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The Implications of England's Northern Powerhouse for Cultural Democracy and Regional Cultural Policymaking

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Abstract

The 'Northern Powerhouse' is the name given to the recent public policy initiatives and investment led by the UK government to re-balance economies and stimulate growth in the North of England by locally devolving power. This exploratory paper presents and critiques the Northern Powerhouse concept from a Cultural Policy Studies perspective. Based on interviews with two key regional policy stakeholders from Leeds and Manchester, the paper illuminates the cities' contrasting approaches to the Northern Powerhouse. In so doing, it establishes the terms of reference for a robust scholarly critique of policy, rhetoric and decision-making regarding the Northern Powerhouse.

Supporting the findings of previous studies into cultural funding, the paper argues that the early initiatives funded by the Northern Powerhouse are essentially personality-led, focussing on expensive flagship arts buildings and responding to the agendas of charismatic cultural leaders. By reflecting on alternative policy approaches, the paper considers the implications of the case study for regional cultural policymaking worldwide and concludes by assessing the significance of devolution and rebalancing of funding to cultural democracy.

Keywords: Northern Powerhouse, Cultural Policy, devolution, arts funding, arts management

Introduction

The 'Northern Powerhouse' is a name given to the new public policy initiatives and investment led by central government to re-balance economies and stimulate growth in the north of England, under conditions of locally devolved power (HM Government, 2015). This exploratory paper will present and critique the Northern Powerhouse concept from an Arts Management and Cultural Policy Studies perspective. It will consider the rationales and practices of arts funding and cultural policy decisions at a local level in the northern regions of England, and explore how these are becoming the focus of attention under the new devolution strategies in development in city-regions across the North.

The sporadic inclusion of the arts and culture within the Northern Powerhouse agenda raises questions about and highlights tensions between different policy approaches, for example between capital and revenue investment, between funding buildings as opposed to people (namely artists, audiences and wider communities). Through original qualitative research with two key policy stakeholders¹, this paper will illuminate the contrasting approaches to the Northern Powerhouse manifested by Leeds and Manchester, the two largest cities in the region, and discusses the wider policy implications of these responses. In the context of huge funding disparities between the centre (London) and the English regions (Stark et al., 2013), alongside the development of new models of administration and arts infrastructure in Scotland and Wales, the paper will ultimately explore the possibilities for change and critically investigate the different narratives of value articulated under devolution in the North.

Background

The concept of the Northern Powerhouse was first introduced in June 2014 by George Osborne in a speech in Manchester, where he argued that the lack of economic and physical connections between the cities and city regions of the North of England was holding back their growth. According to Osborne, the rationale behind this heavily publicized new policy initiative is to address the widely acknowledged economic imbalance in the UK and to invest in growth in the English regions: “the whole is less than the sum of its parts [...] so the powerhouse of London dominates more and more” (Centre for Cities, 2014).

To date the concept has been poorly defined, focusing predominantly on developing transport links and infrastructure. Initially designed to support a call from five “core northern cities” (Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle, Sheffield and Liverpool) for a £15bn investment over five years in science, transport and infrastructure, the call now extends to “city regions”, and includes Hull, the forthcoming UK City of Culture 2017. Under mayoral control, with devolution plans being negotiated across wide-ranging public-private partnerships and administrative areas, devolved city-regions will have much greater control over similarly broad policy agendas and resources, such as education, health and social care budgets.

The geography of devolution deals, and their potential to ameliorate or exacerbate spatial inequalities in cultural policymaking, is therefore a key aspect of current debate, highlighting the need for connectivity between city-regions and the spaces in between across the North of England. Furthermore, as culture is gradually (and sporadically) placed more centrally within devolution strategies, the choices of policymakers become increasingly politically contentious. In a climate of increasing and entrenched instrumentalism in UK cultural policymaking, twinned with ongoing public funding cuts for services and commissioning across local government, the role and value of culture is subject to constant negotiation and contestation, and the debates surrounding Northern Powerhouse reveal the interests and power relations of different stakeholder groups.

For example, following successful lobbying from the Greater Manchester city region, George Osborne recently pledged £78m for The Factory, a brand new arts centre on the old Granada Studios site in central Manchester that will provide a permanent home for the biannual Manchester International Festival, as part of a mixed-use property development scheme for the city’s finance and legal services district. Revenue funding of £9m has also been promised by central government, but will need to be provided by Arts Council England. Potential conflicts of interest are starting to emerge, for example with the secondment of Arts Council England’s Executive Director of Arts and Culture, Simon Mellor as The Factory’s interim project director. Questions are also being raised about the priorities for cultural investment and its presumed returns, given the shortfalls of culture and leisure budgets across the broader city-region and across the North, dwindling community assets bases, and the further competition over central arts funding for existing infrastructure which the Factory will inevitably stimulate.

Research questions

This uncomfortable policy context raises a number of significant questions that might fruitfully be explored with the field of Cultural Policy Studies. The key research questions were articulated as follows.

1. What are the stated priorities for cultural policymakers regarding the realisation of the Northern Powerhouse?
2. How are the values and roles attributed to culture articulated within new devolution strategies, and how do they present new challenges or possibilities?
3. What is the relationship between cultural investment planning and urban development?
4. What role do cultural leaders and flagship buildings play?
5. What implications does devolution have for the peripheries of city-regions and for the relationships between cultural policymakers across the North of England?

Methodology

This paper presents the findings of preliminary research based around these core questions conducted by the two authors in spring 2016. The primary research comprises two semi-structured depth interviews with key stakeholders from the two largest northern English cities/city-regions: Leeds and Greater Manchester. Leeds and Manchester are currently at very different stages in their engagement with the Northern Powerhouse initiative, and the strategic sampling of expert voices from these two contrasting cities was deemed likely to produce a balanced, if admittedly exploratory, overview of regional engagement with the Northern Powerhouse. The depth interview was chosen as the most effective method to elicit the requisite depth, detail and thick description (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) to inform the ensuing case study.

The scholarly aim of this paper is to establish the terms of reference for a robust critique of policy rhetoric and decision-making regarding the Northern Powerhouse over the past two years, and to explore the implications for regional cultural policymaking across the globe. This will be achieved through a critical application of recent Arts Management and Cultural Policy Studies theory to the live, single, revelatory case study (Yin, 2009) of the Northern Powerhouse. The aim of this approach is to explore emerging theories on cultural policy decision-making and to critically investigate the power relations of political and cultural elites at a local/regional level.

For example, it could be argued that the Northern Powerhouse constitutes an exemplar of what Eleanor Belfiore refers to as “the prevalence of bullshitting in the contemporary public sphere” (2009, p. 343). Belfiore goes on to argue that many of the key factors in the cultural policy debate are “indifferent to how things really are” and cultivate vested interests. In the Arts Management literature, Nisbett and Walmsley’s (2016) recent empirical work on charismatic leadership has demonstrated how cultural policymakers are wont to allocate money to charismatic arts leaders rather than to ideas and highlighted the gap between the theory and practice of arts funding. Recent literature focusing on methods and mechanisms for establishing the value of culture for policy-making and appraisal, in both grey and academic literature (e.g. Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016; O’Brien, 2016) will also be drawn on. These emerging theories will be probed through the development of this new case example, which will be developed here through two depth interviews with leading cultural figures in Leeds and Manchester.

This qualitative empirical work will be supported through an extensive critical review of the secondary (both grey and academic) literature on the Northern Powerhouse, to consider the broader public debate and opinion on the Northern Powerhouse and devolution strategies.

Defining the concept: what is the Northern Powerhouse?

As discussed in the introduction, the Northern Powerhouse technically refers to the new public policy initiatives and investment led by the UK Government to re-balance economies and stimulate growth in the north of England under conditions of locally devolved power. Even a cursory glance at this definition reveals the lofty rhetoric that has characterised the policy discussion of the Northern Powerhouse since its recent inception. This is a highly ambitious and potentially high-stakes initiative, which has been proudly figure-headed by George Osborne, Chancellor of the Exchequer¹ and Member of Parliament (MP) for Tatton (in Cheshire, north-west England). An acknowledged arts friend, if not lover, who is passionate about his constituency’s nearest city, Manchester, Osborne has led his series of announcements of investment in key flagship sites with gusto (Moore, 2016), candidly stating the prejudices he has had to overcome in focusing on the North whilst claiming Conservative responsibility for “putting the Power into the Northern Powerhouse” and bringing stronger democracy through brokering the devolution deal with the Labour strong-hold of Greater Manchester (HMT, 2015).

¹ This is the UK Parliament’s term for what many other countries refer to as the Finance Minister.

Perhaps inevitably, the term has attracted not only significant criticism but widespread cynicism across the north of England. As the senior officer from Leeds City Council explained, the very concept of the Northern Powerhouse is premised on opposition or competition to the south; it encourages northern regions to ‘look south’. But *within* the North itself, perceptions are somewhat different, with the main Northern Powerhouse beneficiary to date, Manchester, perceived actually as a “Western Powerhouse”, leading smaller fish like Leeds and Hull to look enviously across the Pennines to their western neighbour. However, perceptions are starting to shift as Hull approaches its year as UK City of Culture and as Leeds prepares a bid for European City of Culture. According to the senior Leeds City Council officer interviewed, one positive aspect of Leeds’ pending bid is that it is focussing the city’s energy on becoming a major European city rather than on historical parochial rivalries.

Rebalancing and conflation with devolution

There has been some conflation of the proposition of the Northern Powerhouse with the promises of devolution, which is hardly surprising given their recent introduction into the local cultural management lexicon. The ideas of re-balancing investment towards the regions (away from the capital) and of ‘place-based’ policy making have longer histories than these initiatives, in part through the work of the consultants behind the *Rebalancing Our Cultural Capital* report (Stark et al, 2013; see below) and also more historically initiatives such as *Living Places*, which attempted to bring a range of planning and cultural agencies and policy bodies in line through a common methodology for place-based strategic investment in housing market renewal and culture and leisure services (Evans & Foord, 2008).

Sir Richard Leese, leader of the Manchester city Council was careful to make distinctions between the Powerhouse initiative and devolution at a recent meeting of the Manchester Cultural Partnership, stating that the former is based on economic theory, whilst devolution concerns the integration of decision-making powers into local infrastructure. Interestingly, the first sector to be formally ‘devolved’ in Greater Manchester, health and social care, does not technically comprise devolution, since the National Health Service remains a national mandate, although the ways in which this mandate is delivered will be decided locally. This distinction is useful as it emphasises the need to create new arrangements for managing and allocating resources and to establish alternative locales, processes for and owners of accountability. The sense within the cultural sector is that within these shifting arrangements there may be new opportunities for arts and culture to be recognised for the ways in which they deliver health and social care (and other) services locally, and once recognised and incorporate they may increase their capture of local resources through cultural commissioning (NEF, 2016).

A distinction between devolution and the NPH was also made by our Manchester interviewee, an experienced international creative producer and co-Chair of the What Next North West chapter (a cultural advocacy network group). The main distinction in this case, however, was on the basis of connectivity across the North compared with a focus on individual city-regions:

There are two different things going on – there is devolution which is about a number of authorities coming together into a combined authority in terms of social care, health and possibly education. That is quite different from the Northern Powerhouse which is a lot more of a pan-regional thing, not just Greater Manchester but actually is about how a wider area comes together economically. There is movement of people between in those areas, because it is a wider area there are more people who want to invest, the transport infrastructure is better. And that for me is quite different from devolution, which is about Leeds, or Manchester or Liverpool.

She also acknowledges that at present it is less clear how individual organisations may play a part in new arrangements or influence their own position, hence the need for networking groups such as What Next which can share information in partnerships across organisations and promote more internal conversation.

How do we as a sector, well, in order to unlock that money, health and skills are making big transformations, aren't they, in terms of their management structures and their governance structures? We've had conversations about what big change might mean, or at the very early days, but it hasn't got beyond that. And I can't see that we can be real beneficiaries of devolution, unless we really work out what is it that we can deliver and how are we best structured and set up to deliver that, if it is going to be a source of income going forward. Not just a source of income but how we are going to have a foot in, a place at that table... as individual organisations we are never going to be there, or be helping those decisions, or might be beneficiaries of those decisions, I don't think we can do that as individuals.

There is a question mark over how leadership and accountability will play out under devolved arrangements, and where ultimately responsibility for sector development and managing investment will reside:

At a strategic level there is a responsibility which is on Arts Council because external partnerships are part of their brief. They are the ones that have partnerships with local authorities, they have other strategic partnerships as well, so it partly has to be them but they can't do it on their own. Then they need strong people in local authorities where there are any left, to be helping driving from that end. It is probably a three-pronged thing isn't it? You have got local authorities, you have got Arts Council and then you've got the arts organisations themselves. ..[I]s it an equal three-way split of responsibility? Well I guess they can't work without each other.

There was recognition from the senior officer at Leeds City Council that the arts and culture are very much riding on the coattails of the Northern Powerhouse.

“The cultural and creative sectors have to force their way in [...] because the local economic partnership is a fairly traditional one [that mainly] understands how to invest in capital.”

In Leeds, this policy subjugation appears to be explained not only by the seemingly intangible nature of cultural development, but also by the lack of coherent cultural policymaking in the region:

“The cultural and creative sector doesn't have a singular voice in Leeds or in Yorkshire, that's different from other regions [...]. The cultural sector has expected its funders to speak for it [...] and the cities mainly haven't seen the need to coalesce around an independent cultural networking organisation.”

The interviewee at Leeds City Council felt that the Northern Powerhouse did have the potential to “warm up relationships” and encourage policymakers to be “less fearful of quite radical new models”. He also argues that it could “provide a backdrop in which you could make some savings between authorities in terms of cultural provision: could you have a West Yorkshire museums service, a Yorkshire-wide library service, devolvement of the local authorities grant-giving money to the Arts Council regionally? However, he felt that there wasn't much appetite in the cultural sector at the moment for working more collaboratively across the region.

Conversely, according to both our interviewees the regional offices of Arts Council England now seem to be working more collaboratively under the new management structure of a director for the North. As the Manchester interviewee suggests:

Locally we have Arts Council staff in the North who work really hard for the North, I can't really talk about other regions. I don't feel we could have better. It is a very good ground for them to work with but I feel they are trying very hard to try to move the money up to the North and to try to have the big strategic partnerships that need to be made, and to try to have artistic ambition as well.

This renewed effort to rebalance arts funding comes largely to the efforts of independent consultants, Stark et al. (2013) who established that in 2012/13, while Londoners benefitted from cultural spending to the tune of £86.41 per head, the rest of the population received only £8.48 – under 10% of the London levels. These figures were so shocking that in 2015, the controversy surrounding historical imbalances in regional arts funding in England ultimately provoked a parliamentary inquiry, which determined that London receives a share of arts funding which is “out of all proportion to its population” and this “clear funding imbalance [...] must be urgently rectified” (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2015).² This has been backed up by similar promises of rebalancing, although largely reconfigured as place-making, in the publication of a long awaited White Paper ‘Our Culture’, the first on arts and culture since Jennie Lee’s now-famous original arts policy paper [REF] 50 years ago, and a Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee inquiry in May 2016, *Countries of Culture*, which also considered challenges for broader cultural sector provision across the country, with a particular focus on new models for local development to mitigate funding disparities.

However the discriminate allocation of Treasury funding to projects selected by the Chancellor, cannot be the solution for the call for more equitable access to culture or distribution of resources. Neither the Northern Powerhouse or devolution offer much in the way of comfort – with the former relying on building-based investments and existing tourism-led models for economic impact (such as the Hull City of Culture and the Great Exhibition of the North), and the latter likely to be a “patchwork” of different local arrangements with even greater asymmetry between the devolved regions themselves and London/the South (Riddell, 2016). Despite the buzz, the rhetoric, the shiny new venues and the ribbon cutting, the Northern Powerhouse is unlikely to rectify this imbalance.

Many shades of decentralisation

A key concern when examining the Northern Powerhouse initiative is the way in which it has disregarded and indeed transgressed existing funding frameworks, mechanism and processes. Within the political context of devolution and the semantic context of northern power, there is a clear irony inherent to this national interference in regional policymaking. In the words of the senior Leeds officer, “the Government makes the decisions and tells the Arts Council to deliver it. [...] It is disempowering because you’ve got no teeth, while having your own resources reduced.”

The council officer went on to explain how this unconventional approach has actually held the Leeds region back:

Yorkshire feels there is a right way to do things. It [the Northern Powerhouse] isn’t about asking for expressions of interest which then go through a process: it’s ideas driven, people driven and personality driven. [...] The authenticity for the business cases for some of these more recent investments isn’t as robust as it would be if you went through the traditional funding route with the arts council.

It could be argued, then, that the Northern Powerhouse lacks a legitimate policy framework and is almost defiantly failing to follow due process. As the initiative is coming directly from Number 11 Downing Street (the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s office), it is bypassing not only local authority and Arts Council grant-making procedures, but also the governmental Department for Culture Media and Sport.

This provides further support for Nisbett and Walmsley’s (2016) finding that cultural spending often manifests itself in the form of ministers and civil servants bequeathing money directly to big personalities and overriding any published or transparent policy systems. It also highlights the need

² Although Arts Council England has since pledged to heed Stark et al.’s recommendations and allocate more Lottery money back to the regions, this has failed to address the imbalance in public arts funding distributed via grant-in-aid. In addition, local government cuts to culture have impacted the most deprived areas of England most significantly.

for critical enquiry which moves further away from the accepted narrative of centralised mechanisms for Evidence-based Policy Making (EBPM), the dominant model for public policy in general (Cairney, 2016), and cultural policy in particular (Gray 2009) and towards a critical interrogation of the actual processes of policy making and their geographies and locales. O'Brien (2016) identifies the ethics of policy making using evidence to be framed by 'establishment' cultures with the help and incorporation of particular research disciplines:

“This core identity, which fused both longstanding gentlemanly tropes with modern managerialism, was buttressed by social science. This was seen most obviously in the use of social scientific evidence in the policy process” (O'Brien, 2016, p. 132).

Key objects and devices which articulate these forms of managerialism are fundamental to 'the comprehensive rationale of policy making' (Cairney, 2016) within the framework of New Public Management, which proposes cycle of rationalisation, implementation and evaluation. One such 'object' which helps policy makers perform these logics of practice is the Treasury Green Book, (HMT, 2003) which promotes economic methods, such as cost-benefit analysis, to establish the business case for intervention (O'Brien, 2013; 2016). This performance is partly about transparency, but also about risk-mitigation, and in the case of the Factory, the lack of a comprehensive business plan, feasibility testing or clear sense of artistic direction has been reported as something resulting from a decision to go with "gut instinct" and "a very headline idea" (Moore, 2016). Anecdotally cooked up by Osborne and Sir Howard Bernstein, Manchester's chief executive, although part of a longstanding public desire to have a national flagship in the city, the initiative has been rationalised to date on a broad impact study which looked at current capacity for inward investment, it seems the decision demonstrates a Weberian combination of charismatic leadership supported by the bureaucratic process, albeit with much of the bureaucracy post-hoc.

Indeed, this circumnavigation of expected policy rationales and processes has put those not in immediate receipt of first tranche of central investments into culture in the North under the Powerhouse initiative on the back foot, and according to the interviewee from Manchester, emphasised the need for strong leadership:

If I was Leeds or Liverpool I would hoping that I had really good people working to develop what the Liverpool and Leeds response would be. I think the focus has been on Manchester but I don't think that doesn't necessarily translate into winners or losers; I think it is about really working out what each place can offer that is unique and how it can sell itself that is unique. But that is not going to just come, there would have to be work to put it into that.

There is also a tacit acknowledgement that while there may in principle be opportunities for greater democracy under devolution, in practice the pathway to cultural development through place-based investment is not an even playing field.

It is sort of an iterative process, isn't it? Trying to move forward through the mud to find out where the pot of gold is. And also when the pot of gold lands it is not fair for everybody. So when the Factory lands which is absolutely fantastic for this city, amazing for this city, amazing for the arts in this country. But it's not, it will be a big pebble in the pond. And the ripples will not ripple evenly over everybody.

Cultural policy 'proper' or 'display'

As suggested above, the dominant models for place-making at play in the Northern Powerhouse rely on culture acting as an *attractor* for inward investment. As the Manchester interviewee proposed:

One of the things has to be about place-making. If culture is at the heart of making a place a good place to live, more people will come and live there and there will be more resource in terms of local economy. More people will want to invest, more people will want to live there so there is a whole thing about culture being important to the NPH to make it a vibrant,

growing area for investment and living, which are all the things behind somewhere becoming successful, or more successful.

Selective investment into projects which are capital, large-scale and building-based raises both public and professional concerns about the business case and policy rationales behind investment decisions, as well as the ways in which they may cause further imbalance – from East to West rather than North to South. These concerns are arguably obscured by the cultural legitimacy claimed by the plans. For example, the announcement of investment for The Factory came armed with a set of cultural references designed to anchor the development into Manchester's popular cultural history, specifically connecting to the Factory record label (owned and run by cultural impresario and media presenter, Tony Wilson, which housed musical artists of the 1980s and 1990s) to Greater Manchester's pivotal role as the location of the industrial revolution.

In media commentary, the investment into culture and the role this may play in the Northern Powerhouse is discussed in comparison with other 'products' of the knowledge economy. For example, the investment into the Graphene institute in Manchester to accelerate commercial exploitation of this discovery (and compete against the rapidly increasing global market for its application) is likened by Moore (2016) to the innovation and application of steam power and its effect on the rapidity and scale of social, industrial and economic change in the North in the 18th and 19th centuries. As such, these investments are very much 'on-brand' for Manchester, as the Original Modern city branded by Factory records creative consultation and one-time Creative Director for Manchester, Peter Saville (Marketing Manchester, 2009).

In the case of Leeds, there is a feeling in some circles that the city is behind the curve, not helped of course by Prime Minister's David Cameron's off-camera provocation that people in Yorkshire hate each other so much that they cannot reach a city region deal! But the interview with the senior manager from Leeds City Council offered an alternative interpretation. Within the Council, there is a clearly strong desire to take a co-creative, bottom-up approach to the Powerhouse. Apparently, what Leeds ultimately "asks for" will depend on the outcome of its co-created cultural strategy and will be tempered by a pragmatic awareness of the need to revenue fund any major capital investment:

It's hard to move away from the big shiny white box and big shiny black box [...] but I think we will go down a road that is about looking after what we have already and be revenue neutral.

However, there is a realisation within Leeds City Council that although the Government may well "want to cut some ribbons [...] and open some shiny things", the sums of investment involved are currently nowhere near significant enough to engender any genuine devolvement of power:

There's not enough resource within the thing called the Northern Powerhouse to be able to devolve any decision making or funding at scale. [...] Psychologically, we are still a mile away from equality and from thinking about what the Northern Powerhouse can do: it's still drip-fed, crumbs off the table.

Compared with the eye-watering sums being spent on London's second Crossrail project, for example, the seemingly large amounts being allocated even for large-scale pet projects like The Factory remain relatively paltry. So we can already see how regional policymakers might feel cynical and sidelined by Government initiatives such as the Northern Powerhouse, which encroach on cultural spending with no clear remit or legitimate authority.

However, as the Leeds interviewee confessed, this is perhaps just another manifestation of *realpolitik*; and to take the moral (or policy) high ground would only culminate in less investment.

Where's there's criticism of it, it's because it just feels like a political construct for particular political ambitions and aims [and] that's the reality of the world we live in. Either we go 'we'll try and be part of it and get what we can out of it or [...] we walk away and don't get any resource. How is that responsible? That's a challenge ... people

don't really trust its motivations politically. [But] the cynicism is in the background, people are getting on with their job.

However, although on the one hand it might be considered naïve to shun public investment, on the other hand playing the *realpolitik* game can clearly backfire: as The Factory initiative illustrates, a seemingly generous one-off capital investment by central Government requires significant annual revenue funding by regional funders to actually enable it to operate.

A True North: connecting or competing?

Only time will tell what ultimate impact the Northern Powerhouse agenda has on identities and working relationships across the north of England.

In Leeds, “people have the commitment to it but find it harder for that to be part of their regular dialogue”. It's to do with knowledge, experience and confidence about talking about it and there is a fear that it's a bit soft. But I think that's changing [...] there is a theoretical understanding about it but it's not quite ingrained enough.”

As the Leeds interviewee argued, people have a strong sense of place and identity, which could discourage them from taking a broader view:

“You have to work where people's identity exists rather than try to force them to have an identity [...] the North has a bit of an identity [...] but there are sub-identities within the North: Yorkshire is a much stronger identified brand than Leeds is [...] but you're probably from Manchester rather than greater Manchester [...] or Lancashire.”

Despite the Northern Powerhouse rhetoric, there clearly isn't “one North” but manifold cities, city regions, villages, national parks, conurbations, local authorities, counties and supra-counties all competing and/or collaborating to realise their own disparate goals. Amongst these often forced and contested entities, some voices are heard loud and clear, whilst others have no voice whatsoever. In the context of devolution, this relative empowerment is arguably determined by the devolved entities themselves: as the Leeds officer put it, “there is a danger that it becomes more about city centres [...] but that is up for cities to decide.”

However, despite their cynicism about certain aspects of the Northern Powerhouse, both interviewees seemed to concur that the initiative is likely to improve working relationships between cultural policymakers across the North. As the Leeds officer articulated it:

It will probably galvanise us rather than pit us against one another. [...] There is a potential for us to work more closely together. The relationships between those cities and the cultural policy people, me and my peers, are positive and the only thing that prevents them moving forwards are the time and resources to do so.

It seems, then, that the Powerhouse could in actuality function as a kind of participatory action research, whereby regional policymakers are forced into adopting more radical models and less narrow or parochial perspectives.

Implications

Ongoing research and scrutiny of how the north of England responds to and self-determines the future policy initiatives of the Northern Powerhouse will provide further insights into the distinctiveness of local cultural policymaking (Johanson et al., 2014), within a nexus of relationships with national cultural policy (both proper and display). Competitions such as the *Great Exhibition of the North* and *UK City of Culture* position culture predominantly as a temporary spotlight on places as exciting visitor attractions to capture tourism spend, rather than something that can be celebrated as part of everyday life forming the basis for participation, for civic inclusion and for social capital. This privileges buildings and festivals as sites of consumption, rather than eco-systems and infrastructures,

networks and pathways which support progression and production. Place-making does involve drawing on the distinctive qualities and structures of feeling of place, however it should not mean neglecting the ways in which cultural policy can address inequalities and provide the means for more ‘inclusive growth’.

Recent studies (e.g. Thompson, 2015; Matthews and O’Brien, 2015) have questioned whether property development and buildings-based strategies should continue to be priorities for local cultural policy in a post-industrial, even post-regeneration society. These studies have called for much greater consideration of the social and cultural benefits of cultural regeneration which result from “community development and self-expression” rather than buildings (Hutton, 1993, p.1785). They also warn of the potential for geographic disparities as creative city approaches privilege large metropolitan cities over rural areas (Hutton, 2009). Supporting the findings of these studies, cultural phenomena such as the successful emergence of the non-building-based models epitomized by National Theatre of Scotland and National Theatre Wales have demonstrated the effectiveness of alternative models, where cultural spending works within an existing capital infrastructure and focusses investment on people.

Conclusions and limitations

This exploratory paper has shone a spotlight on how regional governments and authorities engage with national cultural policy initiatives. The contrasting case studies of Leeds and Manchester illustrate the pros and cons of divergent approaches: while Manchester has managed to galvanise its arts and cultural sector, speak with a strong, unified and charismatic voice, and in return reap the apparent benefit of millions of pounds of investment, Leeds has decided to bide its time and take a more organic, democratic approach. Only time will tell which strategy will be the more effective in the medium to long term. As things stand, while Leeds has its ideals and aspirations, Manchester has the PR, the money, and the shiny new buildings.

Despite the caveat that the empirical work behind this research is inevitably exploratory, based as it is on the (albeit “expert”) opinions of two senior cultural stakeholders, the findings of this paper suggest that in terms of cultural policy initiatives, the manifestation of the Northern Powerhouse has to date been dominated by the funding and development of expensive flagship arts buildings, which lack evidence of public, audience and community demand and contradict recent critical evaluations of the social and cultural benefits of cultural regeneration (Thompson, 2015; Matthews and O’Brien, 2015). Future research might therefore benefit from probing these emerging findings amongst a wider stakeholder group derived from all of the future city regions. As the Northern Powerhouse is still in its infancy, cultural policy scholars might also wish to evaluate how the earmarked investment in buildings actually translates into impact, while carefully monitoring the advent of new decision and initiatives.

Devolution is a major and controversial preoccupation in a number of European Union nations at the moment, and the case study of the Northern Powerhouse in England provides a timely illustrative case study of how regional cultural policy (and thus the arts and culture more manifestly) can both benefit from and be manipulated as a puppet of national policymaking. It also illustrates how cultural policy-making actually happens, and how cultural narratives of place are drawn into the logics of practice and politics of personality which continue to override questions of due process, robust planning and public transparency.

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