation**

Bourdieu (1979) originally conceived 'cultural intermediaries' as being a new kind of actor that arose in an era of expanding mass culture in 1960s France, attempting to mediate cultural taste and practice. This emergent army of TV producers, critics and journalists were seen as 'new' in comparison with cultural critics and commentators in the traditional sense, such as intellectuals and arts experts based at cultural institutions and establishments in the pre-media age (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Lee, 2012). Bourdieu analysed the emergence and dynamics of this expanded professional group who were working in popular large-scale production, rather than supposedly elitist, literary and artistic small-scale production.

Yet, over time the range of actors framed as cultural intermediaries has significantly broadened and altered from the original meaning. With the adoption of the creative economy concept by New Labour, from the end of the 1990s cultural intermediation has been understood in relation to urban regeneration and structural change in post-industrial urban areas across Europe (Banks, 2009; Banks et al., 2000; O'Connor, 1998). For instance, in Manchester cultural producers and intermediaries have been termed 'cultural entrepreneurs' (IT/web designers, graphic designers, fashion designers, night-club promoters, journalists) who actively contribute to culture-led urban regeneration (Banks et al., 2000). The conceptualisation of cultural intermediaries has also encompassed more fluid relations between production-mediation-consumption reflecting the rise of particular sub-sectors within the creative industries (Hesmondhalgh, 2007; Maguire and Matthews, 2012). Foregrounding the economic transactional characteristics of intermediaries in the market-place, their 'knowledge, talent and skills' have been considered central to the creative economy where 'symbol-making is an essential source of money-making and thus a new driving force of the national economy' (Lee, 2012: 4).

It is clear that the expansion and adaptation of roles framed as cultural intermediaries are not simply due to a misreading of Bourdieu. The evolving understanding of cultural intermediaries is at least in part responsive to the 'significant changes brought about by the growth of workers involved in the production and circulation of symbolic forms' (Negus, 2002: 501). Furthermore, the shift is indicative of a changing rationale for public funding

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of culture. In the 1970s–1980s, the social and political function of culture in society was central, however from the mid-1980s, a new emphasis was given to urban development, local economic growth and inter-city competition (Andres and Chapain, 2013: 163). For intermediary agents operating between culture, policy and industry today, the role performed is ‘deeply ambiguous’, reproducing ‘prevailing economic relationships’ and ‘simultaneously driving the emergence of new associational relationships’ (Taylor, 2013: 2).

Disadvantaged communities should be able to benefit from public funding that supports the creative economy. This is especially the case given that worklessness or work-place insecurity impacts not only upon income but also a lack of chance to develop work-place identities (Sayer, 2011: 701; see Sennett, 1998). Yet a dearth of opportunities to enter the workplace has excluded whole groups from the urban economy. Instead of acting as an extension of the inequities of neo-liberal practices, intermediaries are part of a complex assemblage of a spatialised cultural-political economy (Taylor, 2013). The important interpersonal and social aspect of the creative economy offers potential for an ‘alternative regime of economic calculation’, with intermediation creating a pivotal moment where value can be reframed, and new opportunities brokered (*Ibid.*: 3).

Indeed, the recognition that diverse groups should have the opportunity to benefit from the creative economy does not mean we should reduce the benefits of culture to its economic value, nor reduce the value of individuals and groups to their economic potential. By framing and reframing values – whether exchange or non-exchange values – intermediaries are active agents in the utilisation of culture in the creative economy by actively working to help ‘circumscribe a set of activities which can then become the objective correlate of policy intervention and measurement’ (O’Connor, 2013: 2). Drawing upon sociologist Bob Jessop’s work on economic imaginaries, intermediaries have the power to ‘identify, privilege and seek to stabilise’ economic activities so they can be measured (Jessop, 2005: 145). Working between state and non-state actors, intermediaries often enact a form of mediated monitoring which can likewise be observed in community participation objectives of social policy.

### Culture and social ex/inclusion

The centralisation of cultural policy in urban strategy arose from new forms of urban intervention in the 1970s, with its potential applied to assist in job creation in new sectors and place-marketing from the 1980s (Bassett, 1993; Griffiths, 1995; Mulgan and Worpole, 1986). A dual function, as Griffiths argues, was the view that cultural policy offered ‘potential as a mechanism for social integration’ along with its ameliorative contribution to a damaged civic culture ‘brought about by growing social marginalization and impoverishment’ (Griffiths, 1995: 256). While it remains important to be attentive to the various aims that underpin policy strategy on social inclusion of disadvantaged communities into the creative economy, if public funding is being utilised towards growth in the sector then it is necessary to consider how this wealth – social, cultural, economic – is distributed.

Barriers to employment such as lack of diversity and high-level qualifications are indicative of Kate Oakley’s argument that claims for the democratising tendencies and pathways for the socially excluded in the creative sector have been exaggerated (Oakley, 2009, 2013).

The concern of many cultural industries advocates with access for marginalised groups – ethnic minorities and women in particular... [is still] reflected in specific interventions, though the ability of those interventions to counter wider market and social forces was limited, to say the least (Oakley, 2009: 404, 2006).

For instance, 7% of employees in the creative and cultural workforce in 2011/2012 are from a Black and minority ethnic background (Arts Council England, 2014: 6). While 12.3% of staff and managers from Arts Council National Portfolio organisations are from a Black

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and minority ethnic background, less than 1 in 10 managers are from a Black and minority ethnic background. In 2008, in the sub-sector of the visual arts 95% of the workforce identified as White (Arts Council/Iniva, 2008: 9). In light of this research, the work of cultural intermediaries in ethnically diversifying the creative sector cannot necessarily be considered particularly innovative, ground-breaking or democratising (Negus, 2002). The ability of non-state cultural intermediaries to oppose market forces is restricted, which we argue is further stymied by a public funding regime of project-by-project contracts in culture and the arts. In fact, a tension can be observed between the continuum of central and local government economic enterprise and growth objectives since the 1970s, and non-exchange values of social inclusion for disadvantaged communities given inequities built into the existing economic system, along with limited strategic funding to address widening inequality.

New Labour reconceptualised poverty into social exclusion with the enduring result that the ability for people and areas to contribute economically is now the key measure of value (Hall, 2013: 243; see Bailey and Pill, 2011). The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) concluded that arts, sport and cultural and recreational activity could positively support regeneration at the neighbourhood level by improving health, crime, employment and education indicators in deprived communities, thus allowing citizens to become more economically productive (Arts Council England, 2001). It was proposed by the DCMS that creative and sports activities have positive impacts because they can:

- appeal directly to individuals' interests and develop their potential and self-confidence;
- relate to community identity and encourage collective effort;
- help build positive links with the wider community;
- be associated with rapidly growing industries.

This understanding is emblematic of how 'the third way' assumed that growth will in turn create inclusion through 'trickle down' processes. Of course, it is also important to recognise that the market economy represents only a minority of the important non-monetary transactions of products and services that sustain society, such as mentoring and volunteering (Gibson-Graham, 2006: 60).

Nonetheless, under New Labour, policy-makers 'increasingly sought to mobilise residents as "active citizens" to counteract decline and pockets of worklessness in urban neighbourhoods' (Crisp, 2013: 324; also Marinetto, 2003; Sullivan and Taylor, 2007). Besides economic growth, a dual function has been attributed to the creative sector through its potential to draw 'disadvantaged people and places' into 'socially included and normalised roles, behaviours, and spaces' (Hall, 2013: 244; Jermyn, Arts Council England, 2001). Underpinning the instrumentalist claim that creative activities can support social inclusion objectives is the belief that interaction 'with others in art spaces can strengthen social and cultural capital in deprived communities' (Hall, 2013: 247). A relational model connecting sociality, economy and citizenry is articulated in this framing of the spatial power of creative practice. Repositioning the creative economy means its value has been aligned by UK government with contributions to economic growth and urban regeneration, alongside social inclusion of 'hard-to-reach' individuals and communities at the neighbourhood level (see Warren and Jones, 2015; Perry, Smith and Warren, 2015).

Despite a change of UK government in May 2010, policy-makers remain committed to the idea that strong social ties are the foundation for well-functioning neighbourhoods. Indeed, the concepts of 'decentralisation', 'localism' and the 'Big Society' have been deployed as part of rhetoric around devolving state power to local communities (see Bailey and Pill, 2011; DCLG, 2010a). Localist measures may encourage a range of activities within neighbourhoods but are unsupported by significant public spending (Crisp, 2013: 326). Richardson and Durose (2013) have argued that more needs to be done by the Department

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for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to encourage and support community governance in a context of decentralisation and a wider drive for localism. Further issues arise from labelling particular groups as disadvantaged or hard-to-reach which ‘relies on constructing a dichotomy between the mainstream and the marginalised’ (Durose et al., 2013: 5–6). Of particular significance here is reflection on the power structures at play within policy and practice-based interventions, along with an acknowledgement of the agency of particular individuals and groups who may ‘choose’ to be marginalised. Connected debates about forms of representation, inclusion and accountability are currently taking place in local authorities and neighbourhoods as we explore next.

### Cultural policy at the city level: Birmingham, UK

Located in the Midlands in central England, Birmingham is the second largest city in the UK with 1.07 million residents. The economic reputation of Birmingham was built on manufacturing; however, the city suffered rapid deindustrialisation losing 191,000 jobs, or 29% of all employment, between 1971 and 1987 (McEwan et al., 2005). During the 1980s and 1990s, Birmingham’s council-led regeneration programmes mirrored those of many British cities based around ‘flagship’ and cultural projects which encouraged public–private partnerships (Andres and Chapain, 2013). City centre urban restructuring projects include the International Convention Centre and Symphony Hall, Brindley Place, the National Indoor Arena, the Bullring shopping centre and, in 2013, the £188.8m Library of Birmingham. Phases of investment in the city centre infrastructure built upon a strong tradition of provision in civic and cultural buildings, such as the founding of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO) under the leadership of Neville Chamberlain in 1920 (Griffiths, 1995: 257). Today, the creative industries remain central to Birmingham’s Big City Plan urban development strategy, which aims to extend the city core by 25% and grow the cultural offer across this expanded area (Birmingham City Council, 2011).

Despite the closure of the regional development agencies, including Advantage West Midlands, a continuum of public–private partnerships as a model for development is evident in Birmingham and the surrounding area from the New Labour government to the current Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition. The Greater Birmingham and North Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership positions the creative economy as a cornerstone of the West Midlands regional economy, with a workforce of more than 55,000 including freelancers, and 38,000 core creatives (Regional Observatory and Vector Research, 2012). Beyond direct impact such as job creation, investment in Birmingham’s cultural activities is calculated by Birmingham Arts Partnerships, a consortium of leading cultural organisations, to contribute £271m to the wider economy, with estimates that every £1 spent on the arts generates £29 return on investment (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2009). Yet despite ongoing city plans for economic restructuring, the urban economy has been weakened further by the recent recession (see Chapain and Comunian, 2011; also see Oakley, 2009b: 122). In fact Birmingham faces some of highest unemployment rates, low skills and starker inequalities in the UK (Cities Outlook, 2013). In certain areas, over 50% of working age people are unemployed with city-wide unemployment twice the national average (DCLG, 2010b: 9).<sup>(1)</sup>

The creative economy may be positioned as central to the future economic growth of the city, but investment in cultural and creative activity has actually fallen in certain areas. Birmingham City Council documented cuts in art sessions in schools by 50% with a further 9% cuts in youth and community settings over the last three years (Birmingham City Council,

<sup>(1)</sup>Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG); The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2010, page 9. Birmingham also has the highest number of people of working age with no formal qualifications out of the eight core cities in the UK (Birmingham City Council, 2013: 12).

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2012).<sup>(2)</sup> Other research on cultural engagement in the city has shown that those aged 16–34 years are less likely to engage than elsewhere in England and non-White engagement in the arts is significantly below average (−11%) (*Ibid.*). Looking ahead these statistics are even more striking given that Birmingham is the youngest city in Europe – 37% of the population are under the age of 24 – and superdiverse, with an ethnicity profile that is projected to be majority minority by 2020 (Birmingham City Council, 2013). Low levels of diverse engagement measured in local authority research are further accentuated by national policy decisions such as the abolition of educational maintenance allowance and the rise in tuition fees in higher education.

In a series of spending cuts in 2010–2011, Birmingham City Council withdrew core funding from all cultural organisations except for 10 large institutions, predominantly based in the city centre. More recently, partly to readdress a concentration of resources in the city centre, the council have established Arts Champion and Arts Fora groups, funding cultural organisations and arts networks to work across the 10 districts of Birmingham on a rotating three-year basis. Targeting areas outside the city core, this policy is part of a wider agenda to address low cultural engagement through the *Culture on Your Doorstep* initiative. To gain funding under the scheme, artists and organisations must satisfy criteria that their proposed cultural and creative work will support the Council's wider objectives for improving civic participation and social cohesion in areas with multiple social deprivations. Participation rates and financial support pledged by private companies were the primary measures by which the success of the pilots was assessed in the *Cultivating Culture* symposium hosted by the Council in March 2014.<sup>(3)</sup>

*Culture on Your Doorstep* shows a continuum of urban network governance where public–private partnerships are actively fostered; however, it also demonstrates a new move towards cultural governance beyond the city centre to regenerate previously marginalised and high-diversity areas by engaging local actors (Blanco, 2013; Griffiths et al., 2003). This local government focus on the scale of the neighbourhood and community engagement is taking place in the context of significant new legislation (Bailey and Pill, 2011). The recent Localism Act 2011 (sections 15–20) allows ministers to devolve greater power to local authorities. The Localism Act grants powers to increase local authority and community control over local governance and funding allocations. One example is in neighbourhood planning where communities can – albeit with many centrally dictated constraints – prepare a land-use development plan for their area (Layard, 2012). In a similar vein, neighbourhood community budgeting aims to help join together budgets between national and local authority with other public sector bodies.<sup>(4)</sup> Otherwise referred to as place-based budgeting, the pilot is intended to empower local service users and to save costs; a central policy driver under the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition and subsequent Conservative-led government.

Yet substantial cuts to local authorities' budgets means that despite a greater legislative distribution of power, funds to deliver changes have been put under pressure. In a city with high levels of social deprivation, Birmingham City Council has faced some of the severest cuts in the UK to its local authority budget. In contrast to the policy drift signalled by neighbourhood planning and the community budgeting pilots, the council has not yet shown commitment to devolving power in cultural governance. Instead of reflecting the localisation of national strategies, therefore, these pilots in Birmingham demonstrate scalar variation in cultural governance with situationally negotiated elements in the practices of intermediation at the local level, even in times of austerity.

<sup>(2)</sup>Total turnover from the sector has reduced by 13% since 2008–2009.

<sup>(3)</sup>*Cultivating Culture* Symposium, Library of Birmingham, 18 March 2014.

<sup>(4)</sup>The Community budgeting pilots are being trialled in Birmingham's Balsall Heath, Castle Vale and Shard End. In Balsall Heath, both the Neighbourhood Budgeting pilot and Neighbourhood Plan are led by Balsall Heath Neighbourhood Forum.

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### **The role of cultural intermediation at the neighbourhood level: Balsall Heath, Birmingham**

The case studies in this paper are intended to provide insight into the ways in which more peripheral, emerging grass-roots cultural practice intersects with local cultural policy. Balsall Heath is one of Birmingham's Priority Neighbourhoods, which means it has been identified as falling within the worst 5% nationally for multiple deprivations.<sup>(5)</sup> Located 2.5 miles south of the city-centre, Balsall Heath has a diverse population of around 15,000. It is situated within Sparkbrook ward where residents recorded themselves as 62% of Asian origin, 12% White, 11% Black and 10% Arab (Census 2011). Challenges of worklessness are acute with 36.5% economically active and in employment, and no adults in employment in 41% of households.

Despite a high proportion of residents facing multiple challenges, Balsall Heath has been recognised in the city and nationally as a model for community-led action. Stimulating greater community governance of local issues appears a desirable solution in Birmingham where local state governing is impeded by the scale of the council (it is the largest in Europe), and a fast-changing super-diverse population. *Ort*, which brands itself as an 'artist and community café', is emblematic of local initiatives that show how art is being used to develop links with new communities in the neighbourhood. Opened in November 2011, *Ort* was initially reliant on gifting networks such as freeserve and volunteering; however, the adjoined gallery has since been awarded Arts Council England funding for a 12-month programme.<sup>(6)</sup> The neighbourhood of Balsall Heath has also been selected as the case study area for this project because it is the only place in the UK piloting both neighbourhood development planning and neighbourhood community budgeting.<sup>(7)</sup>

The research presented in this article is based on semi-structured interviews and meetings with the assistant director of culture commissioning and arts officers of Birmingham City Council, and the independent consultant for the Balsall Heath Culture Commissioning Pilots. These interviews form part of a 45 interview series which was undertaken in 2012–2013 with policy-makers, council officers, cultural organisation workers (at all levels including directors, education and outreach and project officers), arts practitioners and independent consultants who work in the cultural and creative sector in Birmingham. Ethnographic field-based research involving site visits, attending events and participating in Balsall Heath's local cultural steering group has been further supplemented with a desk-based creative economy mapping of cultural intermediation activity across the city. The methods used operationalised our research questions by providing different vantage points on the cultural ecology of the creative economy, in particular the fissures in how state and non-state intermediaries represent their practice with disadvantaged communities, and the actual processes and outcomes of this work.

#### **Case study #1: Balsall Heath community cultural pilot**

In 2012–2013, Birmingham City council's culture commissioning service established community cultural pilots in three areas of the city: Balsall Heath, Shard End and Castle Vale. An area approach was adopted by the council to increase access and engagement with cultural provision while avoiding targeting specific groups of people. A marked majority-

<sup>(5)</sup>City-wide the council has identified 25 Priority Neighbourhoods below the level of districts and wards. They are then grouped together to form neighbourhoods of a population up to 15,000.

<sup>(6)</sup>After initially being rejected, funding from the Arts Council for *Ort* was awarded for a second programme of events in April 2014.

<sup>(7)</sup>Neighbourhood Community Budget pilots were launched at the 2011 LGA annual conference the Government and followed in October 2011 by publication of the Community Budgets Prospectus, which resulted in 10 areas being selected to pilot neighbourhood community budgets: Birmingham – Castle Vale, Balsall Heath, Shard End; Bradford – Little Horton; Westminster – Queens Park; Hammersmith and Fulham – White City; Tower Hamlets – Poplar Harca; Haverhill; Ilfracombe; Kingston – Norbiton; Newcastle – Cowgate, Kenton Bar and Montague; Tunbridge Wells – Sherwood.

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minority demographic is a core characteristic of Balsall Heath, however, which means that in practice the local state cultural pilots took both an area and community-based approach.

The cultural pilots were framed by two core objectives: first, to grow cultural participation in Priority Neighbourhoods; second, to empower communities to take ownership of local cultural and arts activities. By targeting Priority Neighbourhoods in the east of the city, the stated aim was to distribute funding away from the city centre.<sup>(8)</sup> Commissioning creative activity in local areas is considered by the authority to be an important step towards engaging more diverse people with culture and the arts. The cultural commissioning team intended the pilots to demonstrate ‘capacity development’ through participation that contributes to the creative economy by skills development and jobs creation. Yet despite claiming that the methodology takes a bottom-up approach, the design and intended outcomes have been overseen by local government in a non-participatory way.

Birmingham City Council designed the community pilots and then commissioned three independent consultants in the creative sector (one per each area) to undertake community research, drawing together community-led recommendations about which cultural and arts activities should be supported. The community-led credentials of the research were compromised by the inclusion of an independent intermediary, but it should be noted that the artistic and mediatory expertise of the consultant was well received (Artist in Cultural Steering Group, Interview 11/09/13). Ultimately, the goal of local people commissioning their own activities, networks and events was undermined by the council retaining authority over releasing funding. Approximately £20,000 was originally allocated to each of the three pilot areas. In the case of Balsall Heath, the council reviewed the recommendations, commissioning one contract to St. Paul’s Community Development Trust and allocating £7000 for specific contracts.

Warren acted as a resident/researcher delegate on the Balsall Heath Cultural Steering Group which was established by the consultant responsible for ‘community-led’ research in the area. As the Steering Group was open to all residents, Warren attended to gain insight into the processes deployed to stimulate local cultural governance. It was evident that the scheme helped to develop a local infrastructure and identify cultural leaders from the area to support future participation. Nevertheless, there appeared to be a discrepancy between the recommendations made by the consultant on behalf of community representatives and the final council actions agreed by a non-representative panel of Birmingham City Council managers – comprising senior managers, community-based budget managers and culture commissioning managers. The culture commissioning pilots cannot realistically be considered as community-led given the mediation of consultants and commissioning roles of council officers.

Artists and arts organisations dismissed the pilot, with little evidence of decision-making devolved to those who took part in the consultation process. As one artist stated:

It’s proving to be a real headache... For me it boils down to issues of governance. The city council are finding it really hard to give over their power and control to how the money is going to be spent. It reveals a real issue of what is happening in that department. (Artist in Cultural Steering Group, Interview 11/09/13)

The structural tension of the Community Commission Pilots is that the culture team at the council still maintains power over decisions, shaping the delivery and narrativising the outcomes of cultural projects. Evaluation and commissions appear to be a move towards community governance; however, the council applied its own representative structure and objectives, which hollow out the extent to which power, decision-making and accountability are effectively distributed locally in the creative economy (see Richardson and Durose, 2013).

<sup>(8)</sup>In 2013–2014, Birmingham City Council will fund over £7m to the revenue clients (of which £4m go to the Birmingham Museums Trust) and £80k to support local arts activity.

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Instead of heralding a new form of ‘Third Way’ local governance that answers the rigidities of council bureaucracy and addresses inequalities in the sector, the opportunity to incorporate a more diverse group into policy-making and cultural governance was missed (see Blanco, 2013: 277; Rhodes, 1997; Stoker, 2004). Not simply is the issue about misrepresentations of processes and inflation of collaborative governance, it also potentially impacts upon the radicality of outcomes. As we show in the following case study, elements of innovative cultural intermediation processes established in those neighbourhoods were ultimately lost in part because of competing motivating factors and also because of the local authority’s inflexibility on the goals of governing the cultural and creative sector. Indicative of this disconnect in effectively localising urban cultural governance is the reality that the Balsall Heath Steering Group failed to meet again after the duration of the pilot.

#### **Case study #2: Balsall Heath Biennale**

Balsall Heath Biennale was a two-year programme of events, workshops and exhibitions which explores what it means to be artists working locally in a multi-cultural area of Birmingham. Run by two artists, Balsall Heath Biennale was conceived in response to the ‘particularities of locality’ and consciously situated within the context of the localism act (2011) (Interview with Balsall Heath Biennale, 24/01/2013). In fact, the artists designed a games-based consultation with local residents as part of the Biennale to act as a parallel line of enquiry to the Balsall Heath neighbourhood planning pilot. Between March and August 2012, this consultation helped to develop a set of co-produced projects realised in the final programme which ran July to September 2013. Following their consultation, the artists reflected that a balance needed to be struck between engaging neighbours who were ‘suspicious’ of contemporary art without ‘alienating’ them (Interview with Balsall Heath Biennale, 24/01/2013). A network of public, community and local business spaces were used to stage events in order to support community engagement including: *Ort; The Hillac Restaurant*; Calthorpe Park; Balsall Heath Church Centre and Balsall Heath Library.

The professional expertise and authority of the organising artists – central to the status of cultural intermediaries and to the effective delivery of their work – was manifested most clearly by the free Balsall Heath Art School which ran over a period of 10 weeks introducing participants to contemporary art practice. The art partnership observed that access opportunities were being reduced through changes in the school curriculum. Therefore they wanted to create spaces and pathways in which ‘people from different backgrounds’ could ‘find out’ about contemporary art (Interview with Balsall Heath Biennale, 9/05/2013). On one level, this can be read as an example of intermediary and local community actors working together to create a space for engagement with the creative economy beyond the direct dictate of local government policy. At the same time, it responds to the withdrawal of more conventional funding for arts education, with the intermediation processes serving to fill a gap in state provision.

The Art School is a central element of the cultural programme where impact is interwoven by participation and educational events. Each of the components of the Biennale was conceptualised to raise people’s pride in the local area, attend to environmental issues (particularly littering and dumping), along with marketing Balsall Heath as a potential visitor destination; 6000 copies of the community newspaper were printed and posted through local residents’ doors to advertise the Biennale, including the Art School. The newspaper was written in both English and Urdu. Balsall Heath Biennale was not framed as a normative art Biennale; instead it was conceived as a way of ‘celebrating, regenerating and drawing attention to the area’ (Interview with Balsall Heath Biennale, 24/01/2013). Together the site-specific artistic interventions took an area-based approach to engaging disadvantaged communities that aimed to catalyse neighbourhood planning in new and unpredictable ways.

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Notably, the design of the Balsall Heath Biennale was structured in recognition of the unstable funding climate of cultural activity in the UK, and especially in Birmingham. By creating 15 components, each with multiple levels of activities, the artist partnership produced a model that could be scaled down with components removed or adapted if one or more funding streams were rejected. By connecting artistic, educational and social cohesion agendas the Biennale successfully gained funding from a combination of government, public sector and third sector bodies, including: Arts Council England, Birmingham City Council, Near Neighbours (DCLG); West Midlands Police Force and Community First. The prospective social and cultural value of the Balsall Heath Biennale was widely recognised by funders, but a resulting question must be posed on what kinds of impact were achievable in a finite programme. As one artist in the partnership acknowledged, the neighbourhood is 'multi-cultural not inter-cultural' and it 'takes time to build bridges' (Interview with Balsall Heath Biennale, 9/05/2013), for which a two-year project is a start rather than conclusion.

### Rethinking community-based action in the creative urban economy

Cultural intermediation can be framed as a 'solution' to a perceived political issue that communities categorised as 'hard-to-reach' or socially excluded do not contribute tangibly to society as active citizens. Under the critical lens is not whether greater opportunity and economic solvency could benefit more people, which is clear, but to understand the limitations of existing support to address the structural and networked inequalities that are part of the current economic system. Culture can become eclipsed by the argument of the economic, as a further issue, which limits recognition on the breadth and richness of culture, risking a flattening and narrowing of the forms it may take and people it must reach if publicly funded. In Birmingham, this has resulted in the presumption that more non-White, less educated and poorer people need to be engaged with *mainstream* cultural and creative activity in a way that is *quantifiable*.

We argue that the distinction between state and non-state intermediaries is increasingly unclear given cross-public and public-private partnerships in urban governance networks, which is also impacting upon cultural governance at the local level. The role of 'non-state' cultural intermediaries, such as commissioning artists, is employed as a strategic solution during times of austerity to support the delivery of local state objectives on socio-economic exclusion and a broader policy narrative on localism. In turn, it has been acknowledged that state and non-state intermediaries in the cultural sector 'openly present themselves as... tacticians and pragmatists concerned less with the implementation of the creative industries agenda than its détournement to cultural ends' (O'Connor, 2013: 3). In the case of Balsall Heath Biennale, one of the artists justified the inclusion of projects 'on the periphery of arts' on environmental issues such as littering, arguing pragmatically that 'we'll just have to contextualize [it]' (Interview with Balsall Heath Biennale, 9/05/2013). This kind of hybrid intermediation stems from overlapping but not identical motivations for utilising creative practice by practitioners, local state actors and funding bodies. As the artist reflects, one of the funders was 'not very interested in the product outcome, they're interested in the process, to get these different groups of people to speak and work with each other'.<sup>(9)</sup> Despite attempts to negotiate different terms of practice within funding structures, intermediaries operate as part of the politicised field underpinning brokerage in the creative economy. Even where funding applications are directed by pragmatism there is at least a degree of complicity between intermediaries and the creative economy growth and inclusion drive which needs to be acknowledged.

What is striking in the aims and objectives of the case studies are the ways in which 'independent' cultural practice start to action the same kinds of objectives as local state

<sup>(9)</sup>A discrepancy operates, therefore, in the central emphasis on use-value by actors from the council, embedded within a moral and social economy, with the balancing of use-value and exchange-value by the artists in order to maintain recognition in the international aesthetic economy.

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cultural policy. In the case of Balsall Heath Biennale, inter-cultural community projects and regeneration activity mirrors national government pilots around the localism agenda and local policy on community cohesion in a multi-cultural city. For instance, building stronger connections with neighbours was necessary for the realisation of the project: ‘The bin bags as an art idea only works if it has the support of the people who were going to use it, so we needed that dialogue with neighbours to activate them’ (Interview with Balsall Heath Biennale, 9/05/2013). Co-production activities in the Biennale have strong synergies with the intent of policy pilots on community-led action, with both requiring civic engagement at the local level. They also reveal comparable difficulties and blockages in achieving these aims given social fragmentation that can occur in areas of multiple deprivation, with high inflows and outflows, and ethnic and religious difference.

Of particular interest, then, is how and why creative methods are utilised to engage local communities in a time of economic austerity. It is clear that the sometimes uneasy relationship between state and non-state actors in cultural intermediation processes is not simply a reflection of attempts at an administrative fiat in the governance system. In fact by continually negotiating degrees of artistic independence from policy objectives, a question can be raised of whether the relationship between creative practitioners and the state has been rendered a kind of ‘cynical realism’ (Zizek, 1989), where tactical manoeuvring by non-state intermediaries in the creative industries is a ‘new form of lip service to the treasury that hands out the funds’ (O’Connor, 2013: 8).

Ultimately, this paper seeks to propose an alternative lens through which to view the blurred lines between state and non-state cultural intermediation at the local level. Returning to variants of a cultural-political economy approach engaged earlier in the article, cultural intermediation can be viewed as a means by which spaces within the broader creative economy are renegotiated and adapted by cultural ideas (see O’Connor, 2013; Taylor, 2013). If cultural democracy is to work more effectively, the cultural ecology of a city must be nurtured with cultural governance broadened and power distributed, including wider representation on funding and decision-making boards (see Holden and Demos, 2008). In the attempts presented of collaborative cultural governance at the local level there risks a damaging short-term thinking by state and non-state actors where a mismatch of priorities means disadvantaged communities remain largely disconnected from occasional or one-off projects.<sup>(10)</sup> We further challenge why intermediation processes are still being shaped by modes of governance directed by the local state that seeks to harness creative activities for pre-decided social and political outcomes, despite savage reductions in the availability of public funding.

### **Conclusion: The future of intermediation in the creative economy?**

The creative economy comprises multiple forms of transaction and relations which require measures of value beyond capital growth (see O’Connor, 2013; Taylor, 2013). A local state policy focus on marginalised communities and tight budgets in a time of austerity is resulting in partial and fragmented forms of intermediation that are unlikely on their own to overcome barriers to accessing jobs, skills and educational development in the creative economy in a sustained way. Two key points are raised for cultural policy: (a) The dynamic and social potential of the creative economy must be recognised as about more than simply economic growth; (b) within a prevailing political context that privileges the economic there are structural failings that are disadvantaging whole groups from benefitting despite more localised action.

<sup>(10)</sup> Furthermore, the identified mismatch in the collaborative governance of the local creative economy also raises a question of what agency disadvantaged communities have in intermediation processes, which is the focus of the next stage in our wider AHRC-funded Connected Communities research project [Grant number AH/J005320/1].

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This paper has drawn upon two interlinked case studies to show how cultural intermediation practice is being deployed within wider policy agendas around localism and social exclusion in the city of Birmingham. The examination of the Community Cultural Pilot demonstrated that the local authority is reluctant to surrender power to local residents in commissioning creative activity in their own areas, despite lip service to a localism agenda. Birmingham City Council recognises the benefits of co-productive community-led cultural commissioning yet is still retaining a high degree of control over mainstream creative activity taking place across the city. Nonetheless, it must be remembered that this is happening in the context of a city council required to save £600m in austerity cuts, meaning that the Culture Commissioning team is negotiating their own future as well as the sustainability of publicly funded culture in the city.

Of course, where cultural intermediation activities are dependent on public sources for some or all of their funding, then it should come as no surprise that these will continue to operate in dialogue with prevailing political agendas. The freelance artists and independent consultants discussed here as key actors in cultural intermediation processes are effectively taking on the social responsibilities of the state to provide disadvantaged communities pathways into accessing cultural activity. This capturing of priorities and objectives is familiar from shadow state discourses. What is significant is the extent to which the deep cuts of austerity politics have not yet erased the power of the state to shape the activities of non-state actors operating in these areas. In Birmingham, despite funding cuts even major cultural organisations such as the CBSO are being required to do more to engage communities in cultural activities through Birmingham City Council's Arts Champion projects.

The way that the local state continues to influence the activity of cultural intermediaries raises a number of problems. Connections between local state, intermediaries and disadvantaged individuals and groups tend to be relatively unstable given project-by-project funding and high turnover rate in the sector. A third of those interviewed for this research have since moved on to new projects, moved city or been made redundant. Without proper venues and working on a project-by-project basis, there is a major question over whether artists and consultants are actually best-placed to take on complex community-orientated programmes to meet social cohesion needs identified by local authorities and policy-makers.

A bigger point, perhaps, is whether pragmatically chasing funding schemes tied to state objectives dilutes the radical potentiality offered by art-makers as opposed to policy-makers. Indeed, can artists and organisations challenge societal norms if cultural intermediation in this context has simply become a strategic means of connecting the disconnected (i.e. capitalistically 'failed') into a monetary market-based creative economy? In catalysing active cultural engagement at the local level, cultural intermediation can thus be observed to drive highly politicised ecologies of local regeneration and community cohesion through creative methods, instead of creating new counter-cultural spaces of practice. O'Connor has observed in a connected point that creativity does not restrict itself to the creative sector, or knowledge economy, but may 'pervade economy and society more generally' (O'Connor, 2013: 11; Oakley 2013). Thus creativity is more than work stimulated and inspired by cultural workers. Through this lens cultural intermediaries, particularly as they are implicated in reproducing state discourses on the market economy, may be rendered an obstacle in connecting diverse communities with a variety of cultural and creative forms (see O'Connor, 2013).

There is doubtless a vacuum of creative leadership in Birmingham as austerity reduces the importance of the city council as both funder and commissioner. Accordingly, a charge has been issued that instead of acting as an enabler of creative practice, the Council is now a somewhat disruptive influence, attempting to impose its will just as it loses its grip on creative activity (Andres and Chapain, 2013: 171). To end this paper on a more hopeful note, however, these unstable times offer a moment where a situational renegotiation of the

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relationship between artist-led cultural intermediation, disadvantaged communities and the local state is possible. At the local level, cultural intermediaries can play a larger role to ‘shape and regulate’, ‘organize and govern’ the creative economy (Van Heur and Jacob, 2013). A cultural intermediation less wedded to local state economic growth, and urban development strategy can promote a vision of the creative economy operating beyond monetised market-value and narrowly defined social inclusion targets. We propose that by negotiating tensions around cultural value and disadvantaged groups, intermediaries can help stimulate grass-roots level action that opens potentialities for improved neighbourhoods, as part of a more community-orientated creative economy.

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