

Bridging bureaucracy and activism: Challenges of activist state-work in the 1980s Greater London Council

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Abstract

An emerging literature on ‘new municipalism’ has identified attempts not only to transform local state functions to respond to the urban crises of neoliberal austerity, but also to transform the structure and practices of the state itself, embedding democratic processes into local government. This article utilises the historical experience of the ‘new urban left’ within the Greater London Council (GLC) from 1981 to 1986 to explore the internal dynamics of state transformation in a context of municipal activism. It situates the GLC’s progressive policy responses to the urban crises of the early 1980s within a more quotidian project of state remaking, in which activists worked in-and-against the established political cultures and practices of the local state. The new urban left’s transformative, rather than simply instrumental, approach to the local state – rooted in the democratic politics of progressive social movements – challenges straightforward dichotomies between state and society. The article frames these nascent municipalist characteristics with a theoretical argument based on an autonomist-Marxist account of the state as a form of social relations, one that emphasises how capitalist crises pivot on the internal contradictions of labour. This reading directs theoretical attention to the ‘prosaic’ labour of state officials, and the article thus considers the quotidian experience of politicised officials in the GLC, whose activity blurred boundaries between political activism and professional labour. The practical contradictions involved in such forms of ‘activist state-work’ – working within bureaucratic and legal limits, experimenting with new organisational forms, and negotiating contested workplace subjectivities – reveal forms of boundary-bridging between activism and statehood that highlight the potentially transformative dynamics within the labour of local governance. This unstable tightrope-walk between bureaucratic constraint and political agency at the nexus of state-work contributes to new municipalist thinking about reshaping the conduct of urban governance.

Keywords

activism, bureaucracy, local state, municipalism, state work

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摘要

一个关于“新地方自治主义”的新文献指出，人们不仅试图改变地方政府职能以应对新自由主义紧缩带来的城市危机，还试图改变政府本身的结构和实践，将民主进程嵌入地方政府。本文利用1981年至1986年大伦敦议会（GLC）内“新城市左派”的历史经验，探讨地方自治运动背景下政府转型的内部动力。它将GLC对1980年代初期城市危机的进步主义政策反应置于一个更为日常的政府重建项目中，在该项目中，活动家们在当地政府既定的政治文化和实践中开展工作。新城市左派对待地方政府的变革性（而不仅仅是工具性）进路（其植根于进步主义社会运动的民主政治中）挑战了政府与社会之间简单的二分法。本文用一种理论论证来构建这些新生的地方自治主义特征，该理论论证基于自治主义-马克思主义将政府视为一种社会关系形式的论述，其强调资本主义危机如何以劳动的内部矛盾为中心。这种理解将理论注意力引向国家官员的“平淡无奇”的劳动，因此本文考虑了GLC政治化官员的日常经验，他们的活动模糊了政治行动主义与专业劳动之间的界限。这种形式的“行动主义政府工作”所涉及的实际矛盾（在官僚体系和法律范围内工作，试验新的组织形式，以及协调相互争夺的职场主体性）揭示了行动主义和政府地位之间的边界桥接形式，突出了地方治理劳动范围内的潜在变革动力。这种不稳定的、走钢丝般的状态（在官僚约束和政府-工作关系中的政治代理之间）有助于产生新的、重塑城市治理行为方面的地方自治主义思考。

关键词

行动主义、官僚主义、地方政府、地方自治主义、政府工作

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Introduction

“... democratising state policy-making processes is a creative but inherently contradictory process: messy, unsatisfactory, necessarily incomplete. And that is if you do it properly!”
(Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987: 400)

‘New municipalism’ captures an emerging set of directions for progressive left urban politics at the intersection of social movements on the ‘streets’ and the formal politics of local institutions (Blanco et al., 2020; Thompson, 2021). With radical urban movements assembling platforms to contest local elections, the municipalist moment offers the exhilarating promise of ‘rebel cities’ striking out on projects of democratic renewal and institutional transformation that might support and ultimately build towards post-capitalist urban commons. Although the variegated geographic reach of ‘new municipalism’ makes it a meta-category that

resists ‘straightforward conceptualisation’ (Thompson, 2021: 325), much of the focus has been on innovative symbiotic activist coalitions between urban social movements and local electoral platforms (Gonick, 2016; Russell, 2019) that are adopting transformative approaches to local states, with the intention of remodelling them into forces of democratisation of the urban environment (Angel, 2021; Thompson, 2021). Yet activists are seeking to remake not only the *function* but also the *form* of local governing institutions; both what they do and how they do it (Roth et al., 2020; Russell, 2020). In turn, this recognition invites a need for new municipalists to develop new state theoretical approaches, putting the movement’s emphasis on grassroots democracy into conversation with radical theories of the state (Angel, 2021; Russell, 2019).

This article takes the challenge of internal state remaking as its point of departure, employing a case study of the historical

experience of the ‘new urban left’ in the Greater London Council (GLC) of 1981 to 1986, when it was under the leadership of a left-wing coalition within the Labour Party. I argue that the radical politics at work within the GLC offer relevant conceptual resources for rethinking statehood, challenging a conceptualisation of (local) states as singular, coherent and intransigent entities clearly bounded from civil society. In particular, I suggest that refocusing state relations on the quotidian experience of labouring in the state offers an opportunity to more deeply explore the dynamics of structural constraint and transformative politics. The experiences of the GLC left highlight the importance of considering the everyday labour behind transformations in urban governance (Harney, 2002), as participants navigated legal and bureaucratic constraints and negotiated the ‘role entanglement’ (Cooper, 2020) in their contradictory positions as both activists and paid state employees or political representatives. While the left GLC’s policy output sought to assert and protect social rights and public resources, and in small ways help incubate new structures of democratic self-government in London’s civic and work spaces, radical councillors and staff also sought to bring the energy of grassroots movements to bear on the institution itself and to reshape the conduct of urban governance in ways that resonate with new municipalism’s strategic orientations (Blanco et al., 2020; Thompson, 2021). For example, some GLC workers attempted to import prefigurative, collective decision-making practices into the work of local administration, foreshadowing the radical-democratic ideals captured in Barcelona en Comú’s concept of the ‘feminisation of politics’ (Roth et al., 2020).

The practices and subjectivities of what I term ‘activist state-work’ blur the boundaries between officialdom and activism, and

trouble the rigid demarcation of state and civil society that frequently informs state-critical transformative practice (Cumbers, 2015; Routledge et al., 2018). The everyday experience of working within the GLC instead points to a more complex picture of the tensions and contradictions within the conduct of local governance, allowing activists to see that local states can be spaces of opportunity as well as (albeit more typically) closure and limitation. Here the article draws on autonomist Marxist theory, which conceptualises the inherent crises of capitalism and the state in two linked ways – defetishising the social relations underpinning the state-form and locating potential for anti-capitalist subversion within the labour-form – that inform a theoretical interest in exploring the internal dynamics and antagonisms of the ‘prosaic’ labour within state institutions.

The article begins by introducing the case study of the GLC left and setting out the methodological approach taken, consisting of a revisionist historical study drawing comparative conceptual lines with contemporary new municipalist theoretical concerns. The article then considers the contributions of state-critical autonomist Marxist theory for a transformative approach to urban institutional change, arguing that although such critics have had a blind spot regarding the state in strategic approaches to social change, their theoretical foundations can be deployed to usefully reveal and problematise the unstable social relations that transect state institutions. These insights are then drawn on to explore the contradictory contours of activist state-work in the 1981–1986 GLC, across four related challenges: unsettling the social relations of bureaucratic-legal constraint, negotiating competing subject-positions, enacting a devolution of state resources, and sustaining prefigurative working practices. The article concludes by drawing out conceptual

implications for municipalist strategy, on the basis that the contradictions faced by activist state-workers in the GLC remain relevant to attempts to work ‘in and against’ municipal institutions today.

The account below draws on research gathered from a historical case study of the GLC, consisting of archival documents held in the institutional London Metropolitan Archive and the activist May Day Rooms, as well as interviews with former GLC councillors and officers. Alongside 12 lengthy semi-structured interviews I conducted with key figures at the GLC, the research draws on 14 interviews collected by volunteers for the ‘GLC Story’ (<http://glcstory.co.uk/>), a project set up to revive popular memory of the GLC and its relationship to London’s communities.

Revisiting the 1980s Greater London Council

The GLC was a regional metropolitan government established in 1965 and abolished in 1986. Envisioned as a more strategic authority, it was responsible for city-wide planning issues, including emergency services, main roads and traffic management, as well as bus and underground rail services through the arms-length London Transport (Hatherley, 2020). In May 1981, after 4 years of Conservative administration, the Labour Party won back control with a slim majority and elected a left-wing leader (Ken Livingstone) and committee chairs – following a protracted organising effort to select left-wing candidates and secure control over the party’s manifesto, drafted in consultation with trade unions and social movements (Carvel, 1984).

Alongside a wave of other ‘municipal socialist’ administrations in Labour-led local authorities like Sheffield, Liverpool, and some London boroughs (see Frost and North, 2013; Payling, 2014), the GLC left of

the 1980s has been seen as a high watermark of democratic socialism in Britain (Hatherley, 2020; Lansley et al., 1989). The 1980s GLC is, however, strikingly absent from recent literature on contentious urban politics or progressive local governance, despite governing one of the global economy’s wealthiest metropolises at a time of acute crisis and neoliberal transformation (Sassen, 1991; Thornley, 1992). But while financial deregulation of the City of London and the creative destruction of its new skyscraper enclave in the Docklands were key moments in the global imposition of a neoliberal urbanism (Massey, 2007); and while from Westminster a new conservative national identity was assembled through the narrowly ethnocentric terms of suburban Britain and the expulsion of diverse inner cities from its cultural imaginary (Hall, 1988); both faced an alternative vision of society from across the River Thames, where London’s seat of municipal government offered a ‘South Bank socialism’ of democratised public space, robust public services, and a voice for the oppositional claims of trade unionists, feminists, anti-racists, gay liberationists, and peace activists (Hatherley, 2020; Lansley et al., 1989; Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987).

Politicised local councils in the 1980s were subjected to an extraordinary amount of media and political hostility, widely derided as the ‘loony left’ even by much of the Labour Party (Curran et al., 2019; Massey, 2007). They were subject to increasingly restrictive and punitive legislation from Margaret Thatcher’s central government, culminating in the outright abolition of the GLC (and six other metropolitan councils) in 1986 (Duncan and Goodwin, 1988; Stoker, 1991). Massey (2007: 81), who worked at the GLC, suggests that:

“...[t]he viciousness of the attacks on that GLC, and the fact that these attacks continued long after its abolition, with the clear intent of

destroying it even as an imaginative resource for the future, are themselves a hint of the potential it offered”.

Nevertheless, particularly since the left-wing leadership of the Labour Party from 2015 to 2020, recognition of the GLC left and its influence on the contemporary British left has been growing (Hatherley, 2020), making it a relevant touchpoint for activists and researchers. Scholars have begun to revive the ‘imaginative resource’ of the 1980s GLC, excavating the residues of social and political alternatives beneath the accumulated and over-determining conceptual bearings of Thatcherism and neoliberalism in that period of British political history (see Brooke, 2014).

The 1980s GLC is perhaps best known for a proactive and interventionist approach to local industrial policy, with a new Industry and Employment Committee tasked with responding to the restructuring of London’s economic base (Egan, 2001; Mackintosh and Wainwright, 1987; Murray, 1987). London’s inner-city problems were particularly acute, facing a major crisis of de-industrialisation and unemployment: a banner on the rooftop of the GLC’s County Hall headquarters announced monthly unemployment statistics in a rebuke to Parliament across the river. The committee’s investment vehicle, the Greater London Enterprise Board (GLEB), made strategic investments to restructure businesses and renovate light industrial sites deemed important to London’s employment base (GLC 1983a, 1985a), based on a concept of ‘restructuring for labour’ (GLC, 1983a) that sought to leverage greater industrial democracy and workers’ power into economic planning (see Egan, 2001; Murray, 1987).

GLEB and the committee’s *London Industrial Strategy* (GLC, 1985a) were criticised for failing to indicate a revolutionary path to economic transformation, merely

constituting a Keynesian palliative to capitalist restructuring (Cochrane, 1986; Eisenschitz and North, 1986), and ‘municipal socialist’ local authority industrial policies were linked to a wider trajectory towards municipal entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989). Yet while it is true that GLEB can be conceptualised within the syndrome of associated local government practices emerging in response to capitalist restructuring, many commentators have missed the ways that the contradictions of operating ‘in and against the market’ (GLC, 1983a) were acknowledged and worked through in the department’s own scholarly output, from its lively economic research group (GLC 1983a, 1983b) and the work of its director Robin Murray (1987) and elected chair Mike Ward (GLC, 1984a). GLEB and the *London Industrial Strategy* combined an understanding of the nature of the GLC’s constraints and contradictions with an effort to radicalise the local economy within the limited interventions it could make, based on a ‘politics of needs’ (GLC, 1983b) and related concepts like diverting technological innovation towards supporting ‘socially useful production’ (GLC, 1984a). As Ward put the GLC’s ambiguous relation to industry:

“In it, because the workings of the market surround us: we, at least, as a local authority cannot abolish the market; against it, because at times hesitantly, sometimes with contradictions, we look to base our policy on needs...” (GLC, 1984a: 1).

A similar principle of social needs lay behind other GLC policies, particularly an emphasis on the infrastructures of collective consumption provided by the local state as part of the ‘social wage’. For example, the GLC’s flagship ‘Fares Fair’ policy, a 25% cut to bus and underground rail fares (Carvel, 1984), sought to use expenditure on urban services

and infrastructure as a form of limited redistribution of wealth (Livingstone, 1987). Other transport planning policies to disincentivise private vehicles and road-building were explicit about ‘trying to change the balance of power on London’s roads’ from vehicles to pedestrians and public transport users, as a Transport Committee booklet (GLC, 1985c: 2) puts it. Such policies aimed at supporting the basic components of social flourishing rather than simply reproducing labour power for capital; a theme recognised by supportive campaigns demanding their ‘right to enjoy the city’ (Fares Fair Support Campaign, 1981), and expressed through politically-linked festivals and the opening of GLC-owned cultural spaces to the public (Williams, 2020). Each of these contributed in small ways to a broader pattern of (albeit limited) redistribution of wealth. As a GLC research officer explains,

“...if you have a lot more buses, and if you open up the South Bank to the school kids that live around it, and if you put in cycle lanes... you actually and effectively change income distribution. You allow people to do more with their income at the bottom end of the income distribution” (interview).

A substantial programme of grant aid continued this redistributive thrust, with funding to a wide range of community, voluntary, and campaigning organisations that aligned with the GLC left’s political commitments – including a significant proportion for childcare, reflecting an ‘economics of feminism’ and an ambition ‘to collectivise and liberate aspects of domestic labour’ (GLC, 1984a: 11, 1984b, 1985b, 1986).

Yet while such policies did have some concrete impact, arguably their significance was more demonstrative and ideological, with limited powers to substantially overhaul the urban economy (Duncan and Goodwin, 1988; Egan, 2001). As Peck (2013: 109) argues, the GLC ‘did not seek, naively,

to wish into existence capacities for local intervention that did/could not exist’, but developed policies in relation to wider political arguments as a demonstration of their relevance, ‘inventively positioned within (an analysis of) dynamically restructuring metropolitan economies’. The progressive political potential of GLC policies was therefore geared towards exposing the contingent political ideologies and capitalist normalities that colour urban crisis, while challenging a pessimistic view of urban space as solely determined by capital (Massey, 2007; Peck, 2013). Thus Cooper (2020: 181) suggests British municipal radicalism of the 1980s was characterised by the adoption of an activist register, marked by ‘a readiness to campaign, and not simply govern, on behalf of marginal and subjugated interests’, alongside an affirmation of, and activist-state interest in, the entrenchment of social justice issues in the everyday urban fabric – seeing, for instance, the political importance of pavement curbs, pedestrian crossings, sewage disposal, or herbaceous lawn borders (Hall, 1988; Hatherley, 2020). For example, the GLC voiced countercultural claims on spheres of social life previously considered beyond the scope of local government interest, such as sexuality (Cooper, 1994), and directly campaigned (or funded community campaigns) against nuclear weapons (Atashroo, 2019), racism (although see the critique by Gilroy, 1987) and corporate urban development in the Docklands (Leeson, 2019). Such efforts, as Hall (1988) argued, could contribute to countering the emergent atomised subject-formation of Thatcherite politics, laced with competitive individualism and hostility to public administration. By explicitly politicising local government and urban collective consumption, Londoners could be offered an alternative subject-position as members of an interdependent public collectively funding, producing, and benefitting from public

infrastructure (Duncan and Goodwin, 1988; Hall, 1988).

Other work on the GLC has usefully situated it in the context of the politics of the British new left. Several early analyses (Boddy and Fudge, 1984; Gyford, 1985; Lansley et al., 1989) identify a 'new urban left', a relatively diverse and eclectic coalition of social movements coalescing around a Labour Party left wing increasingly open to political action beyond the confines of the Party and parliament. Alongside a reinvigorated shop-floor labour movement, participants came from social movements contesting a series of unfolding and interrelated urban crises, from declining environmental conditions and inner-city poverty to socio-cultural oppression tied to gender, sexuality and race (Wainwright, 1987). Recognising the ties between these variegated urban crises and the fiscal crises of local states, threatening public services and infrastructure, the new urban left looked to the local state, via the Labour Party left, as a platform for further intervention (Gyford, 1985). The London new urban left recognised that the old class base for left politics could not be reconstituted, but needed to be built in coalitions across diverse constituencies of the marginalised and urban poor (Livingstone, 1987). Building on a theoretical identification of the urban infrastructures of collective consumption like housing and transport as key spaces of political intervention, they could potentially stitch together struggles for 'old' working class demands with 'new' social movement aspirations (Cockburn, 1977; Rowbotham et al., 1979). However, influenced by the post-1968 social movements, they were also strongly critical of the 'top-down' paternalism of the welfare state and state-centric strategies for social change. Disaffection with bureaucratic political organs like traditional trade unions and the Labour Party drove an emphasis on grassroots, 'bottom-up', and

extra-parliamentary politics (Wainwright, 1987). In this context, the turn to campaigning for Labour candidates in local elections might seem peculiar, but emerged from two further critical perspectives: a recognition that extra-institutional movements faced their own limits and struggled to exert any hegemonic social force without the stabilising and institutionalising effect of formal politics (Gyford, 1985), and a reinvigorated Marxist theoretical understanding of the state in the late 1970s, including debates on the 'local state' widespread enough to 'enter into the ordinary language of socialists' (Corrigan, 1979: 203; Gyford, 1985).

Many accounts of the GLC, however, have overlooked the presence of a 'bottom-up' and social-movement inspired politics, largely reading the GLC as a cohesive actor explicable by reference to its policy outputs, flattening an often discordant internal politics – a position compounded by the GLC's own publications, which typically present an ordered narrative of the GLC acting as a singular force. Critical assessments too often conflate the institution and its occupants, allowing them to read the difficult negotiation of constraints as the naïve adoption of timid social-democratic reformism. Atashroo (2017) for instance, notes the disappearance of contextual evidence about intention, action, and the limits to agency within the GLC bureaucracy from critical accounts like Gilroy's (1987), suggesting that a structural critique that restricts scope for individual agency will likely conflate intentions and outcomes. Atashroo (2017) criticises Gilroy's approach for framing contingent outcomes as part of a cohesive institutional logic, misreading unintentional failures as wholly disingenuous exercises in co-opting social movement discourses and energies – a discursive position that has strongly influenced subsequent perceptions.

A more detailed study of the 1980s GLC's internal dynamics, however – revealed

especially in conversation with radical councillors and workers – demands a revised historical account, approaching the institution as a fragmented terrain, with pockets of ‘oppositional space’ (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1979) in which messy experiments in urban bureaucracy were undertaken, emerging from new and slippery arrangements between social movements and state officials.

A new conceptual perspective of that kind is invited by the present-day municipalist movement, a radical urbanism that represents not simply a novel embrace of electoral politics by urban social movements, but rather an openness to including governing institutions in broader strategies for generating citizen power to achieve social change (Russell, 2020). Accordingly, municipalist scholarship moves beyond a conceptual perspective of local states acting progressively to refocus on the relational engagement of social movements and activists with local governance (Angel, 2021; Russell, 2020). As Cooper (2020) points out, new theoretical-political paradigms enable new conceptual lines to be drawn from historical cases, which also offer the benefit of hindsight. However, the new municipalist literature has not yet drawn clear parallels with prior histories of the urban left in government.

Thus, whereas the GLC has tended to be narrated within the discursive constraints of British ‘local socialism’ – of local governments dabbling in progressive politics – this paper adopts an alternative perspective, focused instead on the constituent activists of the new urban left and their novel practices of institutional experimentation. Recent work has begun to reappraise the GLC and excavate its internal dynamics (Atashroo, 2019), including the important work of the ‘GLC Story’ project. My aim here is to bring those experiences into conversation with theoretical perspectives about the state, to highlight points of tension that

remain relevant to contemporary forms of what I term ‘activist state-work’ within municipal governance.

The crisis of the state-form as labour in-and-against the state

Although new municipalists have stressed its ‘decentring’ of the state (Thompson, 2021), it remains vital to take seriously the implications of municipalist practices for theoretical perspectives on statehood (Angel, 2021; Russell, 2019). Reading the new urban left politics of the GLC from a new municipalist standpoint, attentive to the challenges of straddling the practical and conceptual boundaries between autonomous social movement activism and progressive local government, contributes to new state-critical theoretical perspectives that unsettle fixed conceptions and certainties regarding the state. The account below puts municipalist insights, often shaped by an emphasis on quotidian and prefigurative practices (Angel, 2021; Cooper, 2020; Roth et al., 2020), into conversation with an autonomist Marxist reading of the state as a set of social relations structured by capital (Bonefeld, 2003; Hardt and Negri, 1994).

The latter is relevant here not only because of its explanatory power, but because the new urban left’s turn to local government was itself influenced by its theoretical understanding of the capitalist state, especially in the work of Poulantzas (1980) and in Britain the emerging ‘open Marxism’ around the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE) (Clarke, 1991). Poulantzas (1980: 129) conceptualised the state not as an apparatus separated from social life, able to be captured on behalf of subaltern classes, but rather as a social relation, ‘the specific material condensation of a relationship of forces among classes’, part of the facilitative mechanics of capital accumulation, intimately tied into (but not reducible to)

capitalist social relations. Poulantzas's emphasis on the state as a social relation presented a challenge to reified understandings that differentiated a political-institutional realm from that of civil society and everyday life: defetishising the state in this way meant including its material forms and practices in the realm of social relations structured by capital. The implication, as an influential CSE pamphlet spelt out, was that class struggle was always necessarily *in and against the state* (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1979). Moreover, because the state does not exist *a priori* but rather emerges from a broader ensemble of socio-relational processes structured by capitalism, those relational processes that structure its 'institutional materiality' might be intervened in, reshaped and exploited by savvy radical actors (Clarke, 1991; Jessop, 1990). Accordingly, as John McDonnell (GLC finance chair and deputy leader from 1983 to 1985) explains, the turn to the GLC was partly prompted by

"...a more detailed discussion of: what is the state? As much as a set of institutions, it's a relationship of dominance. And therefore how do you change that relationship? You go within the state, and you transform the state form" (interview).

In and Against the State (one of whose authors later worked at the GLC) emphasised that crisis is not an exception but an inevitable and everyday condition of capitalism, part of the fundamental antagonism at the heart of a society based on extraction of surplus value and monopoly rents from labour and private property. Here, the argument drew on Italian autonomist Marxism, which reversed the polarity of capitalist 'crisis': labour is the ever-present crisis of capitalism because workers continually resist their subjectification, forcing capital into innovating its organisation of production and reproduction to reassert its profitability (Hardt and Negri, 1994; Tronti, 2019).

These autonomist conceptual foundations have led some thinkers to reject any state engagement by transformative movements, but others have argued such a relational perspective implies the opposite, that engaging in-and-against the state is an essential component of class struggle (Angel, 2017; Cumbers, 2015). Cumbers (2015: 72), for example, argues that the abstentionist position on engaging with the state of the major proponents of autonomist Marxism, like Holloway (2002), derives from 'the same reified and abstracted categorisations of class, the market, the state, capital ... that they themselves rail against', and conceptually closes down possibilities for social transformation. Yet the view of those like McDonnell, eager to restructure the social relations of the GLC as a state apparatus, corresponds more closely not only to Poulantzas's (1980) critique of the fetishism of the state and de-essentialised view of the state as traversed by social antagonisms, but also to the conceptual foundations of autonomist Marxism. The autonomist recognition of the living movement of human labour within the categories of political economy underpins an 'insistence upon the internal crisis of the state-form (labour within and against the state form)' (Charnock, 2010: 1283), and thus points to possibilities of social change not delimited by the structuralist parameters of a reified view of state institutions. As this 'open' critical perspective demands re-incorporating the dialectical social relations that political concepts abstract from in any categories of analysis (Bonefeld, 2003; Charnock, 2010), so it must include the internal contradictions within the practical labour of state work experienced at the level of everyday acts of contestation.

Similarly, Harney (2002) suggests that despite its centrality to anti-capitalist theory, labour is conspicuously absent from its metaphysics of the state. But labour is the

world-making activity internal to the state, the everyday ‘practices and techniques’ that produce the outcomes we assign to its ‘ghost-like abstraction’ (Mitchell, 1999: 89). This gives some specificity and ordinariness to Poulantzas’s concept of the state’s ‘institutional materiality’, pointing to concrete practices and lasting infrastructures that underpin and respond to wider forces of political power, but are also deeply embedded in the ordinary fabric of everyday society (Painter, 2006). Harney (2002) argues government work is theoretically significant not only because it reproduces the state, but also because the instability of labour relations creates potential for political progress and disruption, latent in the dramatism and dynamism inherent to working the borders of bureaucratic constraint and social agency (see Newman, 2014). In this sense, because the state is not independent of wider social relations, the labour that produces it also potentially drives the crisis of the state and governability.

Moreover, whereas critical urban theory has typically viewed the scope of local government autonomy as a set of external constraints – from limited tax revenues resulting from financial crisis and austerity urbanism, to the ‘neoliberal legality’ that diminishes the official pathways of possibility for radical politics (Brabazon, 2016) – an important insight of municipalist scholarship has been the identification of functional constraints at the level of the ‘prosaic’ and everyday internal relations of local governance, such as the inertia of conservative local bureaucracies (Angel, 2021; Janoschka and Mota, 2021). Thus as Angel (2021) points out, an over-emphasis on constraint can mean missing the creative moments of agency and contestation that make such structural constraints visible and meaningful (Newman, 2014; Painter, 2006). Building on Poulantzas, Jessop’s (1990) sophisticated

‘strategic-relational’ approach to state theory argues that structure never wholly contains or captures action and takes form only through dialectical interaction between constraint and creative agency.

Accordingly, emphasis on the state as a field of labour highlights how the outcomes of local governance depend on deeply intertwined and mundane relationships between practices, persons, and organisational structures. Angel (2021) directs attention to quotidian practices in the state, drawing together Jessop’s strategic-relational theory with what Painter (2006) calls ‘prosaic geographies of stateness’. In Angel’s account, prosaic practices of state-work co-evolve with structural relations, constraining and making possible each other’s field of action. Conceptualising state practices like this helps avoid an all-encompassing structural view and allows space for ‘subversive agency’, revealing how ‘the processes that produce the state are themselves the product of messy and indeterminate everyday struggles, inciting a more forensic examination of the prosaic details’ (Angel, 2021: 530).

In light of this recognition of the contested and contradictory terrain of the state, the internal dynamics of the state as a field of labour come into view as a necessary and significant point of theoretical enquiry. The following sections identify four elements of state-work internal to the GLC that resonate with issues faced by municipalists today: the reshaping of bureaucratic structures and relations as part of an effort to creatively circumvent legal constraints; the challenge of navigating conflicting subject positions as both political activists and nominally apolitical technocratic state workers; the difficulty of importing prefigurative collectivist practices into highly hierarchical institutional structures; and the potential to devolve state resources to external social movements.

Reshaping everyday bureaucratic relations

Armed with a theory of the state as a form of social relations, the new urban left sought to reconfigure the GLC's internal socio-structural relations. As McDonnell (1984: 1) wrote when GLC deputy leader.

"...We sought to undermine the capitalist form of social relation by replacing it with a relation ... [of] co-operation and democratic control".

Analysing these attempted new relations reveals a set of contradictions inherent to what I term 'activist state-work', as radical councillors and staff members struggled to assert political agency against institutional bureaucracy while navigating competing personal subject-positions.

In the GLC, the process of creating space for left policies was closely entwined with the recrafting of relationships within the bureaucracy. George Nicholson, chair of Planning from 1983, argues that previously.

"people had been very passive as councillors... basically been elected and then expected to be told pretty much what to do by [officers]. They rubber-stamped it. Well the [1981-86] GLC sort of turned that on its head" (interview).

This new approach was a source of alarm for traditional local government officers, especially the legal department, who were

"desperately worried about powers in local authorities ... Lawyers patrol that boundary in a very meticulous way. ... and here we were, busting that boundary in every way" (officer, interview).

These relations set the stage for confrontation between longstanding senior officers and the new radical incumbents. Here, attention to the prosaic labour of state work can help to explain the important resonances not

only of rational political action but of emotion, desire, emergence, and creativity (Cooper, 2020; Painter, 2006). In some cases this could manifest as a startling hostility from senior officers:

"I can remember the assistant Director General ... And I mean it was brutal stuff. I can remember her cornering me in a corridor and saying, 'We will bury you!' I mean, this was naked stuff, this wasn't subtle stuff! ... It was actually what they wanted to do, they wanted to suffocate anything" (officer, interview).

In order to navigate the 'soft' obstacle of institutional cultures for radical policies, which formed much of the difficulty of negotiating legal constraints, the GLC left inverted the traditional relationship between policy-making and legal powers. Instead of looking for what policies were possible within the scope of the law, they identified manifesto commitments and then sought forms of legal justification. This had to be developed in daily contact with legal professionals, within interpersonal struggles to establish the political authority of democratic committee decisions and assert effective management over officers' informal power:

"...we spent many hours arguing and working with the lawyers that it was justifiable to spend the money on these ... so you had a legal battle, a bureaucratic battle, and a sort of ideological development all running alongside each other, in which we were intimately involved" (officer, interview).

"We would say to the finance officer 'don't tell me I can't do it, tell me how to do it'" (officer, GLC Story).

Key to this was a learning process regarding how to work the mechanisms of the GLC legal-administrative bureaucracy. After their Fares Fair policy was struck down in the courts following a legal challenge by an obviously politically-motivated judiciary, councillors began to recognise that the source of

their legal advice was fundamental, because the legal system does not operate objectively but with great leeway for interpretation according to political preferences (Egan, 2001). Transport Committee chair Dave Wetzel thus recalls demanding that a senior officer should find

“not one of your fucking Tory barristers! I want a socialist who actually believes that we should win!” (interview).

However, the antagonistic relations involved in moving radical initiatives through bureaucratic channels could sometimes be constructive rather than combative. For Nicholson,

“I always liked to have officers saying ‘well you can’t do that, or think about this, or maybe there’s a better way of doing it’. That’s kind of a creative relationship ... to me that’s when the GLC worked at its best, when first class officers were working with political ideas that had a strong basis, and collectively tried to make them work” (interview).

Sometimes this was not necessarily open collaboration, but down to learning the skill of ‘read[ing] a lawyer watching his back but essentially between the lines telling you what to do’ (officer, interview). Accordingly, even if sometimes there were ‘tortuous legal justifications’ (officer, GLC Story), after Fares Fair the GLC was able to demonstrate that it had taken its actions reasonably, keeping them insulated from outside interference.

Moving radical policies from conception to outcome was therefore a contingent, contradictory process, strongly impacted by internal relations within the local state and how they influenced or responded to individuals, dispositions, and new forms of political thought. Of course, this experimental process co-evolved with wider structural forces, prompting the Thatcher government to draft increasingly punitive legislation that prohibited the legal openings exploited by the GLC

(Stoker, 1991). However, in the context of ever-narrowing legal and fiscal latitude, the degree of political leeway the GLC was able to establish is an important indication of the rewards of proactively reshaping internal relations and practices within local state institutions (Egan, 2001).

Constituting activist state work

As *In and Against the State* argues, however, the potential of such a strategy depends on the extent to which it is able to create, and constantly exploit and expand, an ‘oppositional space’ within the state (Clarke, 1991: 55). Accordingly, the left in the GLC sought to bring a ‘bottom-up’ approach to bear on urban statecraft. Here, it remains important to emphasise the perspective of autonomy, and to disambiguate between the local state as actor and terrain, and between movement representatives and bureaucratic functionaries. Autonomy in this instance figures ‘as a *contradictory process* marked by the contested relation within, against and beyond the state, capital, the law, policy and as *surplus activity* that cannot be subordinated to power’ (Dinerstein, 2015: 10, emphasis in original). Enacting an antagonistic politics within and against the state thus depends on this ‘surplus activity’, which can be seen in the political dispositions and commitments carried into, and sustained within, the state by representatives of the movement. A transformative dynamic within the state can be complicated, supported or undermined by the actions of state managers and employees, whose conflicting interests, alongside or against elected politicians, necessitate a certain comfort with contradiction and internal conflict. For Newman (2014: 141), navigating the ‘role entanglement’ of progressive activists employed by the state is:

“uncomfortable work that [involves] key dilemmas: where to put your energy; how to sustain

multiple, and often competing, loyalties and commitments; how to make a living while living your politics; how to combine working for an imagined future while living or prefiguring that future in the here and now”.

Straddling multiple subjectivities was an everyday reality for radical GLC workers, blurring distinctions between their own political commitments and their contracted work in urban administration:

“I was a paid activist basically, it was stuff that I would have done before and would do today for no money at all” (officer, GLC Story).

“... there were a lot of political activists working in the GLC so we probably wouldn't make a distinction between what was our job and what wasn't our job” (officer, GLC Story).

Partly, this role entanglement was enabled by seeing the political administration in the GLC as consistent with the values and practices of the outside movements workers participated in:

“I felt positively about the GLC. It seemed to be speaking to all the ways that I was, all the things that were a part of me” (officer, GLC Story).

This blurring of political subjectivity extended beyond state labour to other kinds of activism and voluntary labour, casting workers into ‘a whirlwind of political and politically motivated social activity’, as one GLC community outreach worker vividly recounts:

“I live in this sort of feminist bubble, nearly separatist ... I spend every waking minute working for women. Either paid work or voluntary work. Or lesbians and gay men, or black people. So I'm a living activist, I'm running from producing a newsletter to answering the phone at [London Lesbian and Gay] Switchboard to doing a shift at Women's Aid” (GLC Story).

Living such forms of role entanglement nevertheless produced a series of tensions within both the GLC bureaucracy and social movements. Several staff members were recruited based on their political commitments and involvement in new left politics with an ingrained disrespect for authority and institutionalised practices, only to be faced with severe restrictions in the highly regimented bureaucratic structures of their new workplace (Gyford, 1985). Tensions with established staff surfaced over the wider principle of bringing activist commitments into the workplace, but also over mundane bureaucratic rules, such as disobeyingly using the exclusive Member's Floor against senior officers' instructions (officers, interviews).

Several GLC officers and councillors recounted how some conservative senior officers cleared their desks and left when they realised their new disempowerment, while others had to be reassigned or sometimes dismissed to counter their obstruction. But for some long-standing workers, the influx of left activists was an exciting development, bringing in new practices that

“hugely improved their jobs ... because they were just being asked more interesting questions. And a lot of people really threw themselves into it” (officer, interview).

Others stayed on specifically because of their enthusiasm for certain new GLC policies, such as the opening of South Bank cultural facilities to the public during the daytime (see Williams, 2020):

“... a lot of people who weren't, you know, socialist, liked a lot of what was essentially democratisation of public space” (officer, interview).

By contrast, the appearance of a more functional administrative apparatus could also,

paradoxically, fuel concerns in external social movements that radical political energies were being co-opted and defused. Many external critics felt that entering the local state neutered activists' political commitments, that workers were 'just window dressing' who 'weren't really representative', doing little of value and perhaps even 'very much traitors [who] can't be trusted' (officer, GLC Story); a particularly cutting accusation for insurgent officers who felt they were still part of the same radical left project. Yet as Hall (1988: 235) argued about the GLC, these tensions are the unavoidable means by which movements pressure those 'inside' power to deliver to those 'outside':

"The fatal mistake would be to seal some bargain which would guarantee those in office a free ride from criticism or 'trouble', or alternatively to stitch up the constituencies on the ground as silent partners in the great 'experiment in government' up above. When the contradictions are resolved, you may be sure they have been resolved in a bureaucratic, conformist, statist direction".

Importing prefigurative practices

Further negotiation of tensions between radical and formal politics are evident in experimental attempts to import radical practices from the movements directly into the hierarchical shell of the local state, partly driven by precisely that concern, that radicals would be co-opted into adopting the logics and practices of the state (Roelofs, 1983). Staff in the Women's Committee Support Unit, for example, experimented with collective workplace practices that reflected the organisational methods pioneered in the wider women's movement, aimed at prefiguring a communal and inclusive society (Bennett, 2000; Roelofs, 1983). Support unit staff attempted to develop working methods like equally sharing menial tasks and

minimising hierarchies of authority and responsibility (GLC, 1983b; Roelofs, 1983).

However, the institutional need for management also prompted 'an incredibly divisive kind of atmosphere' (officer, GLC Story), with staff becoming hostile to the first head of the unit, as their anti-authoritarian politics clashed with her perceived authoritarianism (Roelofs, 1983). The activist context also complicated a workplace politics of productivity, creating an informal expectation to work beyond paid hours, with staff feeling judged not only on the quality of their work but of their feminist commitments (Roelofs, 1983). Moreover, the minutes of staff meetings record a growing set of difficulties with collective practices themselves, especially with the unit coming under increasing workload pressures from councillors wanting to address more campaigns and issues (GLC, 1983b). Staff began to question their motivation and capacity to adhere to collective principles; 6 months after the first meeting, a report suggested it had become 'more work to work collectively' (GLC, 1983b). Discussions concluded that collective principles could still work, but had certain organisational limits, and consequently the unit was reorganised with some compromises over previously resisted practices like hiring clerical assistants (GLC, 1983b).

A superficial reading of this episode appears to evidence co-optation into state power and embrace of bureaucratic domination. However, the record reflects a more nuanced grappling with complex difficulties and contradictions. This was not a hasty abandonment of principles, but a lengthy process of discussion, as staff collectively explored their contradictory positions as radical bureaucrats, while also scrutinising their radical principles in relation to the practicalities and specific dilemmas of state-work, which demands lines of accountability not only to bureaucratic managers but to the wider public (Bennett, 2000; Harney, 2002). It therefore revealed a structural tension

to labouring in the state: between ‘internal’ institutional reshaping and the effectiveness of that reshaping for workers’ ‘external’ impacts on urban society and their ability to meet the expectations of a wider constituency of radical movements.

Towards de-statisation?

The relationship with aligned social movements presented another set of challenging contradictions for activist state-workers within the GLC. An important aim for the new urban left was a strategy of democratisation, aiming to open up the local state to outside influence and develop new relationships between state and civil society (interviews; Gyford, 1985). Hoping to imprint democratic impulses on the conduct and outcomes of governing, committee meetings were opened to the public, and several brought in ‘co-opted’ voting members to represent relevant social movements (GLC, 1985b). The GLC’s physical spaces, especially its County Hall headquarters, were opened for campaigning groups to use:

“...it became the People’s Palace, it became a place where political activists, people would have meetings and all sorts of campaigns, you know the Palestinian Solidarity would have its meetings in the GLC, and it was open in the evenings ... the [striking] miners were practically living in the GLC, sleeping in bits of the building” (officer, GLC Story).

Here, building on Harney’s (2002) attention to labour, the GLC experience shows how state work can manifest as political activism, not only by carrying out the work of a radical government but also by bridging abstracted state policies with everyday social activism on the ‘outside’. For Painter (2006), ordinary social life is already saturated with ‘state effects’ that deeply involve us in mundane relations to state institutions, whereby

state workers and citizens engage together in the mutually constitutive production of everyday space, through ‘prosaic’ practices that are ‘improvisatory, contingent and heterogeneous’ (Angel, 2021: 529). The GLC’s more deliberate crossing of the boundaries demarcating state from society reflects how this connective labour can be deployed to reverberate that relationship back into the state apparatus. As Painter (2006: 758) suggests, one implication of this conceptual perspective is that just as state work produces ‘statisation’ – the intensification of the social presence of the state – it might also produce its opposite: ‘organisations that are nominally part of the state could be mechanisms for a de-statisation’.

Such forms of anti-state practice can be glimpsed – albeit in a subterranean form; as immanent potential rather than explicit political philosophy – in the political aims underpinning the GLC’s grant aid programme. Although funding non-state organisations to fulfil social objectives has more recently been ambivalently connected to the localist and voluntarist politics of austerity urbanism in the post-neoliberal context, the GLC’s grants were geared towards devolving resources to ‘foster an infrastructure of social collaboration’ beyond the state (officer, interview). This was strongly related to an autonomist politics of ‘self-help socialism’, shifting resources and power out of state institutions to

“enable people and communities and organisations to be able to more strongly fight for themselves, because we didn’t think we’re supposed to do it for people, we wanted to enable other people to struggle” (officer, GLC Story).

This effort to cultivate popular mobilisation also dovetailed with other radical GLC policies, such as using the local state’s financial resources to improve conditions of employment and support self-managed cooperative

spaces and enterprises (GLC, 1983a), in order to facilitate limited autonomy from capital and thus support the organising capacity of urban movements; altogether an attempt at ‘legislating the class struggle back into existence’, as Hatherley (2020: 116) suggests. But it could also be construed, in some activist officers’ thinking, as a means of undermining state power by ensuring financial resources were distributed beyond its control:

“Our principle was that really we’ve got to dismantle ... We’ve got to break up the power of the GLC in order to share it with the popular movements” (officer, interview).

One officer, for example, recalls being told:

“Your job now, between now and abolition, is to get as much as you can out of this building and into the community. Off you go”. And we took that pretty literally’ (GLC Story).

Such means of turning the local state’s resources against itself, however, necessarily involved and invited difficult tensions between external social movements and the GLC’s bureaucratic structures. Because many of the councillors and officers administering grants came from social movements themselves, there was ‘a lot of discussion, anxiety about undermining the autonomy’ of groups receiving grant aid (officer, interview). There were widespread worries – often borne out in practice – that the grants programme might induce reliance on state funds, professionalisation of activist work, or competitiveness between organisations (although, as Mayer (2013) notes, these concerns and contradictions were a relatively general condition of many urban movements in the 1970s and 1980s; see also Bennett, 2000).

McDonnell, who headed the grants panel in its early period, stressed that they attempted to avoid clientelist relationships

(interview); on some occasions, funded groups even actively campaigned against GLC policies, such as an unemployed workers centre that distributed anti-work leaflets at the GLC’s *Jobs for a Change* festivals (Islington Action Group of the Unwaged, 1987). Thus, to a limited extent the practical action of radicals within the local state could deploy its resources against its institutional power. In the perspective of the wider potential of the GLC, such possibilities are partial and riven with internal tensions, their limits driven home by the process of the GLC’s abolition by central government – the (selectively) anti-state politics of Thatcherism dwarfing the state-critical efforts of the radical left (Duncan and Goodwin, 1988; Hall, 1988).

That state-critical radicals fought so hard against the central state’s disruption of their administrative programme (Lansley et al., 1989) highlights a wider practical-strategic paradox for radical municipal politics: that in the absence of alternative systems of self-managed provision (which, as new municipal projects show, might be incubated by urban governments), state-work is both a constraining force of bureaucratic domination and yet essential to a progressive urbanism. As Harney (2002: 5, 187) argues, labour ‘for’ the state is an inherently socialised, collective, and productive activity, even if its expression is typically corrupted: it is ‘a practice of society on society’ that makes ‘the state as a field of labour ... hard to smash without damaging ourselves’. Activist state-work thus raises the question of human needs within a workplace structured by the demands of capitalist profitability, revealing the fundamental contradictions at the heart of both capital and the state (London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1979; Rowbotham et al., 1979). Consequently, while the conflictual relations generated in the line of activist state-work have been

identified as contributing to the dissolution of the new urban left (Lansley et al., 1989), they also present potentially fruitful lines of political strategy and theoretical inquiry for urban movements open to the ambivalences and contradictions of engaging with local government.

Conclusion

This article has emphasised a set of practices ‘in and against’ the local state within the GLC, in which activists created pockets of institutional space to pursue their oppositional politics, in concert with the ‘outside’ social movements that they considered themselves an extension of. Although much of the new urban left’s activity was specific to the scalar and spatial contours of British politics in the 1980s, it provides a valuable lens through which to examine the possibilities, pitfalls and contradictions of reimagining the state at the municipal scale (Cooper, 2020).

The concept of activist state work introduced in this article reinscribes the important internal contradictions of the practical labour of working in governing institutions (whether as political representatives or officials) as an important category of analysis in radical approaches to the state. It therefore resonates with and might help inform contemporary radical municipal practice, especially in terms of the ‘prosaic’ practices that pit acts of resistance and transformation against the structural shell of institutional cultures, as well as the contested terrain of legality (Morgan and Thorpe, this issue). As the pathways for transformative politics make their way through the porous structures of existing legal-administrative apparatuses, revealing their reliance on engagement and creative political energies, they demand theoretical models attentive to the instability and internal crisis of the state-form.

Whereas that attention can be located in the theoretical foundations of autonomist Marxism and its reading of capitalist crisis, such critical perspectives have too often become clouded amidst a reflex abstention from any form of engagement with state institutions (Cumbers, 2015).

Here, conceptualising the local state as a field of labour helps to bridge more structural variants of Marxist state-critical theory with recent efforts, inspired by new municipalism, to reimagine the scope and possibilities of statehood (see Angel, 2021; Cooper, 2020;). Conscious experimentation with new institutional practices, and their everyday conflicts and challenges, reveal the local state both as a terrain of contestation – not a singular, absolute logic of power but rather a contingent, conflictual space wherein the conduct of governance is continually revised (Newman, 2014) – and of possibility, within which the constituent power of grassroots action might be tethered to the constituted power of statehood (Routledge et al., 2018). They also show how the contested domain of urban governance can in some instances be creatively sutured to emancipatory political horizons (Cooper, 2020): glimpsing the spectre of utopian collectivism in a local government staff unit, or of a democratic transformation of urban society in local authority traffic management policy.

Moreover, attention to the relational and mutually constitutive (and constraining) character of practices and subjectivities typically seen as unrelated or opposed, such as officialdom and activism, demands a conceptual perspective on governance that moves beyond a binary logic of inside/outside the state, or between state and society, that typically informs state-critical radical practice. As such the GLC experience of attempted state transformation ‘from the inside’ strongly accords with new municipalist perspectives on the state in strategies for

social change, which seek to balance emphasis on citizen-led grassroots direct action with an effort to reimagine the possibilities and potentials of institutionalisation and statehood; ‘decentring’ the state without rejecting it outright and blurring boundaries between state and civil society (Russell, 2019; Thompson, 2021). Yet the practices of activist state-work in the GLC also mark a continuum of radical local governance between the ‘new’ municipalism and prior histories of ‘municipal socialism’ – as much as distinctive theories of change and forms of participatory democracy set them apart (Thompson, 2021), the core contradictions and entanglements of roles, subjectivities, commitments and expectations of activist state-work remain relevant sites of strategic dilemmas for municipalist movements making inroads into local governance.

Grassroots politics are always at risk of incorporation into formal institutional logics, but within the prosaic practices of activist state-work, and their immanent instability, lies the potential to re-channel the expected unidirectional reshaping of practices and political consciousness *against* conservative political forces and institutional inertia, which nevertheless push powerfully in the opposite direction. In contrast to perspectives that conceptualise local states as ‘intervening’ in civil society and local economies, the new municipalist emphasis on grassroots collective action suggests the inverse potential: for social actors to ‘intervene’ in the local state, becoming activist state-workers and prefiguring alternative governance relations in collaboration with grassroots mobilisation, as a potentially fruitful avenue for transformative social change.

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