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The Domestication of Open Government Data Advocacy in the UK: A Neo-Gramsican Analysis

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The article adopts a neo-Gramscian analytical framework developed in the field of International Political Economy in order to analyze the relationship between an online collective of civil society actors and UK government policy makers in the case of the UK's Open Government Data initiative. The aim of the article is to consider the neo-Gramscian notion of trasformismo as a useful conceptual tool for exploring the relations between the OGD advocates and policy makers within the UK state. Empirical evidence is presented which suggests that the notion of trasformismo is able to illuminate some of the political processes of absorption, adaptation and distortion which have emerged during the development of the UK's OGD initiative, and which have functioned to restrict the counter-hegemonic potential of OGD in order to shape the initiative towards a distinctly neoliberal framework for action.

KEYWORDS: Open Government Data, Information Policy, Gramsci, Hegemony, trasformismo, UK

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Introduction

Since the mid-2000s, the idea of Open Government Data (OGD) has emerged in the United Kingdom as a strong demand on the state emanating from a growing minority of civil society and state-based actors. A key foundation for this growing demand has been the development of a collective of predominantly civil society actors with a strong online presence. Initial observations suggest that these OGD advocates have been relatively successful in at least elements of their agenda of 'opening' up public data, and have managed to embed themselves into the policy-making fringes of the UK state, and other hegemonic institutions such as the

European Commission and World Bank. A liberal pluralist interpretation of these developments might be relatively positive, following the lead, for example, of Ruggie's (2002) analysis of the influence of the alter-globalization movement on the United Nations' adoption of a corporate social responsibility policy, or Bomberg's (2007) analysis of the relationship between environmental campaigners and European Union policy makers. However, in the case of the UK's OGD initiative, critical analyses have questioned the meaning of these successes and the shaping of the initiative towards neoliberal ends, counter to some of the OGD advocates' initial intentions (see Bates 2012; Longo 2011).

With regard to the focus of this special issue on the relationship between online collective action and policy change, the case of OGD advocacy in the UK marks an interesting site of analysis since the OGD advocates exist primarily as a production and policy advisory collective at the interface of civil society and the state, rather than, for example, a protest group outside hegemonic neoliberal institutions. Further, the OGD advocates are marked by significant heterogeneity regarding the perceived benefits and outcomes of OGD; an issue that is rarely publicly discussed. This article will begin to explore some of the political processes underway at this nexus of state–civil society activity, with the intention of exploring the process of domestication of the OGD agenda into the logic of the UK's neoliberal state as the initiative has evolved.

In recent years there has been a much needed emphasis on the discursive aspects of collective action and social change, for example, those inspired by Melucci's (1992) work on the analysis of new social movements, and Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) radical democratic re-interpretation of Gramsci. However, this discursive turn has often been at the expense of appreciating the influence of more material factors such as institutions and resources. In an attempt to draw on the benefits of both approaches in the analysis of collective action, a neo-Gramscian analytical framework is proposed which recognizes that the "historical structure" that social agents confront is made up of three interacting forces: material capabilities, ideas, and institutions (Cox 1981, 135-136). As will be discussed below, it is also perceived that the neo-Gramscian framework is particularly insightful with regard to the specific case of OGD, and the current historical conditions of economic crisis and growing distrust in political and economic elites. The aim of the article is to consider specifically the neo-Gramscian notion of trasformismo, developed primarily through work in neo-Gramscian International Political Economy, as a useful conceptual tool for exploring the relations between the OGD advocates and policy makers within the UK state. Trasformismo refers to the political process by which potentially counter-hegemonic ideas and activities are adapted and absorbed into hegemonic frameworks for action, particularly during periods of hegemonic fragility. It will be argued that such processes are at play in the case of the UK's OGD initiative,

and that the trasformismo process is leading to restrictions on the counter-hegemonic potential of OGD and those social agents that may activate such potential.

The arguments made in this article are based on case study data collected primarily during 2011. Interviews with 21 OGD advocates were undertaken between February and July 2011. Of these, 11 were civil society OGD advocates (of which four are defined as 'core' advocates due to their activity on a relevant government advisory panel, and the remaining seven are defined as 'peripheral' advocates), five were local government employees, four were civil servants, and one represented the corporate Public Sector Information Re-use sector. The interviews aimed to gain understanding of the emergence of the OGD initiative; the ideas, grievances, and activities of the civil society advocates and how they functioned as a network of actors; and, how the state-based actors engaged with the phenomena and responded to the ideas put forward by OGD advocates. Due to the sensitive political nature of some of the discussions all interviews were carried out on the condition of interviewees' anonymity. This was designed to promote more open discussion with interviewees. Interview data referred to in the body of the article is therefore cited with reference to the category of interviewee (for example, Core Civil Society; Local Government etc.), rather than individual names or identifiers. In order to understand the broader environments and communities that these interviewees were engaged in and to keep up to date with developments in the field, a range of OGD events were attended, including local Open Data groups, international Open Government Data camps, Open Knowledge Festivals, and a number of short OGD-specific events organized by, for example, universities and Government Departments. Further, a key OGD mailing list—open-government@okfn.org—was followed. This was complemented by desk research on any emerging policy issues and developments.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. Firstly, key concepts from the neo-Gramscian analytical framework are introduced and discussed in relation to the current context of neoliberal capitalist hegemony. An account of the emergence of OGD is then presented and discussed in relation to the neo-Gramsican notions of hegemony and counter-hegemony. The empirical data is then presented and discussed, first focusing on the trasformismo strategies and processes of 'ideational distortion,' and then those of 'institutional absorption' that are evident in the development of the OGD initiative.

The Neo-Gramscian Framework

The concept of hegemony is a Gramscian term that has been drawn on by a range of critical scholars, and is therefore the most useful place to begin outlining the

neo-Gramscian analytical approach. Gramsci describes the 'moment' of hegemony in the following terms:

> "It is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies come into contact and confrontation with one another, until only one of them—or, at least, a single combination of them—tends to prevail, to dominate, to spread across the entire field, bringing about, in addition to economic and political unity, intellectual and moral unity, not on a corporate but on a universal level: the hegemony of a fundamental social group over the subordinate groups." (Gramsci 1992a, 179-180)

Morton (2007, 93) describes how hegemony refers to a situation of generalized consent within a population for the 'framework for action' articulated by the capitalist classes: "the citizenry come to believe that authority over their lives emanates from the self." As Femia (1981, 38) articulates, this Gramscian notion of consent is one of "conscious attachment to, or agreement with, certain core elements of the society," rather than fear of non-conformity. Critically, it is in the realm of civil society that consent to such a 'framework for action' tends to be manufactured. It is the combination of civil society and the more coercive practices of political society that make up the notion of the "integral state" (Gramsci 1992b, 75). Thus, it is important not simply to reduce the analysis to a struggle between civil society and the (neoliberal) state.

Femia (1981, 46-47) articulates three different levels of Gramscian hegemony: integral, decadent, and minimal. During periods of "integral hegemony" there is substantial unity and consent within the population, and the relationship between rulers and ruled is "organic" in nature: "without contradictions or antagonisms on either a social or ethical level" (Femia 1981, 46). Such conditions of "integral hegemony," Femia (1981, 47) points out, are not present in modern capitalist societies since the rulers are not "capable of representing, or furthering, everyone's interest" within the class-based capitalist system. In contemporary conditions, therefore, "widespread cultural and political integration is fragile," and has generally been representative of the second level of hegemony: "decadent hegemony." At this level, the common sense of the people is not in full alignment with the ruling classes and social tensions exist below the surface. A breakdown in consent beyond this level would result in the most restricted form of hegemony: a "minimal hegemony." In such conditions, hegemony would be based upon the ideological unity of elites (economic, political, and intellectual) in combination with distaste for popular participation and a lack of broad-based consent for the agenda of the ruling classes.

Whilst the notion of hegemony is the most commonly applied of the Gramscian concepts, significant work has been undertaken in the field of neo-

Gramscian International Political Economy (IPE) which draws on the work of Cox (1981; 1983) to develop the ideas of passive revolution and trasformismo in relation to the era of neoliberal globalization (see, for example, Bieler and Morton 2001; Moore 2007; Morton 2007; Paterson 2009). In situations of hegemonic crisis, or when there has been a failure of elites to gain popular consent (that is, a minimal hegemony) these neo-Gramscian theorists argue that conditions of passive revolution can ensue. Drawing on Gramsci, Cox (1983, 165-166) argues that if new social relations are not fully "worked out," a situation of passive revolution occurs in which changes are implemented in a top-down fashion with no "arousal of popular forces."

Moore (2007) describes how within such conditions "elite-generated activities" are present that enable a political strategy of trasformismo, or adaptation and co-optation of the population to new capitalist norms. As Femia (1981) and Cox (1983) elaborate, trasformismo frequently involves the incorporation of leaders of potentially counter-hegemonic forces into the institutions of the ruling class—thus "decapitating" the popular forces and restricting their ability to build their grievances into a coherent, counter-hegemonic project (Cox 1983, 47). Further, as Paterson (2009) discusses, these processes of trasformismo often go much further than the incorporation of leaders into elite institutions, to also involve processes of "ideational distortion" in which, citing Cox, elites engage in the "domesticating of potentially dangerous ideas by adjusting them to the dominant coalition" (Cox 1983, 166-167). This "ideological strategy" Paterson (2009, 47) argues, aims to "win over the protesting popular movements as a whole so they come to consent to the dictates of existing political institutions." Such political processes should be understood as aimed at (re)generating consent for reconstituted capitalist social relations, but without realistically embracing the interests of non-elite classes and social groups (Morton 2007, 64).

These notions of passive revolution and trasformismo have most commonly been utilized within neo-Gramscian International Political Economy to analyze the adoption of neoliberal capitalism within peripheral economies (Moore 2007; Morton 2007), and in relation to the institutions of global capitalism (Paterson 2009). However, it is argued here that the concepts are also useful for analyzing political processes within a core global economy enduring a period of crisis that could potentially lead to a deepening breakdown in consent for the hegemonic political economic project. The current financial and economic crises that have engulfed neoliberal capitalism and the UK Government's response to these issues can be perceived as disruptive to the base of consent for neoliberal hegemony in the UK. More broadly, the longer-term breakdown in trust for neoliberal democratic political systems is well documented (see, for example, Dalton 2004). In the UK, such issues are also exemplified in relation to the

public's response to specific political crises, including anger regarding the invasion of Iraq (2003) and ongoing war in Afghanistan (2001–), the MPs Expenses Scandal (2009), and the relations between political, police and media elites emerging in the phone hacking scandal and Leveson inquiry (2011–2012). Combined, these factors can be argued to risk a significant fracturing of consent for the UK's neoliberal hegemonic project. Coming back to Femia's categorization of integral, decadent, and minimal forms of hegemony, on the continuum between integral and minimal hegemony the situation of the neoliberal project in the UK shows signs of moving in the direction of a minimal hegemony. Such an observation is supported, if in less theoretical terms, by a range of commentators including Ed Miliband, leader of the opposition Labour Party (Miliband 2012). Whilst neo-Gramscian theorists have tended to argue that conditions of passive revolution align with conditions of minimal hegemony, it is proposed here that such conditions and the respective strategy of trasformismo can also be present during a period of fracturing consent that political elites perceive could lead to a breakdown in consent and the emergence of a strong counter-hegemonic political project.

Opening Public Data

Open Government Data refers to the re-use of datasets that are produced by the public sector, government, and regulatory bodies. It includes major public datasets such as mapping, land use, public transport, company registration, and government spending data, as well as smaller datasets such as the location of local council services. The type of data involved is valuable for a number of reasons, including the generation of substantial economic value, state transparency, informing public sector decision making, and general interest.

The Open Government Data 'movement' which emerged around 2004–2005 draws together a mixture of state transparency and open government activists focused on enhancing democratic processes (Davies 2010; OKFN and Access-Info 2010); open knowledge and information commons advocates (OKFN and Access-Info 2010); social and commercial entrepreneurs, micro enterprises, and SMEs (Davies 2010); and, technologists active in the field of linked data and the Semantic Web (Tinati et al. 2011). This group of predominantly civil society actors has converged, through utilization of online communication technologies and the organization of corresponding offline communities (Coleman 2011; Davies 2010), to demand that the government 'open' public datasets for re-use, by proactively publishing them online in technically open formats, and allowing free or marginal cost re-use licensed through use of an 'Open Definition'

(http://opendefinition.org/okd) conformant license that allows both commercial and non-commercial re-use without barriers.

Whilst in the UK there has been a right to access some of this data since the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) came into law in 2005 (and prior to this for environmental information), data accessed in this way was not licensed for re-use and was often not provided in machine readable formats (the new 2012 Right to Data amendment of the FOIA attempts to change this). Further, whilst data (or, information based upon the data) was legally accessible, it was not always proactively published; often somebody needed to make a request for the data/information in order to gain access to it. In terms of re-use of public data, the development of the Click-Use license in 2001 aimed to make the process of re-using some types of Public Sector Information (PSI) for both commercial and non-commercial purposes easier by creating a free-of-charge transactional licensing process for those wanting to re-use some public datasets. Further, the transposition of the EU Directive on Re-use of Public Sector Information which came into force in 2005 made it a legal obligation that PSI produced as part of a public bodies' 'public task' should be made available for commercial and non-commercial re-use without discrimination, although charging was permitted.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of OGD advocates inside and outside the state, key issues remained which revolved around charging for re-use licenses, the lack of proactive publishing of data, the difficulty of getting data in machine readable formats, the digitalization of public data by private companies who then claimed IPR on databases, and other restrictive practices being employed by public bodies and employees that prevented OGD advocates and others from re-using public data for both commercial and non-commercial purposes. In particular, a key issue for many OGD advocates in the UK has been re-use of data with a high commercial value produced by public sector Trading Funds (Hogge 2010; Mayo and Steinberg 2007; Newbery, Bently, and Pollock 2008). These Trading Funds must gain at least 50 percent of their revenue from the commercial exploitation of the goods and services they produce; they include the Ordnance Survey, which produces mapping data, the Met Office (weather data), and Companies House (data about registered companies). Other OGD advocates more closely tied to the transparency movement have also experienced restrictions in their efforts to source re-usable environmental datasets that are collected by a variety of public and private bodies. Further, others have struggled to access and re-use the data behind the Strategic Arms Export Controls website, which they eventually overcame by 'scraping' the data directly from documents available on the website (Davies 2012).

These restrictions on the open re-use of public data encountered by OGD advocates can be understood as being rooted in a historical structure that has

fundamentally favored the interests of political and economic elites. The range of historical factors shaping this structure is broad—moving from the historically secretive nature of the UK state, to the increasing commercialization of information, prioritization of capitalist interests, and changes in state revenue generation during the neoliberal era. Further, even when there has been a will to open data by public bodies, these restrictive processes are often found embedded in the technologies and everyday practices of information management within public institutions (see, for example, Screene 2005; Shepherd, Stevenson, and Flinn 2010).

In analyzing the OGD initiative it is important to understand its emergence within this structural context. Critical scholars have long pointed to the anti-democratic nature of the process of commercializing and otherwise restricting access to public information. Observing the emerging situation in the US in the 1980s, Herbert Schiller argued that the principle of free access to information was

> "being steadily weakened [and] ability to pay increasingly has become the organising mechanism for acquiring, processing, and disseminating governmental and all other kinds of information (...) As the idea of information as a good for sale, a commodity, advances, the idea of information as a social good, the cornerstone of democratic life, recedes." (Schiller 1991, 44)

Whilst the emphasis on free re-use, not simply access and use, of public data is relatively new, and can be understood as linked to the development of, and increased access to, technologies that can interrogate large datasets, from a democratic perspective the basis of the argument is the same. Principally, the monopolization of information production (in this case, using public data) by those who are enabled either as a result of institutional attachment or ability to pay is anti-democratic, and can be understood as a factor in the (re)production of the hegemonic project. Opening public data for re-use by anybody broadens the range of social agents able to use the data to develop understanding of phenomena, and thus restricts the hegemonic reproduction of knowledge by dominant institutions. This, of course, does not suggest that anybody is able to re-use the data; only that the potential for counter-hegemonic information production is expanded. It is this critical point which positions some form of OGD as a necessary, but not sufficient, element of any progressive egalitarian political project which runs counter to neoliberal capitalist hegemony (although certainly questions need to be asked about the framework for opening data for commercial re-use and the regulatory environment within which such re-use exists). Therefore, for some groups and individuals, to engage in OGD-related activity might be perceived as engaging in a form of counter-hegemonic "war of

position"—that is, attempting to "build[] up the strength of the social foundations of a new state" within the structural constraints of the old (Cox 1983, 165).

The OGD proposal, however, in the current political economic conditions also has the potential to be shaped towards furthering the ends of the neoliberal project. As discussed in Bates (2012) and Longo (2011), the UK Government is interested in the benefits of OGD in relation to informing the wholesale marketization of public services as part of the Open Public Services Agenda, and leveraging growth and innovation in the financial industries and Smart Cities developments. Further, as Worthy (2010) has argued, access to some form of government information has been a cornerstone of the UK Government's attempt to reverse the fragmenting trust of citizens in government institutions for well over a decade; a process that must also be understood in relation to the Gramscian notion of hegemony as consent. It is at this complex historical juncture that the OGD initiative and those aiming to shape its outcomes exist. The article will now go on to present empirical data suggesting that in the case of the OGD initiative in the UK, political processes have been underway which have attempted to domesticate the OGD agenda through a process of trasformismo, restricting the counter-hegemonic potential of the initiative in order to shape it to decidedly neoliberal ends.

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"Ideational Distortion" within the UK's OGD Initiative

Paterson (2009, 47) describes a key aspect of the trasformismo process as a policy of "ideational distortion," in which consent is constructed through "reflecting the normative language of the protesters and ideas back at the public:"

> "The ideas and language of those individuals and organisations that mobilise public support for systemic change are absorbed and then written into official documents, policies and procedures of the target political institutions (…) The language and rhetoric change (…) but the principles that determine the substance of the policies and procedures of the institutions do not change (…) In doing so a new 'common sense' is established and consent constructed." (Paterson 2009, 47)

The ideational milieu of OGD advocacy is a complex space, and space restrictions do not permit a full elaboration here. However, put simply by one OGD advocate:

> "There's the far left in there, there's the fars of the economic right, there's all sorts of different ideological commitments but they're unified in 'we

> want some more data,' so we're going to have this shared movement." (Interview: Peripheral Civil Society)

The discursive space of OGD can therefore be understood as being highly politicized, with a range of social actors aiming to leverage OGD for their own individual and socio-political agendas; however, whilst there is awareness of these issues amongst some advocates, public discussion is rare, with advocates tending towards a relatively uncritical public discourse (Bates 2012). Such a space, it is claimed, results in significant vulnerability to strategies of "ideational distortion" by elite groups attempting to domesticate the counter-hegemonic potential of OGD.

At the most basic level, this process is apparent in the adoption of the discourse of "openness" and "transparency" by the UK's new Coalition government that came to power in May 2010. Here we see not only the high-level push for Open Government Data, but also the Open Public Services policy[1]and the emergence of the Open Government Partnership[2], as well as a more generalized political discourse about the benefits of "openness" per se. A similar phenomenon emerges in relation to the discourse of "transparency," which has become strongly intertwined with the push for "openness." Here, we have the formation of a Transparency Board[3], and the overarching Transparency Agenda[4] under which all of these open and transparency policies and discourses find their home. What is interesting about this discourse of openness and transparency is that whilst it draws on the discourse of actors with a potentially disruptive subject position in relation to aspects of neoliberal hegemony, it attempts to leverage their ideas to enable a strictly neoliberal agenda. As one core OGD advocate recognized, the OGD supporters in Government

> "seem even more committed to this agenda of openness and something like transparency than I am." (Interview: Core Civil Society, author emphasis)

This "something like transparency" has been one which aims to enable and inform the opening of capitalist markets (or, new spaces of capital accumulation) by opening (or, making transparent) data produced by public bodies, at the same time as attempting to (re)generate consent and legitimacy for the neoliberal project via a discourse of "transparency" and "openness." Thus, as articulated by

[1] http://www.openpublicservices.cabinetoffice.gov.uk (November 11, 2012)
[2] http://www.opengovpartnership.org (November 11, 2012)
[3] http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/content/public-sector-transparency-board-who's-who (November 11, 2012)
[4] http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/transparency (November 11, 2012)

OGD advocate Daniel Dietrich below, the underlying neoliberal substance runs counter to the intentions of many of the original OGD advocates:

> "Most Transparency advocates would reject the ideas of outsourcing and privatisation we now have to realize that some people argue for exactly this under the name of open government (...) I think the Open Government / Transparency / Open Data Movements should be clear that our demand for an open Government, for Open Data and more Transparency and Participation is not the same than others' advocacy for outsourcing and privatisation in the name of Government efficiency under a neoliberal agenda." (Daniel Dietrich, OKFN)[5]

Comment [DS2]: punctuation?

I've check the original, and this is a direct quotation from the mailing list

I'd feel more comfortable leaving it as it is if possible.

The adoption of the discourse of "openness" and "transparency" might therefore be understood as a strategy of trasformismo by "ideational distortion" being enacted by the Coalition government (alongside other neoliberal institutions such as the World Bank). Further, this process of "ideational distortion" is more subtly apparent in the discourses of "participation" that are strongly embedded within the ideational constructs of many OGD advocates in both civil society and the state. Whilst at a surface level, support for more participative forms of governance emerges from both civil society and state-based OGD advocates, on closer inspection there are significant divergences in the substance of the constructs behind the term.

Amongst those embodying some form of egalitarian political energy—and, thus holding some form of disruptive potential with regard to neoliberal hegemony—in relation to their engagement with OGD, 'participation' tended to be constructed within a democratic frame of reference and as a challenge to the centralization of decision-making processes by political and economic elites during the neoliberal era:

> "Citizens should be in charge and they're not at the moment (...) It's out of our hands. This is what I worry—I worry that everything that is happening about government is not in our hands at all." (Interview: Peripheral Civil Society)

> "What I'm really interested in, in the long term, is in participation. For example, having mechanisms for citizens to be able to make real

[5] Open-government mailing list, 26 August, 2011, http://lists.okfn.org/pipermail/open-government/2011-August/001448.html. Date accessed, 30 August, 2011.

decisions, possibly more at the local level, using real data." (Interview: Peripheral Civil Society)

"It is social engineering—they [public bodies/local authorities] don't want people in the way, they don't want people to have access to the same amount of information, and it's so obvious (...) I think creating parity and equality as far as having access to information and data is essential in that… because it will enable people to stand up for themselves." (Interview: Peripheral Civil Society)

"The central thing is at the moment we have huge amounts of asymmetries of information. The amount of information—for you to effect something in government in a consultation, whether it's to do with a planning application in local government or things like that." (Interview: Core Civil Society)

"We think of ourselves as being about empowering people." (Interview: Core Civil Society)

Whilst many of these OGD advocates did not believe that opening data would automatically lead to increased participation, nor, for some, that participation itself was an unproblematic concept, they did perceive it as necessary for democratizing decision-making processes and thus challenging the restrictive forms of neoliberal governance that have become hegemonic over the last thirty years (see, for example, Cox 1996; Gill 1992; Morton 2007; and Murphy 2000 for further elaboration of neoliberal governance).

An overlapping interest in "participation" was discernible in the discourse of state-based OGD advocates; however, in general, the substance of the arguments differed from those above. Indeed, the more democratic participative ideals envisaged by some of the OGD advocates were ridiculed by one state-based OGD advocate:

"The whole debate around participatory budgeting is a farce (...)" (Interview: Local Government)

A number of state-based actors were instead interested in the relationship between participation, transparency, and citizen trust:

"It's fundamentally a political initiative, driven in large part by elected politicians' view that trust in government can only be maintained these days if government is more open and transparent, and that's why

> politicians are prepared to be so masochistic about it." (Andrew Stott, former Director for Transparency and Digital Engagement, Cabinet Office)[6]

> "And again the trust there, if we can say that we are being totally frank with people then they're more likely to get engaged." (Interview: Local Government)

This notion of trust enabled by participation and transparency can be understood in relation to the desire of supporters of the neoliberal state to (re)build political consent amongst the population. Further, it can be understood as an attempt to engage in an absorptive strategy of trasformismo via participation and engagement across a much broader field than OGD.

The notion of participation was also articulated in relation to the need to build consent around the austerity drive in public service provision:

> "We've become much more dependent upon the public accepting that we can't deliver services the way we did anymore. If they don't come on board and join in with us in developing the future services, we will suffer as a result." (Theresa Grant, Acting Chief Executive of Trafford Council)[7]

Further, some saw the benefit of OGD for informing citizens' participation in the emerging markets for public services provision, an agenda closely tied with the government's own plan to leverage an "Open Public Services" market through provision of OGD (Bates 2012):

> "It's opening up the choice for people (...) there's an app (...) where you've got all the care homes and you can go on there and you can check what was the last rating of this and how clean is it and what are your chances of getting MRSA in a particular hospital, and that coupled with (…) some of the government legislation on opening up choice to people, so you can go to the hospital you want to, you can go to the doctor you want to." (Interview: Local Government)

[6] "Challenging Openness" session, FutureEverything conference, Manchester, 12-13 May 2011.
[7] "Challenging Openness" session, FutureEverything conference, Manchester, 12-13 May 2011.

The intention here is not to generalize to the extent of claiming that all civil society OGD advocates are working towards the construction of a wholly counter-hegemonic participative form of democracy, and all state-based OGD advocates a hegemonic neoliberal notion of participation; neither is it to claim that there is homogeneity in political expression in either of these two groups—there is not. Nonetheless, interview data did suggest a trend towards differing interpretations of participation between the civil society and state-based OGD advocates. Further, the pattern of this trend suggested that the participative discourse of citizens challenging the anti-democratic processes of the neoliberal state was being "reflected" by state-based OGD advocates, but in a way that further entrenched the neoliberal logic of the UK state. It is therefore argued that processes of trasformismo by ideational distortion are present around the discourses of 'participation'—as well as 'openness' and 'transparency'—in the UK's OGD initiative, and that this is tied to a deeper and broader strategy of trasformismo beyond the specific domain of the OGD agenda. Critically, it is therefore important to consider whether if the civil society OGD advocates' efforts to embed more democratic participatory processes are successful—but in the context of continuities in the rest of the neoliberal project, rather than empowering citizens—would such participation instead serve a legitimating function, empowering the hegemonic system over the participating agents, in the manner of an absorptive form of trasformismo? Further, it is important to understand that some civil society advocates will likely be content with enhancing their own political agency, rather than a more widespread notion of social change; a much easier political project given the socially privileged makeup of the OGD community.

Institutional Absorption within the OGD Initiative

Absorptive processes of trasformismo were observed by Gramsci as a complementary strategy to that of distorting the ideational terrain. He argued, for example, that the people in the poverty stricken South of Italy were effectively politically "decapitated" through the absorption of talented individuals from the South into the capitalist institutions of the North via a process of trasformismo. More recently, Cox (1983, 173) used this concept to explore processes "in the manner of trasformismo" in relation to International Organizations. He argued that the absorption of talented individuals from peripheral countries into International Organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, OECD, and ILO was effectively a co-optative process that restricted the political maneuverability of peripheral countries in the global economy, and legitimized the actions of these International Organizations. Whilst Cox discusses processes of trasformismo at

the international level, similar arguments might be constructed regarding the absorptive processes at play in the OGD initiative in the UK context.

It is not the fundamentally counter-hegemonic beliefs of these 'absorbed' individuals that are central to the process of trasformismo—after all, those individuals that Gramsci and Cox refer to were not hardened revolutionaries, and it is unlikely that they would have wanted or been given access to such roles if they had been. Rather, it is that they have the potential to mobilize social actors in order to challenge systemic elements of the hegemonic project and promote more egalitarian social relations. Cox (1983, 173) argued that although such individuals may enter hegemonic institutions with the intention of changing the system from within, in reality they are "condemned to work within the structures of passive revolution." In effect they become adapted to the demands and requirements of the hegemonic system, rather than being able to instigate fundamental and wide-ranging reforms. This section will now go on to explore some of these absorptive processes apparent in the OGD initiative.

Core civil society OGD advocates that were selected to join government advisory panels such as the Public Sector Transparency Board and Local Public Data Panel can be understood as the primary individuals relevant to absorptive processes of trasformismo in the case of the OGD initiative. Interviews with these OGD advocates during the first half of 2011 evidenced different interpretations of their relationship with the UK state. Whilst recognizing the differentiation evident in the discourses of transparency—discussed above—one advocate was still overwhelmingly positive about the relationship:

> "It has been very positive in that I've been very impressed personally (…) Francis Maude and even the Prime Minister and therefore his advisors seem even more committed to this agenda of openness and something like transparency than I am. I mean that's been fantastic." (Interview: Core Civil Society)

Another core civil society advocate was more restrained, but still hopeful that things were changing:

> "The politicians can be more enthusiastic and kind of demanding than the civil service can be capable of delivering (…) now [after the election of the new Coalition government in 2010] there are—the politicians are more demanding because they're more into it and I hope that—I think the civil service is creaking a bit more as it tries to respond." (Interview: Core Civil Society)

A further core civil society advocate, however, was frustrated with the process:

> "They are trying to square the circle. They are trying to open up data and at the same time sweat the assets." (Interview: Core Civil Society)

As another interviewee described, this core OGD advocate was perceived to be

> "Really, really at the end of their tether with government, because he just *doesn't* understand why things can't happen." (Interview: Local Government)

These interviews were undertaken within the first year of the new Coalition government (February–July 2011), and observations suggest that since this time the initial hopefulness of the first two of the set of four advocates quoted above has dissipated somewhat. For some core OGD advocates a key barrier has been around the opening up of Trading Fund data, with some core OGD advocates now organizing with others under the banner of a Coalition for a Public Interest Data Policy with this as a key initial issue. For others, a growing frustration regarding the co-optation of the initiative into a strongly neoliberal framework, as discussed in Bates (2012), has also been reported.

Other more peripheral advocates also reported a frustration that the Coalition government had "kind of hijacked the transparency agenda to kind of (…) pull apart the public sector, in a way" (Interview: Peripheral Civil Society); nevertheless, they were still heavily engaged in a form of consensus-orientated advocacy for OGD at the local level:

> "One of the approaches that I decided on very early within this was it had to be consensual, it had to be working with local authorities to release data rather than the traditional I would say activisty—My Society, What Do They Know—type approach." (Interview: Peripheral Civil Society)

As one local government official working with this peripheral advocate articulated:

> "I went along to the first meeting of the [Open Data Group], and was amazed really at how (…) people automatically assume that data is being hidden (…) And, quite frankly I was shocked at the level of negativity towards—me! (...) But I think the local data community (…) certainly are a bit more understanding than they were—certainly [X] who leads [Open

> Data Group] is, I feel, a little bit more understanding about the sort of problems in local government. He's been in here quite a few times (…)" (Interview: Local Government)

This process of being drawn into the logic of public sector data holders was also reported by a further state-based OGD advocate:

> "It's quite interesting for me, because over the time I'm trying not to go native [in relation to public data holders] (…) that's been quite interesting, where you start from a position of hostility and conflict and tension, you come to a position of understanding—go a little bit native. And, so, I guess that's happened to a certain degree with developers as well, is that they have more understanding." (Interview: Local Government)

What is evidenced here is a process of domestication and de-radicalizing of some of the OGD advocates and their demands as they have begun to engage more with public data holders. Whilst for some public bodies, a lack of engagement with aspects of the OGD agenda might be interpreted as a strategy to resist the attack on the public sector emanating from central Government, in the cases discussed here this was not the case: both the local authorities concerned had a strong Conservative leadership, and were keen to implement the agenda of central Government. Thus, it was into the logic of uncritical neoliberal state institutions that these developers and OGD advocates were being drawn.

Further, it is apparent that significant institutional barriers are in place, which have restricted the influence of 'absorbed' OGD advocates within the decision-making process. These barriers include institutions such as the Official Secrets Act, which have prevented OGD advocates attending significant meetings (Interview: Peripheral Civil Society). Further, the policy-making nexus around the controversial Trading Fund data shifted towards the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and HM Treasury, and away from civil society OGD advocates on the Transparency Board and other advisory panels connected to the Cabinet Office and The National Archives. As one interviewee highlighted, this significantly limited the influence of the OGD advocates:

> "We were told—your voice as a movement is in the Transparency Board [by] people in the Cabinet—and people in gov—politicians. But what we were told is—people in the Transparency Board said—well, we are not really having the discussions—it is Business—the Department of Business and the Treasury." (Interviews: Peripheral Civil Society)

As one core OGD advocate perceived,

> "The Cabinet Office is not very strong; the power sits with the vertical—the House, Treasury, these people—and the Cabinet Office, well, pfh." (Interview: Core Civil Society)

Such a perception is echoed by those in the neo-Gramscian International Political Economy tradition who have argued that during the neoliberal era "those state agencies in close contact with the global economy—offices of presidents and prime ministers, treasuries, central banks—have gained precedence over those agencies closest to domestic public policy" (Morton 2007, 125). The shifting of OGD policy decision making towards HM Treasury and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, thus represents the reinforcing of the influence of representatives of the global economic elite, and a restriction on the influence of the civil society OGD policy advisors who were absorbed into government advisory panels. This process has been further embedded through the appointment, in 2012, of individuals with significant connections to the global economic elite into key Cabinet Office positions. For example, Tim Kelsey was appointed as Executive Director of Transparency and Open Data at the Cabinet Office (in office from January to July 2012) after a two-year period at McKinsey, a global management consultancy firm with significant influence on the neoliberal policies of the UK Government. Further, in a fascinating absorptive twist, the new civil society Coalition for a Public Interest Data Policy, which was formed by those frustrated about continuing restrictions on opening public data, elected Chris Yiu to be their representative on a seat they had negotiated on the new Data Strategy Board.

The election of Yiu evidences a complexity in some of the processes of trasformismo at work in the OGD initiative. Yiu is currently Head of the Digital Government Unit at Policy Exchange—a leading center-right think tank set up by Cabinet Office Minster and OGD advocate Francis Maude and other Conservative Minsters in 2002. However, prior to this he has also worked for McKinsey.[8] Whilst no empirical research has been conducted on the election of Yiu other than general observations, the decision appears to represent a significant absorption of neoliberal state and corporate interests by this civil society OGD group, and highlights a multi-directional absorptive process at work in the development of the initiative. Further research would need to be conducted to ascertain how civil society OGD advocates have interpreted—or, indeed, whether they have been aware of—this process. It is questionable whether many civil society OGD advocates are particularly knowledgeable about the political agendas of Policy

[8] http://www.bis.gov.uk/transparency/data-strategy-board/board-members

Exchange and McKinsey, or their connections with the UK government and corporate interests.

For those OGD advocates with a more critical interpretation regarding the potential of OGD to challenge key elements of the neoliberal hegemonic project, the understanding of these absorptive processes has been mixed:

> "Open data—its people that have managed to embed themselves into the fringes of government (…) that is very good, but it's got some problems. That is that when the tide turns, many of the—I mean they are not going to (...) they can't react." (Interview: Peripheral Civil Society)

For this advocate, therefore, whilst short-term benefits were perceived from this type of engagement, there was a wider appreciation that the co-optative processes of trasformismo that restrict political maneuverability would move into play at some point.

A further peripheral advocate argued that many of their OGD friends recognized "a system out there manipulating" people, which they believed they could change in part by instituting OGD. However, these friends did not understand that they could only get OGD by

> "conform[ing] under certain criteria, [therefore] what they are going to end up with is something totally else from what they wanted or they thought they were going to get." (Interview: Peripheral Civil Society)

Indeed, this peripheral advocate observed that

> "The system and establishment, or at least part of the establishment, can be very clever and very well informed. That means they know how to buy them [OGD advocates] out (…) I know some excellent people who have decided deliberately to close their eyes and not to act on what they see—they are capable of seeing the flaws, but they cannot act because they are paid by—they are employed by—the people that give them work doing Open Government Data will not employ them if they start being too inquisitive about what is being done." (Interview: Peripheral Civil Society)

This advocate therefore questioned the agency and potential impact of those being drawn into working relationships with the neoliberal state. Indeed, the advocate's description echoes the observations of those in the neo-Gramscian tradition who have observed processes of trasformismo by absorption of talented individuals into "positions that ensure they will not be able to activate change"

(Paterson 2009, 47) in a range of other situations. Despite such concerns, a number of these peripheral OGD advocates have been engaged in applying for positions on the new Open Data User Group panel in 2012, and in the process which led to Yiu being elected as the Data Strategy Board representative, evidencing a somewhat ambivalent attitude with regard to the agency of individuals engaging in such activities.

What is clear from the discussion above is that there have been a range of strategies to absorb key civil society OGD advocates and groups into the institutions and logics of the UK's neoliberal state and policy-making community. This process has been complemented by restricting some decision making to institutions, such as HM Treasury and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, which OGD advocates are distanced from, and the appointment of individuals representing the interests of global economic elites into institutional environments, such as the Cabinet Office, that OGD advocates had begun to be absorbed into.

Conclusion

From a liberal pluralist perspective, the apparent increase in influence of the UK's OGD advocates into parts of the UK's policy community might be interpreted as a significant achievement that has offered recognition of and engagement with the OGD agenda. However, such an approach does not take into account the conflicting interpretations of how OGD might be useful, enabling, or indeed necessary for, a range of political projects including the reproduction of the neoliberal hegemonic project. Empirical data demonstrates, for example, that for some advocates OGD was perceived as an egalitarian challenge to centralized forms of political decision making and restrictive forms of information 'ownership' in general; however, for others, it was perceived as leveraging public service marketization and a form of civic participation that was directed at building consent for the neoliberal state.

Moving away from a liberal pluralist interpretation, the neo-Gramscian concept of trasformismo has been drawn on to explore the political processes and relations between different groups of advocates engaged in the development of the initiative in the UK. Empirical data was presented that suggested that in the case of the UK's OGD initiative two key categories of trasformismo had been activated by those aiming to shape the initiative towards more neoliberal ends. Strategies of "ideational distortion" are evident, whereby the key terms of the OGD advocates engaged in attempting to challenge the anti-democratic form of neoliberal governance—for example, "openness," "transparency," and "participation"—have been adopted by the government and state institutions and

reflected back at society, but with a deflection in meaning in order that they have come increasingly to signify marketization and trust formation, rather than democratization. Further, complex patterns of institutional absorption are discernible in which key members of the OGD initiative have been drawn into relatively restricted working relationships with neoliberal state institutions at both a national and local level. Evidence has been presented to suggest an adaptation of some of the advocates' ideas and demands to the requirements of such institutions, and a growing frustration from some regarding a lack of influence in key areas of public data policy development. Further evidence was presented that suggested that decision making on public data policy was being increasingly shaped by those state institutions (that is, HM Treasury and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills) and new senior appointees (that is, Tim Kelsey at the Cabinet Office) with close links to the global economic elite. Such a process was also shown to have reproduced itself in the civil society domain, in the election of Chris Yiu to the new Data Strategy Board by the new Coalition for a Public Interest Data Policy.

In conclusion, the neo-Gramscian approach, in its attempt to explore the complexities in power relations and political processes at this site of interaction between spaces of counter-hegemonic potential and hegemonic institutions, offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding the development of the OGD initiative in the UK, without suggesting that those engaged in it are universally radical in their counter-hegemonic intent. It is argued that in the case of the OGD initiative in the UK these processes of trasformismo can be understood as a form of institutional firewall erected to protect the interests of economic elites from the potentially disruptive advances of this particular collective of online actors. The notion of trasformismo is a useful conceptual tool to illuminate some of the processes of absorption, adaptation, and distortion that exist in such spaces. In the case of OGD in the UK, it has been used to illuminate some of the processes that are restricting the counter-hegemonic potential of OGD in order to shape the initiative towards ends compatible with those of neoliberal capitalism.

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