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From problems in the North to the problematic North: Northern devolution through the lens of history

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Abstract:

Current debates about Northern English cities and their role in national economic strategies cannot be read simply through the lens of contemporary politics. We therefore take the Northern Powerhouse as our starting point in a chapter which traces a long history of policy and planning discourses about the North of England. We use David Russell's chronology of key historical moments in which Northern English cities hold a particular charge in cultural narratives of the nation to guide our analysis of contemporaneous tensions in debates about planning and governance. A focus on representations about the North of England over the course of the last two centuries reveals four interlocking themes: namely the role of London in directing debates about the North; a tension between political and spatial approaches to planning; the characterisation of cities in the North of England as intrinsically problematic places; and the continued issue of poverty in these cities.

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Introduction

It is significant that in his first speech after the 2015 General Election, the then Conservative chancellor George Osborne focused on the idea of a Northern Powerhouse (2015) and its model of partial devolution of budgetary responsibility for transport, housing and health care in city-regions governed by elected mayors. Speaking in Manchester, and presenting this model of governance as an answer to imbalances in the national economy, Osborne based his analysis of the present and prognosis for the future on the capacity of large urban conurbations to drive processes of wider regional growth. Osborne's speech added aspirational detail to an earlier speech, again in Manchester, where the term was introduced into contemporary political debates (2014). This earlier speech offered speculative and unfunded ideas about transport and infrastructure across the North of England, such as a high speed train link between Manchester and Leeds, HS3, to complement the HS2 project of connecting these cities to London via faster routes. Such ideas drew in large part on proposals by then-Commercial Secretary to the Treasury Jim O'Neill, his City Growth Commission, and the 'One North' report (2014) authored by political leaders in Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle and Sheffield. 'One North' articulates the argument, consolidated in Osborne's speeches, that large Northern English cities are not fulfilling their economic potential, not only relative to London, but compared to similarly sized city-regions in mainland Europe, such as the Randstad in Netherlands and the Rhein-Ruhr Valley in Germany.

This type of benchmarking exercise will be familiar to historians of urban and regional policy. Similar ground was covered in Michael Parkinson's 'Competitive European Cities: where do the Core Cities stand?' report for the New Labour administration ten years earlier (2004). Indeed, the prescriptions in the 'One North' report for greater connectivity and transport infrastructure (as well as its imaginative geography, tied to large cities and thus missing large parts of Cumbria and Northumberland) echo those of the Northern Way reports (ODPM, 2004) and the speculative contributions of the architect Will Alsop (2005), both from the previous decade. The deeper one digs historically, the greater the sense of déjà vu. The historical echoes careening around the caverns of British decentralisation politics show that the Northern Powerhouse and its immediate policy hinterland must be seen as part of a long legacy of thinking about the North in problematic terms. For more than 150 years, the North has been bandied about in various ways as both a place with problems, and as a problem in and of itself. Despite the national penchant for new schemes, and for new governments to imagine themselves erasing history – and the governance structures and plans of previous administrations – the internal geographic struggles of the UK epitomises Faulkner's (1951: 80) maxim that the "past is never dead. It's not even past". The current period and its orthodoxies about Northern cities and their role in national economic strategies cannot be

understood simply through the lens of contemporary politics, the power of austerity, neoliberal restructuring and globalisation notwithstanding (Martin, 2015)[i].

Situating the prevalent rhetoric – ostensibly that of empowered regional economies, driven by business and political urban elites – within the long history of corrective interventions in Northern English cities elucidates a series of four interwoven themes which reverberate throughout this convoluted history, and which are vital to understanding the current devolution discourse. The first is the outsized role of London, in a story ostensibly about the North. The second is the question of spatial planning, and its bricks and mortar interventions, versus a power politics of jurisdictions, authorities and assemblies. The third is the tendency by those in power to slip discursively between the North as a place with problems and as a problem unto itself. Finally, there is the omnipresent question of poverty, entrenched in reality long before Engels ingrained it in the global imagination of the original industrial region (1892). In this chapter, we trace these themes in order to highlight how negative images, embedded historically in cultural representations and through the interventions of successive generations of politicians, retain their potency in shaping the articulation and enactment of policy today in the regions that comprise the North of England. Our chapter draws on Russell's timeline of representations of Northern England in popular culture (2004), and his identification of four moments in which the towns and cities of the North held a particular importance in larger

national narratives: the 1840s to early 1850s, the 1930s, the late 1950s to early 1960s and the 1980s. We use a similar chronological frame to situate the role of cities in Northern England within wider debates and developments in the field of planning in the country, but then extend this history in order to transition through to the policies of New Labour and Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition governments, before returning once again to present day proposals for the Northern Powerhouse. We conclude by revisiting our four inter-related themes in order to argue that these are issues which at times get obscured by the politics of the contemporary moment, but which never truly go away.

A genealogy of the North as a "Problem"

Victorian Origins

In his Northern Powerhouse pronouncements, George Osborne positioned his neoliberal economic impulses within his party's tradition of One Nation Conservatism, with his latter speech building to its crescendo on precisely the argument that the Northern Powerhouse resolves the question of regional imbalances within the nation (2015). In so doing, Osborne ventriloquised the rhetoric of Disraeli, whose first political articulation of the One Nation trope came in a public address in Manchester's Free Trade Hall in 1872 (Wyke, 1996). Disraeli's arguments were rehearsed earlier in fictional writings such as 'Sybil, or the Two Nations' (1845), a novel about the lack of understanding between different social classes which falls within a lineage of 'condition of England novels' (Simmons Jr.,

2002). In contemporaneous industrial novels, including Dickens's 'Hard Times' (1854) and Gaskell's 'North and South' (1855), one finds imaginative recreations of cities such as Preston and Manchester at a time when their economic power was at its height (Hunt, 2004), but with political power still firmly located in London.

Notwithstanding their fictional form, the landscapes described in novels such as those by Dickens and Gaskell are crucial to the fixing of national perceptions and popular understandings of Northern England. They make manifest representations of its cities as repositories of social problems, and as problematic places in themselves (Cockin, 2012); threaded through these novels are spatially determined representations of industrialists of these cities as unable to manage capitalism appropriately and equitably. These tropes were substantively seeded alongside the movements towards public health reforms in the early nineteenth century, as in the reports of Edwin Chadwick on sanitation (1842) and James Kay-Shuttleworth on the poverty of living conditions (1832), as well as Engels's famous analysis of the working classes in the Northern Powerhouses of their day (1892). In these writings, we have arguments for greater degrees of responsibility amongst political leaders for the populations of newly emerging cities, in terms of health, employment and housing; separately and together, these texts comprise a recognisable form of a planning imagination, albeit in its nascent state.

By the 1930s, Russell's second period of an 'intensified interest' in the North (2004: 33), Victorian tropes of the problematic North have hardened into hegemonic understandings, reinforced by investigations into the effects of economic depression. These are found equally in novels, such as Greenwood's 'Love on the Dole' (1933), and journalism, such as Orwell's 'The Road to Wigan Pier' (1937), both characterised by their forensic portraits of deep poverty. We also sense deepening cultural differences between Northern and Southern England, in which the North is deviant from the national narratives legitimated through the South's cultural and political institutions (Rawnsley, 2000); despite the reflexivity of his account, we should not forget that Orwell's commission from his London-based publisher was to explore this other England in terms that suggest the industrial North's implicit status as an internal colony. An event such as the Jarrow March offers a vivid example of the depth of economic, social and cultural disjuncture between the institutions of the North and the South at that time (Pimlott, 1981).

Within the political histories of Northern English cities, by the early decades of the twentieth century entering a period of economic decline, there is a newly articulated role of the city in addressing systemic problems of employment and poverty through major planning projects, held at a tensed distance to national government in London. Housing was often the most visible mechanism by which wider social issues

are addressed locally, with councils responding to the national 1919 Housing Act that placed responsibility with them for clearing slums and building new accommodation as a social service to their citizens (Malpass, 2005). Thus there came the development of large housing estates in city centres, such as Quarry Hill in Leeds (Ravetz, 1974), and in its garden suburbs, as in Wythenshawe in Manchester (Kidd, 2006: 221-223). In Liverpool, the 1931 census marked the peak of the city's population, but also a realisation of its economic vulnerability in light of changing trade routes and tourism trends (Belchem, 2000). Thus, in the 1930s a tranche of initiatives, including a new airport at Speke to combat the decline of cruise shipping (Sykes et al., 2013), culminate in the Liverpool Corporation Act of 1936, which paved the way for the development of industrial estates outside the city centre (Wilks-Hegg, 2003). As has been noted, the powers gifted to Liverpool through the 1936 Act were "unprecedented for a British Local Authority and gave the city a unique role in the sponsorship of regional economic adaptation" (Lister, 1983, in Wilks-Heeg, 2003: 48). Notwithstanding Martin et al.'s recent suggestion that modern "British regional policy really began in 1945" (2016: 345), Liverpool in the 1930s was the test-bed for approaches to regeneration that oscillated between national and local scales and that anticipated mainstream policies in the following decades.

Post-War Planning

Such initiatives did little to stem underlying processes of economic and population decline in the post-war period in Liverpool, and ranged from the poorly conceived to those with only temporary ameliorative effects. The enticement of multi-national companies like Dunlop, Ford and Kodak to industrial estates on the edge of the city was accompanied by clearances of inner-city populations to overspill estates (Sykes et al., 2013). Liverpool became a "branch-plant economy" vulnerable to the relocation of capital to geographies of lower labour costs (Wilks-Heeg, 2003: 49). Strategies of encouraging inward investment were not unique to Liverpool, being driven not purely by the city but also by national government, through the regional policies of the Labour administration of the mid 1960s. These policies occur around the time of Russell's next era in his focus on Northernness within narratives of national identity (2004), in which many significant representations of youth culture in theatre and film, like the 'New Wave' or 'Kitchen Sink' dramas (Hill, 1986), play out against the impoverished industrial cityscapes of the North.

At the heart of regional policies and national strategies was the short-lived Department of Economic Affairs (DEA) under Harold Wilson's 1964 government, which served as a modernising counter-weight to the Treasury and helped to drive forward the UK's 'National Plan', along the lines of the French 'Commissariat au Plan' (Clifford, 1997). In its five year life, the DEA worked with an economic geography that is more or less familiar to us still, in a series of reports dividing the North of

England into the North-West Region, comprising Lancashire, Cheshire and Derbyshire's High Peak District (DEA, 1965); Yorkshire and Humberside, encompassing West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire and its Coalfield, the city of York and coastal towns from Filey to Skegness (DEA, 1966a), and the Northern Region, including the mostly non-urbanised North Yorkshire, Teesside, Durham, Northumberland, Cumberland and Westmoreland (DEA, 1966b). Running through these reports is an underlying anxiety that speaks to similar themes of productivity found in contemporary Northern Powerhouse discourses.

The Northern Region report begins with a comprehensive summary of its problems in the fields of industrial strategy, technological development, commerce and housing, with explicit recommendations for national government interventions. As an example with contemporary resonance[ii], Teesside is identified in the 1960s as an area whose problems transcend regional scales, and require intervention from national government (DEA, 1966b: 4). The North West report details a region characterised by sluggish employment and with a dilapidated physical fabric. Poverty is a recurrent trope, especially in the cities of Liverpool and Manchester, where:

> There is probably no other comparable part of Britain where the influence of bad housing is so all-pervasive and depressing and affects so many people. The first – and lasting – impression of a visitor to the region is one of astonishment that the housing conditions he sees around him can still exist in a relatively prosperous part of an advanced industrial country. (DEA, 1965: 108)

The most sanguine of the Northern English reports, that for Yorkshire and Humberside, ruminates phlegmatically on market failure in large areas within the region. Thus, the prospects of Bradford, Halifax and Wilson's own birthplace of Huddersfield are unsentimentally questioned, and towns in the Pennine valleys have their futures repositioned as residential areas with little economic life (DEA, 1966a: 72). Taken together, we have in these reports portraits of cities characterised as slums, towns to be wound down and downgraded to dormitories and entire regions in need of intense redevelopment and state intervention. Although the comparison of problems faced by de-industrialising cities and rural areas facing shifts in agricultural production is examined with a degree of complexity, nonetheless these regional portraits are underscored by descriptions of many economic and social problems. This, it can be said that the trope of the North as a problematic place coloured perceptions in all reports and fed into obdurate policy scripts of the North as somehow dependent on intervention by London-based elites.

From Thatcher to the Northern Way

By the 1980s, a period in Russell's cultural history where Northern England is increasingly marked in film and music as a place of anxiousness and "grit", spatial policy would be restructured in and on the towns and cities with industries on the wrong side of national government priorities. The early 1980s saw a moment of policy change in the move towards a more entrepreneurial form of urbanism (Raco,

2007), in which Margaret Thatcher's Conservative administrations broke with the post-war working consensus on the need for regional agencies to direct and shape local employment markets. Instead, Whitehall advocated a less pronounced role in encouraging employers to develop their businesses wherever they wished. Issues of regional inequalities were of secondary concern in the boosterish drive towards building a knowledge economy premised on the mobility of highly skilled labour. The Miners' Strike of 1984-85 is perhaps the most notable example of such economic policies at a national level and how they impacted on local communities on the ground, especially in the North of England, with miners and their representatives characterised by Thatcher herself as the UK's "enemy within" (Milne, 1994). Such charged political contexts contributed to a wider sense of the North as "England's 'foreign country' within" (1993). As Jones and MacLeod (2004: 438) suggest, the "election of Thatcher's Conservative Party – a government unsympathetic to regional economic decline and bereft of a regionalist sensibility beyond the wealthy South East – left English regionalism to be virtually silenced for the next decade." This resulted in a sequence of Northern English cities led by Labour councillors at odds politically, economically and ideologically with national government, as in Sheffield (Payling, 2014), Manchester (Robson, 2002) and Liverpool (Frost and North, 2013).

The positioning of Liverpool as a repository of social problems was prominent throughout the 1980s. In the wake of 1981's Toxteth Riots, Margaret Thatcher's

ostensibly non-interventionist administration intervened with plans for the economic refashioning of the city centre[iii]. With a regional Tate gallery alongside shops, cafes and bars, the Albert Dock's redevelopment exemplified a regeneration model which involved the pump-priming of public money to leverage in private sector investment (Williams, 2004). Under the aegis of Michael Heseltine, a Merseyside Task Force was set up, which eventually morphed into the Merseyside Development Corporation (MDC), the first in a string of Urban Development Corporations (UDCs) in other cities. The UDCs were forerunners of the Regional Development Agencies, quasi-governmental bodies that were charged with smoothing the path of regeneration processes during New Labour's tenure in office (Robson, Peck and Holden, 2000). Once again Liverpool was in the vanguard of changing regeneration strategies authored by London governing elites, which would be rolled out elsewhere in successive decades.

Fostered in Thatcher's administrations and continued by New Labour are pronounced cultures of competition between cities, in line with neoliberalised modes of governance (Peck and Tickell, 2007). The curtailment of local government's role in public finance started by Conservative governments in the 1980s "on ideological grounds, both to shrink the state and curb… the socialist policies of Labour-controlled local authorities" (Martin, 2015: 263) continued when a Labour government was next elected nationally, although the rhetoric around localism

shifted, as did the scaling of governance strategies. For the North of England, perhaps the most striking examples of New Labour's early regionally-directed policy drives were its Sustainable Communities and New Deals for Communities plans (Goodchild and Hickman, 2006), although even the word 'community' was problematically conceptualised (Wallace, 2010). That is, too often this word obscured governance strategies that abdicated responsibilities for impoverished places and populations at neighbourhood level and masked intensified practices of competitiveness between individual cities and regions (Raco and Imrie, 2003).

Strategies of urban competitiveness were subject to critique (Ward and Jonas, 2004), and sometimes from unexpected quarters, as in the work of architect Will Alsop. At this time, Alsop was employed on a suite of master plans for numerous de-industrialising urban centres in the North of England typically characterised in policy and cultural terms by economic inertia and poverty. He re-imagined Barnsley as a Tuscan hill town; in Bradford he suggested the flooding of a large area in front of its Victorian Town hall; he envisaged a riverside complex in Middlesbrough with buildings in the shape of board games and toys; and in the New Millennium Community development in East Manchester he designed an apartment block called 'Chips', so-named because it resembled three chipped potatoes laid on top of each other (Porter, 2010). Alsop's flamboyant schemes received much media attention at the time, and some of his ideas, such as the 'Chips' building, were eventually built

according to his designs. Leaving aside questions of his signature style, more important for our purposes is the place his individual plans held within Alsop's wider proposals for the North of England, which was to re-imagine its towns and cities as part of a linear urban network or stretched city, facilitated by the M62 motorway (Alsop, 2005; Martin, 2010). His most cogent ideas treated cities in the North of England as potential partners in cooperative and collaborative region building (Hatherley, 2010), rather than individualised economic units.

Will Alsop's plans parallel those driving the Northern Way initiative endorsed by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM, 2004; Martin, 2010), which entailed a dovetailing of modernist spatial planning and the political restructuring traditions. Both Alsop and the Northern Way took the motorway network as a spur to economic growth, and both are articulations of an infrastructural imaginary, or what Goodchild and Hickman define as "the type of 'vision'-based planning" relatively rare in explicit governmental thinking (2006: 123). The idea of using transport corridors as engines of economic growth was not new, with existing links through the Pennines, between Leeds and Manchester, being the subject of intermittent academic planning debates in the decade before Alsop and ODPM initiatives (Herbert, 2000). What was novel in the Northern Way plan was its supra-regional scale, so much so that it offered a "spatial tier that has no other official recognition" (Goodchild and Hickman 2006: 129). Such novelty of scale perhaps places it within a lineage of regionally directed

planning in Labour administrations (Martin et al., 2016: 346), but awkwardly so, not least because the Northern Way itself needs to be understood in relation to the failed attempts to institute regional assemblies earlier in the New Labour period of government (see Willett and Giovannini, 2013).

If the Northern Way was the most high-profile strand of spatially directed policy initiatives for the North of England in the first two New Labour administrations, by the third administration, the political weather was being made by Conservative politicians and their favourite think-tanks. Most infamous, with respect to debates about Northern England, were the arguments in a series of reports by Policy Exchange, co-founded by future ministers Nicholas Boles, Michael Gove and Francis Maude. In particular, its 'Cities unlimited: making urban regeneration work' report (Leunig and Swaffield, 2008) argued that area-based regeneration projects in Northern English cities such as Bradford, Hull and Sunderland would be certain to fail given their position geographically and historically on the wrong side of economic trends and flows. Better, the authors seemed to suggest, to initiate a process of managed decline than throw good investment after bad in such cities and to encourage their working-age populations to migrate to new technological industrial hubs in London and the South-East of the country. Although the soon-to-be Prime Minister David Cameron sought to distance himself quickly from the report at the

time (Watt, 2008), in retrospect one can observe its cold logics in the geographical consequences of his subsequent austerity governments.

Back to the Future: The Northern Powerhouse

Two years prior to George Osborne's first Northern Powerhouse speech in Manchester, now Lord Heseltine's 'No Stone Unturned in Pursuit of Growth' report (2012) was released, refocusing the Northern question on cities and their economies. At the heart of the Heseltine Review (2012) were two related, if recurring, contentions: that the economies of cities and regions beyond London – and the cities of the North of England in particular – are still not performing as well as they should, and that economic growth in these cities could be "unlocked" by strengthening local governments partnerships with business and by streamlining the ways in which Whitehall funds local economic development-related services and programs. "It is not the relative difference between the GVA (Gross Value Added) contributions of different regions that matters most," Heseltine argued (2012: 127), "but the ability of all regions to grow their wealth and prosperity."

Heseltine's findings largely dovetailed with the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government's (2010-2015) patchwork of city and regional planning strategies, plans which tilted away from spatial regeneration but did not push far from the shadow of London. The Coalition's approach also represented a partial,

though not insignificant departure from the previous New Labour government's Northern Way initiative (2004-2011). The Northern Way was envisioned to provide a strategic level of research, coordination and investment across the North, with an overarching mandate to address the GVA output gap between the North and the rest of the UK through a two-pronged emphasis on building a "world-class economy" and improving place-making efforts and quality of life in the North, to be enacted through institutions like the unrealised Regional Assemblies, three Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and City Region partnerships (2004 Growth Strategy; Gonzalez, 2006). In 2011, the Coalition abolished the Northern Way and the constituent RDAs (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2012), yet in many ways carried through and built upon New Labour's emphasis on more city-centred economic development strategies.

The Coalition years thus witnessed a significant formalisation and investment in the capacity and responsibilities of city regions and Combined Authorities – both New Labour concoctions – as in a series of growth-focused 'City Deals' (2011, 2013) to the former, and through the 2011 Localism Act, which granted the "power of competence" to the latter, respectively. Equally notable was the creation of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), voluntary public-private partnerships intended to bring local government and business interests together to identify public investment priorities at the city region scale, and in part fill the void left in the wake of the

abolition of RDAs in their function as quasi-regional economic development agencies (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010).

The Heseltine Review also served as a key touchstone in the work of the City Growth Commission (2013-2014), led by a select cadre of economists, bankers, real estate developers and policy elites. Although both the Review and the Commission shared many of the same concerns over national economic output – with the problematic cities of the North serving as a key referent – the latter's work played a central role in developing a contemporary Westminster consensus around a more practicable set of devolution interventions. The conclusions of the Commission were further massaged by inputs from a handful of London-based policy think-tanks and membership organisations (e.g. IPPR, Centre for Cities) and the Core Cities (along with strong salesmanship from their respective LEPs). Once again, it is curious to note the ways in which London is centred in this particular round of policy design, both in terms of the way its robust civil society furnished the venue for much of debate, and in the various ways in which conversations ostensibly about Northern cities find their way back to the 'Brightest Star', as one Centre for London report (2014) branded its own manifesto for London devolution. This is not to argue against the further devolution of powers to London, but rather to suggest that recurring southerly turns in recent debate perhaps have the effect of displacing other voices,

agenda.

This seemingly bi-partisan and business elite-centred consensus overwhelmingly coalesced around a decentralisation agenda focused on the growth-related 'levers' of public service delivery, as in programs and policies related to skills and education, welfare and housing, transport and connectivity. At the same time, the more prised fiscal powers like increased local control over finance and taxation were often promised as future rewards for the city regions exhibiting good behaviour (see Centre for Cities, 2014; IPPR-North, 2014b; Core Cities, 2013; Northern Economic Futures Commission, 2012). Devolution talk also carried forward the promise of reforms in governance at the city region level and at the interface between local and national government, including a mayoral system that was universally opposed but nevertheless ultimately accepted by Northern cities (Cities and Local Government Devolution Bill, 2015).

If this consensus sounds familiar, that's because it is, building on and borrowing from a lineage of initiatives and agendas that reach well beyond the contemporary horizon of debate. These most recent of echoes, which are now coming so rapidly that any attempt to write about English devolution in the present tense is immediately rendered passé, can at times mask the larger themes that continue to

resonate across this long history. Nevertheless, the four themes of London, the tension between political and spatial planning, characterisations of the North as problematic and questions of poverty all ring true today, some front and centre, others submerged in a layer of brand-conscious discourse and boosterish rhetoric.

The Ghosts of Northern Pasts: London, Planning, Problem Space, and Poverty

> What has the South of Britain got that the North really wants? Short answer: the economic and social stimulus of a London. What has the South got that it could well be rid of? Short answer: the inefficiency of a congested central London. (Economist, 1962, in Burnet, 2002)

Originally drafted for an *Economist* magazine editorial over half a century ago, the quote above demonstrates that the more times change, the more things stay the same. It is fitting to frame our concluding discussion with London, given the ways in which London today foregrounds the fortunes and futures of the North. Arguments persist within the North that whilst one hand of Whitehall is seemingly gifting cities such as Sheffield and Manchester increased economic autonomy, the other hand is building a spatial and economic plan tacitly placing Northern cities as post-industrial hinterlands for the London economy which already drives the allocation of infrastructure funding disproportionately to its advantage (IPPR-North, 2014a; 2015). As Martin et al. argue, despite the rhetoric of cities in the North of England acting as a counter-weight to London's hegemony, Osborne's Powerhouse speeches need to be read alongside the contemporaneous Treasury anxiety that "the growth of London is not hindered or compromised in any way" (2016: 343).

London has also played an outsized role in the development and distribution of devolution in the first place, much as it did in earlier eras. While cries and demands from various Northern voices have always been present, the current version of devolution was crafted in the formal and informal spaces of power in London, not in Manchester or Leeds or Newcastle. The Northern Powerhouse, like so many efforts that have come before it, is thus always as much about London as it is about the North. When the satirical Daily Mash (2015) ran a headline announcing "Northern Powerhouse relocated to London", the true irony is that it was never not there. London is more present in the North than ever, with their intertwined politics and populations engaged in "a kind of relational embrace" that is social, cultural and economic in profound ways (Savage et al, 2015: 297).

Second, current plans for a Northern Powerhouse represent a deepening reliance on a political rather than spatial fix for the problems of the North. This long history reveals a constant toggling between solutions rooted in spatial planning – new infrastructure, regenerated neighbourhoods, bricks and mortar and pipes and wires – and those rooted in political power – new jurisdictions, new governance structures, new alliances of institutions operating at different scales. The Northern Powerhouse in this sense is generally part of the latter, a successor to the Northern Way, RDAs and Government Offices, representing a line of thinking and intervening

that is linked but overall very different from physical and infrastructural investments in the fabric of this cross-Pennine Randstad. While HS2 and the imagined HS3 connecting Liverpool to Newcastle/Hull is now discussed in conjunction with the Northern Powerhouse, they remain institutionally and imaginatively distinct. Even Transport for the North – the newest of statutory institutions one would think would be at the centre of a Northern Powerhouse, as it is the only institution operating at the same scale – is not part of formal devolution debates, which are focused on city region deals.

Third, if one thing has changed in the relationship between the North as a place with problems and the North as a problem space unto itself, it is the emergence of deeper divisions internal to the North as the dominant spatial ontology of problem spaces. Internal divisions once centred on identity, sport and economic rivalry (Caunce, 2003) are at risk of morphing into something deeper, accelerated through devolution deals that are uneven, varying fundamentally from one to another. Thus we can glimpse increasing gaps between the increasingly wealthy, connected and globalised spaces of the Core Cities (Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield Newcastle) and their regional economic hinterlands, and a lack of even-handedness in how city-regions are being incorporated within this agenda. Although we do not dispute appetite for new regionalism in politics on the ground in the North (Giovannini, 2016), the fragmented, London-centric, deal-making nature of the current version of

devolution risks allowing narrowly-interested elites – including many southern-based property owners heavily invested in an increasingly glass and steel core of Core Cities – to "solve" the problem of the North by rendering certain places elite and other places permanently obsolete (see Giovannini, this collection). Fiscal devolution, as Martin suggests, "could end up favouring the very largest cities" only (2015: 264), and those advocates of the current Powerhouse proposal demonstrate a tin ear to the echoes of even the recent past, such as the suspicions of the New Labour and Northern Way era of small local authorities regarding the overwhelming ambitions and influence of the larger Core Cities within regional plans (Goodchild and Hickman, 2006: 129). Etherington and Jones rightly raise a note of caution about the implications for 'ordinary' cities and places outside the orbit of the starring cities in Powerhouse drives (2016: 3).

This seeming willingness to build a "Northern Powerhouse" from very few parts of the North prompts attention to questions of poverty. Today the North sees starkly higher rates of poverty and lower overall health expectancy relative to the rest of England, yet has faced disproportionately high per capita public spending cuts over the course of recent administrations (Maxwell, 2014). As we have argued, concerns over social welfare have undergirded the imaginations and interventions that have shaped and reshaped the North over many decades. Osborne's prescriptions for a Northern Powerhouse are perhaps no exception, yet concerns with poverty and

equity have largely been eschewed in favour of a general focus on wealth creation, arguably at the expense of other policy goals. In a broad survey of recent arguments for devolution, the New Economics Foundation (2015) found that more than four in ten "focus on achieving economic growth as the main justification for devolving power", while only a fraction address questions of poverty and power. The Powerhouse agenda, lest we forget, arises from the same political grouping that founded the Policy Exchange think-tank and whose recommendations for the economically and socially excluded populations of Northern English cities implied an exodus for those who are able to the honeyed hi-tech hubs of London, Oxford and Cambridge and a retrenchment of financial support for less lucky places in the North (Leunig and Swaffield, 2008). Far more than a rhetorical pivot, the extent to which the Government's current devolution and urban growth agendas will prove equitable, inclusive and meaningful to communities beyond the preferred spaces of the Core Cities remains in question (New Economics Foundation, 2015). The backroom, invitation only processes through which devolution plans, proposals and deals have been formulated have all but ignored civil society's leadership role in this area – including the very voluntary and community organisations working the ever-growing front lives of poverty alleviation and community development across the North (Bubb, 2015; Whillans-Welldrake, 2015).

When it comes to poverty, advocates of the Powerhouse, including those in the North itself, seem impervious to the lessons of the recent past, as in the failed aspirations and logics of the Northern Way, which were backed by many of the current political leaders in the North. The Northern Way's argument for increased investment in the North to drive economic productivity was not part of "a national commitment to reduce regional inequalities" per se, as might have been the case in the interventions of earlier post-war Labour administrations, because merely "reducing the gap in regional growth rates does nothing to reduce disparities in economic conditions in absolute terms" (Goodchild and Hickman, 2006: 130). This is an observation which Northern political leaders should reflect on when considering not only what the Powerhouse might do for their cities, but also who it should really serve. Paring down the Powerhouse rhetoric to its core suggests that the current devolution discourse is not at all about making people less poor, or addressing issues of entrenched social and economic inequality, but rather about making *certain* places (London as well as Northern cities) more wealthy and productive in a narrowly financial sense.

The continued centrality of all four themes within contemporary discussions of the North has been made even clearer by the reactions to Brexit. The choice voters made to ignore the spatial developments funded by the European Union in favour of a political solution with very unclear outcomes is part of the long tradition of

tension, as outlined above, between these two forms of intervention. London is once again the shining emblem, the North once again both a problematic space and a poor one (Williams, 2016). As Zoe Williams notes, "This story about the deprived north, however, will have lasting and profoundly misleading consequences for the political landscape, if we don't think more deeply about it". This has been true now for more than 150 years.

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[i] The necessity of this historical perspective has only been heightened by the results of the Brexit referendum and the subsequent change in government. While the impact of the latter we will leave to our other colleagues in this volume to explain, the clear role of the North, and Northern poverty and anger (Williams, 2016), in the result of the vote are clear evidence that a more profound consideration of North/South relations is overdue.

[ii] See the recent proposal by Michael Heseltine to create a mayoral development corporation responsible for the redevelopment of Redcar (Davies, 2016).

[iii] Although archival documents show that there were debates at Cabinet level at that time as to whether national policy towards Liverpool may have better followed a process of "managed decline", to use the words of the then Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe (Travis, 2011).