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Ethnographic Insights into Competing Forms of Co-Production: A Case Study of the Politics of Street Trees in a Northern English City

The aim of this article is to explore the link between different notions of co-production. It seeks to emphasise the underlying politics of co-production in the sense of who defines co-production, especially in relation to initial decisions concerning which specific policy areas are deemed suitable for co-designing, co-creating or co-delivering with services users or local communities. We argue that the rejection of co-production by government may in inflame political resentment and reconfirm negative pre-existing attitudes about 'the establishment'. This is particularly problematic when politicians have promoted the rhetoric of 'inclusive governance', 'sharing power', or 'delegating power' but then reject the co-productive claims emerging from such statements. The study contributes to existing work by analyzing what happens when co-productive structures are terminated or when public protests demand the re-institutionalisation of those relationships. We make this contribution by presenting findings from an ethnographic case study involving street trees in a large English city. We suggest these specific findings have a broader relevance.

KEYWORDS
GOVERNANCE; RESISTANCE;
NARRATIVES; CO-PRODUCTION; ETHNOGRAPHY.

Concern about the emergence of a 'democratic crisis' that dates back several decades has increased and poses distinctive questions for the design and delivery of public services. In this context, the co-production of public services has emerged as a way of closing the gap that seems to have grown between the governors and the governed. The aim of this article is to explore the link between different forms of co-production through ethnographic methods. It seeks to contribute to scholarship examining what happens when co-production fails, or when governments either renege upon commitments to co-design, co-deliver or evaluate public services collectively with local communities or terminate co-productive governance arrangements. We argue that eviscerating co-productive institutions may reconfirm negative pre-existing attitudes about 'political elites' and contribute to public disaffection and demands for the devolution of powers to communities and service users. We suggest this is particularly problematic when politicians have promoted the rhetoric of 'inclusive governance', but then implement forms of marketisation that reject the ambition of co-production as a principle (see also Carson, 2008). We contribute to existing literature by presenting early findings from an ethnographic study of a case study involving street trees in a large English city. We suggest these specific findings have broader implications for the analysis of contemporary democratic governance.

This research is presented through five inter-related sections. The first section identifies a gap in existing studies promoting a 'political' approach to co-production. We suggest that while existing literature shows co-production has inherently 'political' roots, it has not shown what happens when governments row back on implementing co-productive institutions. We therefore offer the notion of 'co-production-as-resistance' to highlight potential for conflict

and counter-claims. The second section moves to a descriptive focus on the rejection of co-productive claims made by local communities in the city of Sheffield. This is a controversy attracting international attention (Monbiot, 2017) and provides a valuable opportunity open-up the 'black box' of (co-productive) policy-making. Our aim is to facilitate a deeper understanding of the underlying roots of tensions within co-productive processes. We achieve this by utilising insights from over 50 hours of ethnographic fieldwork (the focus of the third section). The fourth section presents the main findings of this research in a unique manner through a form of curated 'character scripts' that unpack complex webs of beliefs and understandings about what co-production means from multiple perspectives. The final section then reflects on some of the broader implications of this research.

CO-PRODUCTION-AS-RESISTANCE

The initiation of co-productive relationships in designing and delivering public services is generally viewed as a way of re-engaging local communities, building trust with service-users, drawing on previously untapped civic capacities, and various forms of 'democratic innovation' (Smith, 2009) or 'direct public engagement' (Nabatchi and Amsler, 2014). That is 'innovation that promotes a mix of public service agents and citizens/users who contribute to the provision of a public service' (Pestoff, 2014, p.383). At its most ambitious, co-production can include 'situations where individuals are personally and actively engaged in a process' (Nabatchi and Amsler, 2014, p.3) This is how we can define co-production in an 'institutional' manner. Our focus, however, is *on what happens when those institutional forms break down*. We argue that when institutional modes of co-production are scaled back (for example during a period of austerity), this may provoke a public backlash insisting on the need for institutional co-production. We refer to this the emergence of 'co-production-as-resistance'.

In doing so, we build on existing studies of the success/failure of co-production as a set of institutional innovations (institutional co-production) by examining how citizens contest attempts by authorities at drawing boundaries around 'legitimate' sites of innovation (co-production-as-resistance). This field of enquiry includes the termination of pre-existing co-design frameworks or rejection of co-productive claims in new policy areas. What reasons might governors offer to legitimate the rejection of co-productive claims by communities? Is it possible for local communities or user-groups to challenge such 'executive blockages'? If so, how and through what processes? What are the trade-offs and dilemmas that politicians face when dealing with co-productive demands? By asking these questions we seek to further existing research that sees co-production as an essentially *political* process (Fuji-Johnson, 2015; Stewart, 2016; Carson, 2008).

Existing literature has recently focused on the limitations of institutional co-productive initiatives. Ellen Stewart's (2016, pp.121-122) study of participatory initiatives in UK health policy suggests 'institutions and individuals who "do participation" … also specify the boundaries of acceptable 'view' or 'experience' to move forward within the process'. Genevieve Fuji-Johnson's (2015, p.4) *Democratic Illusion* also finds in the Canadian context that 'the ways in which [co-productive] procedures were implemented served in thwarting their deliberative democratic aims', while Caroline Lee (2015) shows how co-production has been co-opted to serve private sector interests – what she calls 'do it yourself democracy'. These studies tend to be critical of the implementation of 'co-production-in-practice', while still retaining an ideal position that co-productive initiatives *might* achieve their aims in the future. 'In most contexts, the organizations and leaders who possess the resources and authority to create significant participatory governance initiatives' as Archon Fung has argued 'simply lacks the motivation to advance social justice through those projects' (2015, p.521). Criticisms have, for example, been made of the limitations of co-production in the UK government's 'Big Society' initiative (Martin, 2012) and the engagement of patients in 'co-

productive' health policy initiatives (Carter and Martin, 2017). There are fewer attempts, however, at analysing what happens when otherwise productive and empowering efforts at co-production are scaled back. Lyn Carson's (2008, p.8) work stands out, arguing that while more 'mainstream' literature tends to assume co-production occurs in 'invited spaces' (the state invites citizens to co-produce policy in a range of forums), in reality these end up being *insisted spaces* – citizens have to 'insist' they are heard by creating their own arenas for debate. In other words, when co-production fails institutionally, citizens react by resisting the reversion to other institutional arrangements.

We argue that the contemporary focus on co-production has altered the political space surrounding the delivery of public services in the sense that participatory claims are now more likely to be made; and the rejection of participatory claims may lead to forms of resistance, or what Carson (2008) would call 'insistence'. We label this the emergence of 'co-production-as-resistance' and define it as *the utilisation of a cultural belief in democratic collective action that can be mobilised to resist top-down and often market-driven policies that have emerged through little or no engagement with affected communities and to demand a stronger role in the co-design of public policy*. 'Resistance' in this sense is both positive and negative: negative in the sense of actively rejecting certain state-sponsored initiatives; positive in the sense of energising communities and promoting civic engagement in order to change the governing equilibrium.

Table 1: Co-Production: A New Taxonomy

	Institutional Co-Production	**Co-Production-as-Resistance**
Orientation to democracy	Democratic 'innovation'	Democratic 'ideal'
Essence	Controlling, framing, restraining, mediating	Disruptive, countering, re-imagining
Rationale	Reconciling democratic ideals in practice	Opposing institutional practice on the basis of democratic ideals
Emphasis	Partnership 'Inter-dependence-of producer-consumer'	Protest 'Defiance-as- democratic-pressure'
Street Tree Management Policy	1996-2013 *Formal district-level consultation via Area Panels* *[Democratic Services]*	2013-2018 *Deadlock and Fuzzy Governance* *[Privatised Services]*
Key literature	Pestoff, 2014	Carson, 2008

Table 1 (above) seeks to clarify certain elements of 'co-production-as-resistance' by comparing it with a more formalised form of co-production. CP1 refers to those more formalised participatory initiatives and structures that are set up by the state in order to facilitate public engagement around a specific policy, decision or suite of policies that relates to a specified geographical area. The modern management fashion for co-production is therefore a core element of what we term CP1 and has been a growing theme in public management (Pestoff, 2014). CP2, however, refers back to the original aims of co-production as an ambitious effort to empower citizens against formal institutional constraints (Carson, 2008). It refers to the emergence of resistance and its impact on anti-political sentiment, and the next section focuses on the emergence of 'co-production-as-resistance' in an empirical case study.

THE POLITICS OF SHEFFIELD'S STREET TREES

The shift towards co-producing public services is the latest phase of the blurring of boundaries between public, private, third and community sectors. The United Kingdom has always been at the forefront of this agenda and it is unsurprising that the co-production of public services is currently an administrative fashion within the public sector. The Local Government Association's *New Conversations: LGA Guide to Engagement* (2017), for example, provides step-by-step guidance for local authorities and frames co-production in terms of its money-saving and public trust-building potential. Indeed, it encourages local authorities not just to embrace co-production but to 'surpass expectations'. 'There is very clearly a public appetite to participate in consultation, be involved in the co-design of services and other processes, in influencing and shaping plans and actions' the *State of Sheffield 2017* report concluded '[M]ore should be done to inform people, engage them in developing policy and contributing to service provision.' This pronouncement paradoxically overlooks how a significant section of the city's population had in fact been campaigning *for* a greater role in *co-designing* a specific local service for several years. The controversy surrounding the maintenance of Sheffield's street trees had attracted international attention, fuelled widespread civic protest and had even attracted celebrity interventions (Barkham, 2017).

Sheffield is known as a 'green city'. It sits at the edge of the Pennines and a third of the city sits within a national park. The city is home to over 250 parks, woodlands and gardens and has a long-standing reputation for the quality of its 36,000 street trees, many of which were planted in the Victorian or Edwardian period by community groups to celebrate specific events, or as memorials. From 2011 onwards the impact of the national Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government's austerity programme, led to far-reaching cutbacks in public funding. Between 2011 and 2015 Sheffield City Council's budget was reduced by almost a third in real terms (2017/18 will be the seventh year of budget cuts with cumulative spending cuts totaling over £350m – the equivalent to running all parks and countryside managed by the council an estimated sixty times over). This made it one of the hardest hit councils in the United Kingdom and in an attempt to deliver public services at a lower cost in 2012 the Labour Council signed a 25-year Private Finance Initiative (PFI) contract with Amey, a private company, for pavement and highways maintenance. Although detailed accounts of the subsequent controversy concerning street trees can be found online, the root of the debate focuses upon a rather esoteric definitional issue concerning the classification of a tree as 'discriminatory'.

Decisions over the pruning or removal of street trees generally involve their classification into one of six categories: 'dead', 'dying', 'diseased', 'dangerous', 'damaging' or 'discriminatory' (known as the '6D' framework). 'Discriminatory' refers to a tree that might be deemed to be causing a threat in some way by, for example, disturbing kerbs, cracking pavements or blocking paths. A tree survey commissioned by Amey in 2012 suggested that of the city's 36,000 street trees around 1,000 were vulnerable under this framework and 5,000 required some form of maintenance. The approach adopted by Amey has generally been to fell any tree requiring work and at the time of writing (February 2018) 5,700 of those trees originally identified as requiring maintenance had been felled. Although tree felling had been taking place across Sheffield for some time the first major public protest occurred in January 2014 when a 450 year old Melbourne Veteran Oak was felled – in the face of public protests and a report by an independent arboreal specialist stating that the tree was structurally sound. Within weeks protest groups had been formed all over the city in the hope of persuading Amey and the council to work with local communities to co-produce a new street trees policy. These co-productive claims were rejected and civic resistance grew across the city in the form of civic protests, large-scale public rallies, complaints, petitions, legal action and campaigning. The main issue revolved around Amey's approach to tree management. Big old trees, like big old houses cost more to maintain (saplings, like new build houses, generally require no or very little maintenance for decades); and re-engineering the pavement or road around a tree is obviously more expensive than simply removing the tree. During a 25 year contract there is a clear financial logic in felling the mature tree stock as quickly as possible,

irrespective of whether they are healthy or not, to reduce maintenance costs in the remainder of the contract. Protestors therefore argued healthy trees were being felled for commercial reasons and engineering options not being considered.

The claims of protestors are supported by a significant amount of expert evidence. Even Sheffield City Council and Amey have admitted that the majority of the trees removed or scheduled for felling are completely healthy. A survey report by Crane (2016) highlighted how professional standards of arboricultural ‘good practice’ have not been followed and there are no genuine practical reasons for removing most of the trees. Very often two adjacent trees may exhibit the same degree of disruption to kerbs etc. but only one is condemned. In January 2017 the Institute of Chartered Foresters published a report stating:

> Sheffield was widely hailed as one of Europe’s greenest cities, but it is rapidly gaining an international reputation as the place where they are felling street trees on an industrial scale. Local democracy seems to be unraveling before an international audience as the wishes of local communities are ignored and healthy trees with decades of life left in them are felled causing significant loss of tree benefits. It is a political problem and it will be for the politicians to find a solution, with issues way beyond the remit for tree experts to resolve (Barrell, 2017).

A further report in March 2017 by qualified arborists supported the damming conclusions of previous expert reports. It also calculated that using the standard Capital Asset Value for Amenity Trees (CAVAT) methodology street trees with a total asset value of over £66 million had been lost to the city for no obvious reason (see also Nielan, 2016). (The council admitted that no asset valuation had been undertaken as part of their approach (SCC, 2016, 1).) Moreover, increasing research is pointing to the value of mature street trees in terms of health and wellbeing, flood protection, air quality and ecological diversity (see, for example, Kardan, et al. 2015). A host of professional bodies, arboriculturalists and technical engineering specialists have all examined the Sheffield Street Tree policy and the conclusion of Steve Frazer (2017), writing for the Landscape Institute, seems from our research to be accurate: ‘That I am aware of, there are no public examples of a technical expert independent of the contract in support of the current council policy for felling.’[i]

Crucially, the full PFI contract between Sheffield City Council and Amey is not available for public scrutiny due to Freedom of Information restrictions under ‘commercial confidentiality’; and further evidence of the challenges faced by local communities in scrutinizing the street trees policy came in the form of a judgment by the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO) that Sheffield City Council had unreasonably refused to provide information in support of their claim that specialist paving had been used to retain 143 street trees (ICO, 2017; see Saul, 2018). The council and Amey have also claimed that documents have been lost or do not exist (e.g. Version 7 of the *Streets Ahead 5-Year Tree Management Strategy* has been published but no previous versions are available and the council claims they do not have copies).[ii] Furthermore, the PFI’s five-year ‘Initial Investment Period’ ended towards the end of 2017 and was marked by a clear upsurge in Amey’s attempts to fell the remaining street trees.[iii] This involved the recruitment of private security specialists to accompany the gangs of tree surgeons, producing anti-protestor promotional videos and launching nighttime raids on specific trees (using hand tools so not to wake the residents).[iv] It is important to note that Amey have been planting trees to replace the mature street trees that they have felled. The problem, however, rests with the lack of any clear rationale for the removal of healthy mature trees in the first place. The reasons provided, such as the lifting of a kerbstone, pavement cracks, bulging roots, are all routine issues in any city and experts suggest can be easily and cheaply addressed without any need to fell the tree (for a detailed review see Townsend, 2017). In September 2017 even the Secretary of State for the Environment made a public intervention by describing Sheffield’s street tree policy as ‘bonkers’ (*Yorkshire Post*, 2017)

The campaigners (Sheffield Tree Action Groups – STAG) are not opposed to felling or maintenance of street trees when there is rational evidence the work is needed. The concern is there is no independent evidence that legitimately justifies Amey's activities and, as such, STAG's primary ambition is to work with Sheffield City Council to co-produce a new street trees policy based on civic engagement. The council has consistently rejected invitations to discuss potential new approaches and even rejected approaches by national figures to mediate the dispute. And yet in its marketing Sheffield City Council continues to promote co-production and its commitment to listening to local communities. 'We will make sure people feel engaged, involved and listened to' Sheffield City Council's *Corporate Plan, 2015-2018* promises because it is 'an in-touch organization: this means listening; being connected and being responsive to a range of people and organisations, ideas and developments'. Although the Council proclaims the importance of co-production through involvement (what we call 'CP1') the tree protestors are adamant there is nothing of the sort – they argue for 'real consultation (the 'insistent' spaces we call 'CP2'). We examined the roots of these conflicting interpretations of what co-production means through ethnographic fieldwork across several sites.

SHAKING THE BAG

The aim of this article is to explore what happens when co-productive institutions are rolled back, and elaborate the forms of 'resistance' against these aims. We contribute to literature critiquing a 'mainstream' approach for seeing co-production as an essentially technical addition to the standard 'policy process' by showing how, once institutionalised forms of co-production are rolled back, co-productive claims become claims of *resistance* ('insisted spaces'). We argue that where co-productive claims by communities or service users are rejected by political elites then this might serve to inflame a process of what we term 'co-production-as-resistance' as those groups insist upon their democratic right to be involved in discussions, design or service delivery. This section argues that a valuable way of drilling-down into the Sheffield case study and, through this, understand *the politics of co-production* is through ethnography.

Ethnography is an 'active' research tradition involving 'deep' or 'partial' immersion through a bricolage of techniques in a range of sites which is less concerned with generalisations than with raising new questions and 'shaking the bag' (Rhodes, 2015). Our aim was to understand why the street trees controversy had occurred and how such a street-level issue had generated international attention. Following a venerable tradition of ethnography in critical policy research, in this project we recovered the meanings of actions by deep immersion, aiming to understand the narratives actors on both sides of the divide deployed – the stories they told – to make sense of the world and validate their positions. The research took place throughout 2017 and into early 2018 and involved a combination of ethnographic interviews and non-participant observation. Twenty-one interviews were undertaken with councillors, local government officials, arboreal specialists and campaigners with each lasting from fifty minutes to three hours. Council meetings were also observed and relevant documentation examined. This was supplemented by 'hit-and-run' fieldwork (repeated, short bursts of intensive observation). In total over eighty hours were dedicated to ethnographic field research (see Appendix A, below).

The aim of this research was very simple: to expose the multiple and competing interpretations of 'the problem' and, through this, (i) understand how and why co-productive claims had on this occasion been rejected (from the perspective of the Council), and (ii) the implications this had for protestors' claims (the 'co-production-as-resistance'). We therefore draw a discursive portrait through the eyes of key actors. In terms of understanding the challenges achieving this ambition three issues deserve brief comment. First, although this

research involved partial immersion and non-participant observation it inevitably involved a 'rather uneasy combination of involvement and attachment' (Fox, 2004, 4). We aimed to 'study through' the case study as it unfolded through complex webs and relationships between actors, institutions and narratives. The 'contact zones' included more formal contexts of council meetings and court hearings, and less formal public meetings through to protests, night time patrols, fundraising festivals, campaign meetings and social events. Moreover, as the relationship between Sheffield City Council and protestors deteriorated, and Amey and its contractors launched 'raids' to fell specific trees, the field research became more difficult and opportunities for observation more sporadic. Nevertheless, the 'hit and run' nature of the fieldwork was sufficient to achieve the aims of the research – to understand the motivations and perspectives of individuals in the Council and the protest group.

Second, this research project was conducted in a sensitive context marked by legal action, surveillance, High Court injunctions, charges of assault, bullying, intimidation, accusations of poisoning, even death threats (Evans, 2018). Maintaining constant field notes was, especially with protestors, a difficult task and participants often demanded total anonymity. We therefore followed established ethnographic best practice (specifically Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995) by combining a two-phase technique. First, in-field 'jottings' were recorded on a one page data-sheet capturing key terms, events, conversations, interpretations, etc. taken as an *aide memoire*, if and when possible depending upon the respective research site. Second, we write up detailed field notes within hours of leaving the research site, where possible utilising the prompts provided by the jottings.

Third, we continued our research until the point when we felt we had stopped recording interesting data and when a set of reasonably clear findings had emerged. That is, a certain acquired choreography amongst different actors in specific sites; the emergence and mutual reinforcement of shared scripts; and the identification of reasonably clear worldviews or traditions, expressed in specific narratives, that helped explain the deeper origins of the impasse that had occurred and its broader implications. Our aim was complex specificity in context, not formal generalisations, and we sought to deploy a range of methods and observe a multitude of sites in order to triangulate claims, listen to background stories and develop emergent themes.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

'There is no agreed way of reporting from the field', Rod Rhodes (2017, 49) notes; 'The craft of writing is paramount. Each way of telling the tale will reveal only a partial truth. So, political scientists need to become self-conscious practitioners of a literary craft that embraces literary experimentation'. This section embraces Rhodes' experimental approach by presenting the results of the research in the form of carefully curated scripts or narratives - a bricolage consisting of strands of data derived from field notes woven together to represent a specific position or viewpoint. What follows is therefore a rare attempt to let the data speak for itself through a focus on three 'characters' within the case study: the local politicians, the local government officers and the protestors. It is not possible for this section to cover the full cast of characters, nor is it possible to discuss the full range of ideas and beliefs that were uncovered within each character group. It is, however, drawn from extensive research that does provide an accurate précis of the core understandings presented by key actors. Furthermore, the webs of belief that ethnographic methods uncovered and which underpinned the behavior of specific parties to the saga emerged from the research in the form of fairly clear discursive script-like constructions of a tradition that faced certain dilemmas. What follows are representations of these positions derived from extracts from field note records; with comments or explanations from individuals within each main character-group curated into a single narrative. These are followed by short commentaries that interrogate some of these topics in more detail.

(a) Councillors

[Note. This relates only to councilors in the ruling Labour Party.]

Author: I'm trying to understand what's happened in relation to street trees…

Councillor: I'll tell you what's going on. A small number of people are causing a lot of upset and are wasting a lot of money. Most people in the city, the people I represent, are just trying to get on with their lives. If there is a problem it's a long-standing problem and it's not just about trees…it's about one part of this city thinking it can tell the rest of the city what it can do [face reddens, obviously frustrated] Well it can't!

Author: What do you mean?

Councillor: This is the leafy suburbs, the west of the city trying to dictate what should be done. They have the money and think they're educated and know what's best. They can certainly make a lot of noise and attract attention but they're not elected and the whole issue has been through the courts…they lost… and they're still stopping things [sighs, pushes back in chair]. We're coping with enough... trying to deal with budget cuts… we have tried to listen to them – we set up an independent panel that reviewed every decision that the public did not like – but it was not enough…

Author: You make it sound like a class war…

Councillor: It is a bloody class war! This is a divided city. Always has been but it's getting worse. Do you know the story about the bus? You get on one end [of the route] where it's poor and you are likely to die fairly young and you get off in the west of the city where people tend to live to a ripe old age.[v] This is people 'over there' [points a thumb towards window] loving their trees and all that sort of thing while the rest of the city have to get on with real life. There are more pressing things for most people… this council has had to cope with massive, I mean bloody massive, cutbacks. We're in a time of tough choices about social care, housing, asylum seekers, vulnerable people… people on the streets and desperate… and then we have the trees.

Author: But if the trees don't actually need to come down...

Councillor: They do need to come down. That's the point. It's been to court! I'm elected to make decisions they're not! The fact is that the trees were being taken down across Sheffield for years before anyone was bothered. It was only once Amey moved into Nether Edge and places like that that before anyone complained.

Commentary

How does this curated script help us understand the politics of co-production in relation to our case study? Our answer is that it points to the existence of a clear governing tradition that, in turn, helps explain the behavior of the council. The dilemma for councilors is that their governing tradition appears ill-equipped to deal with the challenge of co-production. The dominant tradition is analogous to (mini-)Westminster majoritarianism with its power-hoarding logic and preference for governing capacity (i.e. 'responsible' government) over public engagement (i.e. 'representative' government). In many ways this was the aim of the 2000 *Local Government Act* as the shift from committee-based to an executive-focused model of governance. The intention of this shift, however, was to increase public scrutiny by making it far easier for the public to identify exactly who was making decisions within town halls (i.e. specific portfolio holders in an executive group headed by a 'leader') and why but what this ethnographic research has revealed is a 'negative executive mentality' (Judge 1993). This generally seems to define scrutiny processes as synonymous with the allocation of blame and, as a result, very tight control of the Labour Party group on the council (i.e. the government backbenchers in the city) was deemed legitimate and keeping the public at a distance was viewed as a sensible strategy. The dilemma for the council was that the tree campaigners simply rejected this model of centralised, closed, almost tribal local democracy (see below). A second dilemma was that where the council had sought to engage with the public over Amey's policy on street trees they had generally been seen to do so in a largely cosmetic or tokenistic manner that only served to fuel anti-political sentiment. A 'Highway Tree Advisory

Forum' was established in 2015 to bring the council and affected communities together but was abolished after just two meetings. In November 2015 the council established an Independent Tree Panel to 'provide independent, impartial and expert advice on issues relating to the retention, replacement or treatment of roadside trees'. But the methodology for engaging with the public was highly problematic and as a result the response rate was low (see Brooks, 2017). Even where an ITP review was triggered it seemed to have little impact. An analysis by Rust (2017) suggests that in a sample of 684 condemned trees the ITP recommended that 43% should not be felled but this recommendation was only accepted for around 10% of those trees. And yet arguably the most revealing element of this ethnographic research was the insights it offered in relation to the very human costs of *being political* for those who stand for elected office. To watch and listen to councilors was to enter a professional sphere defined by pressure and uncertainty. There was a very real sense that councilors felt under constant attack and, as a result, anyone who suggested engaging with the public, in general, or with critics, in particular, were viewed as simply naive to the realities of everyday politics in a large northern city. It was an immature, rough-and-tough, low-trust, high-blame environment where the public was never going to understand or accept (in the minds of the councilors) why unpopular decisions might have to be taken or tolerated.

(b) Officers

Author: Dare I mention the word that begins with 'T' and ends in 'S'?

Officer: [Rolls their eyes] No!

Author: Why not?

Officer: You know as well as I do…its now an issue for the Chief Executive's Office and no one else is allowed to comment on the topic. All inquiries, phone calls, anything must now go to the top man's office.

Author: Why?

Officer: Because the whole thing is a [expletive]-up and councillors [meaning the Labour ruling executive] have dug themselves a hole so deep they can't get out of it… It's gridlock [long pause] just think about the costs – the negative publicity on the city, the stress and strain on everyone in the council, the FOI requests…it's all got out of hand because councilors refused to compromise. Lots of people have offered to act as mediators but they were all rejected…it's like the council have adopted a siege mentality… 'batten-down the hatches' and 'dig in' and all that sort of thing and [hands placed on head, pretends to get under the table]. And to be fair I can understand their position…the age of austerity is not over, not by a long way…it's all 'more, more, more' from 'less, less, less' and the councilors are feeling the pressure.

Author: But isn't that an argument for working more closely with local communities…

Officer: It might be in some cases but in relation to trees no one on the council is listening. [long pause] Let's just be serious and think about this. First of all working with local people or service users is never as easy as it seems on paper. People want different things, they expect too much, it gets messy and the council might as well have just made a decision in the first place. We run public engagement events and none of the public bother to turn up anyway. That's not to say it cannot work. It can and the new framework for community-run libraries shows that but it takes a lot of time and effort, it often involves continuing council investment and it depends upon building community relationships. The other thing is that we are talking about trees and I'm just not sure the council think that trees deserve time and effort when there are so many other pressures being put on them.

Author: But what if the trees don't need…[interrupted]

Officer: That's not the point. More trees are actually being planted than felled and some healthy trees did need to come down to balance out the age-range. There's also a rather unfortunate political dynamic at play because a lot of the ruling Labour group represent wards in some of the poorest parts of the city so beating-up the tree huggers [laughs] in the posh parts of town can actually work in their favour…I think they genuinely don't understand what all the fuss is about and they certainly don't believe all the claims about the economic or social value of trees – most of them seem to

> think it's 'voodoo science' – the Sheffield equivalent of fake news …[but] this is not good for the city as a whole. The negativity and attention surrounding the trees is like a constant drip, drip, drip…it's gradually undermining public confidence in the council across the board…I'm not sure that public confidence was actually that high to start with but now the controversy over the trees seems to have become 'the' [adds emphasis] story…it's a bloody saga that never needed to happen.

Commentary

How does this curated script help us understand the politics of co-production in relation to our case study? Once again it points to the existence of a dominant tradition that is subject to increasing pressure and strain. Officials worked within a conventional administrative tradition that hinged around political neutrality, professional anonymity and personal loyalty. That is, a fairly traditional set of public service understandings defining their primary role as supporting elected councillors rather than having any direct relationship with (or broader professional obligation to) the public. The dilemma for officials, however, was how to remain loyal while at the same time being critical. One of the most striking insights was observing officials coping with the duty to remain loyal to the council while at the same time expressing unease with the way the street trees issue had been managed. The two sides of this dilemma expressed themselves very differently during this research. For example, one officer took great pleasure in directing us to the LGA's 'New Conversations' report (discussed above) and arguing that Sheffield City Council could only be assessed as operating somewhere between the 'Naval-Gazing Council' and 'Tower of Babel Council' under this framework. And yet although most officials seemed to agree with this broad conclusion they balanced this against an understanding of the realities of governing in an age of austerity that actually showed little sign of ending. The core insight, however, was that officials understood a dilemma surrounding co-production. On the one hand, budget cuts meant the logic of co-production offered more than ever in terms of saving money and increasing public trust (i.e. the mainstream approach discussed in Section 1, above); but on the other hand, there was also a residual concern co-production was not cost-neutral or risk-free and working with user-communities involved an investment in resources that were in short-supply. Attempting to co-produce services was therefore politically risky and, officials suggested, increasingly hard to engage with the public who had most to gain from working with the council ('to get beyond the usual suspects' as one official put it). Officials were committed to co-production *in theory* (and generally wished councilors had been less belligerent to the tree campaigners) but were aware due to their experience of day-to-day local politics of the limits of co-production.

(c) Protestors

Author: If someone were to ask you what you were protesting about what would you say?

Protestor: I'd say we were protesting about environmental hooliganism, corporate greed and political arrogance. The vast, vast, vast majority of these trees don't need to come down – they're healthy trees in beautiful streets – and yet we have private companies [i.e. Amey and its sub-contractors] racing around the city - night and day – trying to destroy them in order to hit private sector targets. Look at the evidence…look at the expert reports and surveys by real arbs [arboculturalists] that know what they're talking about. We have problems with air quality and flooding and yet the council seems determined to get rid of one of nature's most effective ways of dealing with those challenges. We're supposed to be the 'green city' for crying out loud!

Author: But the city still has lots of parks and open spaces [cut off mid-sentence]

Protestor: No! This is not about parks or woodlands or all that…it's about the street trees that were paid for and planted by the people who used to live on these streets. The trees are part of the city's history and that's what no one in the Town Hall seems to get…lots of the trees were planted to remember young

men who'd once played out on the streets and were killed in the war.[vi] Others were planted to commemorate specific events [stops and pauses] I was outside a house the other day guarding a tree and an old lady came out and told me about how her grandchildren used to play in it. The kids, now adults with their own kids, used to love playing in the branches and would throw the blossom at each other like it was confetti at a wedding. These trees are our heritage, they take hundreds of years to grow but just seconds to destroy.

Author: And the council's position?

Protestor: Don't get it, don't care... Totally insulated and cocooned from the real world. Years ago you used to know who to talk to about specific matters. I remember when the council used to tend the trees and you could talk to them. Even the old area panels provided some sort of opportunity to raise really local issues but all that seems to have gone. My councilor blames the councilors who run the council, my MP says he can't do anything, the council leader says nothing can be done because the contract [PFI contract with Amey] would be too expensive to renegotiate but I'm not even sure they've tried. We can't even get a copy of it [the contract].

Author*:* So you've taken matters into your own hands…

Protestor: Not really. We want the council to work with us and engage in an open conversation about what might be done. There must be room for compromise. There always is but on this the council have been bloody belligerent right from the beginning. The public meetings were a nightmare, the Tree Panel a farce and then the council starts taking everyone to court in an attempt to shut us up. We don't understand why the council won't engage and yet it holds to a position that most people just don't understand…and the worst thing is that they blame it on a contract [with Amey] that we can't even read. Instead the council just focus on running a smear campaign against us – we're anarchists, we're violent, we're poisoners, we're anti-democratic, we're illegal, we don't represent the city. It's bollocks. Democracy has to be about more than one vote every four years and it's hard to find a good explanation for why we've lost thousands of trees apart from Amey wanting to flatten the city in order to increase their profits. It's a form of environmental asset-stripping that is being allowed by a Labour-run council that should know better. And that's the funny thing…I don't actually think this is about street trees anymore. It started about that but its evolved to being about broader concerns with politicians and how politics works…I'm not a hardy campaigner… I find it hard and upsetting… we don't want to be doing any of this but someone has to…I can't wait until May's [2018] local elections!

Commentary

How does this curated script help us understand the politics of co-production in relation to our case study? Once again it points to the existence of a tradition that exists in explicit opposition to that which is dominant in city hall. This tradition might best be captured in the label 'critical citizens', reflecting a demand for more inclusive policy-making, greater transparency and concerns about the power of the private sector. The dilemma for this tradition is that it is hitting-up against an existing political mainframe that is either skeptical about many of these values or has reluctantly concluded it has no choice but to engage with the private sector. It is the tension between these two traditions that explains the current state of gridlock.

What was interesting about observing the campaigners was they frequently spoke about how the relationship between the council and public had changed. Until the early 1980s street tree management took place through an informal form of co-production whereby staff from the Ecological Services Department (ESD) would engage with local communities when work was

required on local trees. The level of knowledge and engagement often flowed down to knowing exactly which family had originally paid to have each street tree planted. The eco-history of the city was therefore rooted in high levels of social capital and an institutional memory held in professional knowledge and informal notes. This knowledge was lost in the 1980s as the ESD was abolished and tree care transferred to the Highways Maintenance Department (but has resurfaced in the form of cultural heritage claims and local asset ownership in the current debate). A form of basic street-level public engagement capacity was therefore lost. This was recognised by the council in the mid-1990s and led to experiments with localized Areas Panels (1996-2009) and then slightly larger 'Community Assemblies' (2009-2013). The assemblies were particularly relevant to this case study as they did provide formal engagement frameworks used by the public to question the planned PFI contract with Amey. But the assemblies initiative was abolished in 2013 due to concerns about their cost and levels of public attendance (see Dommett and Flinders, 2013). The point being made is that when serious local concern emerged around Amey and the street trees there were no intermediary sub-city engagement structures (high-trust, low-cost, social capital, etc.) in place to potentially negotiate some form of co-produced resolution. There are some broader citizens' initiatives focused on environmental issues linked to the trees debate. Sheffield Environment Weeks, for example, are a series of volunteer-led initiatives to raise environmental awareness in different parts of the city, while Heeley City Farm and Whirlow Hall Farm are urban farms explicitly seeking to promote sustainability and environmental agendas in a collaborative manner with the Council. These initiatives, however, are piecemeal and poorly funded, and did not provide alternative outlets for managing such an important, city-wide issue.

A second observational insight was the existence of a PFI contract that most campaigners thought was simply incompatible with democratic politics. An act of 'democratic displacement' had occurred whereby responsibility for a public service and public assets have been placed in the hands of a multi-national company. Sheffield City Council deny that any 'displacement' has occurred and consistently argue that it remains 'in complete control and ownership of its highway trees' (SCC, 2016, 2) and yet at the same time co-productive claims over street trees are rejected on the basis that renegotiating the PFI contract would have 'catastrophic financial consequences'. Exactly what these consequences might be or their scale is impossible to know because relevant sections of the contract have never been released for public scrutiny. 'The stumps that now line the streets in the city' one campaigner lamented 'were totems to the death of democracy' which leads into a third and final insight from this study – the manner in which the rejection of co-productive claims not only stimulated significant local resistance but also the manner in which it served to reinforce and spread dominant social stereotypes about arrogant, self-interested politicians.

INSIGHTS FROM STUMP CITY

Ethnography provides detailed studies of social and political dramas but it is not limited to the microscopic. As Geertz (1993: 23) suggests, 'small facts to speak to large issues' and this has been underlined by our case study. The PFI contract in Sheffield represents a good example of what Pierre and Peters (2014) call the 'Faustian bargain' of modern management reform in the sense that measures theoretically offering increased economic efficiency (private sector actors or market mechanisms) come at the price of reduced democratic control and accountability. The apparent lack of local democratic responsiveness created by this 'Faustian bargain' has led to the emergence of co-production-as-resistance in Sheffield. Local politicians have rowed back on previously co-productive institutions, stimulating far-reaching and ongoing resistance. Working outwards from the specifics of this case study to its broader implications, three issues deserve brief comment.

First, rolling back co-productive institutions can lead to a political 'backlash'. Decisions concerning co-production rarely, if ever, take place in a neutral space and therefore cultural, institutional, legal, financial and political impediments must be acknowledged and understood if co-production is to make the leap from '*from fairy tale to reality'* (RSA, 2013) in the sense of becoming a mainstream policy approach. What this case study has revealed is that, despite Sheffield Council's insistence on the need for co-production, there are a number of underlying assumptions clashing with more idealised notions of the protestors. The assumptions are that engagement is too expensive, citizens are not capable of understanding complex issues, engagement only works for easy issues, engaging with citizens risks opening a floodgate of demands for control, and citizens don't want to engage.

The second issue takes us back to the value of ethnography. Ethnography is far from a new method in the study of co-production. Martin's (2011) work, for example, shows the limitations of co-production as an institutional procedure through extensive ethnographic fieldwork. The sites of ethnography tend, however, to be *within* the co-productive institution itself. For example, Martin (2011) and Carter and Martin (2017) study the limitations of public forums in health care by attending those forums. Our study adopted a more expansive research landscape – from the council chamber to the street – and this provided an original and significant account of the meanings different actors attached to specific claims and counter-claims. It therefore provides a rich account of the politics of co-production complementing existing studies.

Stepping back further, our third insight locates this case study within broader debates concerning trust in liberal democratic states ('anti-politics'). In essence, using Colin Hay's framework for understanding 'why we hate politics' (2007), this case study sheds light on attempts by local politicians to depoliticise policy through delegation to private actors under a long-term legal contract followed by denials of agency (i.e. capacity to subsequently alter the contract or take back control). It is exactly this shifting of resources, powers and responsibilities away from the direct control of elected politicians that is, according to Hay, fuelling anti-politics. In this context the forceful promotion of co-productive claims forms a civic strategy for *re*politicising those realms of fugitive power. Which is exactly why this article has attempted to focus attention on co-production-as-resistance in both theory and practice.

Appendix A – Methodological Note

Ethnographic Interviews
Arboreal specialist – July 2017
Campaigner – July 2017
Campaigner – July 2017
Former MP – July 2017
Councillor – July 2017
Campaigner – Aug. 2017
Campaigner – Aug. 2017
Campaigner – Aug. 2017
Campaigner – Aug. 2017
Arboreal specialist – Aug. 2017
Local government officer – Sept. 2017
Local government officer - Sept. 2017
Local government officer - Sept. 2017
Councillor - Sept. 2017
Councillor – Nov. 2017
Councillor - Nov. 2017

Campaigner – Nov. 2017
Campaigner – Nov. 2017
Campaigner – Nov. 2017
Local government officer – Dec. 2017
Independent Review Panel Member - Dec. 2017

Field Research
7 Sept. Street-based campaign observation [4 hours]
11 Sept. Early morning street patrol [3 hours]
17 Sept. Campaign meeting, private house [2 hours]
26 Sept. Street-based campaign observation [6 hours]
5 Oct. Early morning street patrol [1 hour]
9 Oct. Early morning street patrol [2 hours]
23 Oct. Campaign meeting, public house [2 hours]
30 Oct. Street-based campaign observation [4 hours]
4 Nov. Campaign meeting, private house [2 hours]
9 Nov. Street-based campaign observation [5 hours]
10 Nov. Street-based campaign observation [4 hours]
12 Nov. Campaign meeting, private house [1 hour]
24 Nov. Early morning street patrol [3 hours]
27 Nov. Street-based campaign observation [4 hours]
12 Dec. Street-based campaign observation [4 hours]
18 Dec. Campaign meeting, public house [2 hours]
8 Jan. Street-based campaign observation [4 hours]
14 Jan. Campaign meeting, private house [2 hours]
25 Jan. Early morning street patrol [3 hours]
1 Feb. Street-based campaign observation [4 hours]

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[i] (Sheffield City Council's arguments in favour of felling frequently refer to a street tree survey conducted by Elliott Consultancy in 2007. Council documents and statements by councilors and Amey have claimed that this report states that 75% of the city's trees were reaching the end of their natural life (e.g. Dore, 2017). This claim is not actually supported by the Elliott survey which suggested that 1,000-1,241 street trees (i.e. 3% of the total stock) were in need of replacement; and 4,950-5,191 (14%) needed some maintenance work but certainly not felling.)

[ii] As claimed in the Tree Preservation Order application.

[iii] https://medium.com/@jennifersaul/lies-violence-and-spurious-arrests-in-sheffield-4b8c47c0bb19

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