

Seeing the global in the local

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Steve Hanson

Thatcher opened a new infrastructural space during her reign. Osborne is attempting the same.



Photo: Steve Hanson

To look at the way the regions are re-aligning, and how the Northern Powerhouse is part of that, is in some ways to be blinded. The suffocating lack of a voice we have been describing across our series is locally experienced, but globally produced. We have to look at the global picture.

The Deloitte blog recently explained why Manchester is the 'land of opportunity' for American investors. But what is immediately striking about the article in which they state that, by David O Leary, a corporate partner, who works with large corporations on their 'tax structuring and rate management', leads the North West M&A tax team, and works with clients 'undertaking an IPO or considering an IPO exit' is that it often reads like a puff piece for Creative Tourist.

Why? O Leary sets up London and New York as 'twin ambassadors' for global tourism and 'reciprocal investment'. He shows us just how intertwined culture and finance are. Next time you hear someone describe an area as 'up and coming', because it has an artisan beer shop, a deli and a hip venue, try to also hear the phrase 'reciprocal investment'.

Sharon Zukin is still essential for understanding those processes, and for fine art markets, Julian Stallabrass, a Marxist Historian at the Courtauld. But the examples Zukin gave, in her famous Century City work, took place in New York, and played out at city-scale. What we are seeing now is a very similar game being played out at regional, national and supranational levels.

This bigger picture, as Bauman points out, is often very difficult to see in the local. But it is not impossible. When O Leary states to an audience of global investors that 'Manchester is securing a reputation for business, study, and now tourism investment', please ask yourself again how you view Manchester Metropolitan University's complicity with Manchester City Council to clear the homeless and/or protest camp known as 'The Ark' under the Mancunian Way on Oxford Road, just before Freshers' week.

If we look again to Deloitte, we can see how they are currently working with MIDAS to capitalise on 'Manchester's appeal to American audiences'. This summer it was possible to sip Prosecco bought from tents at the International Jazz Festival, directly opposite the tents of the homeless, outlawed under the Labour council's health and safety regime, and soon to be wiped from the city centre stage: Tents have been banned from the city centre; but in Manchester, some tents are more equal than others.

Although the financial benefits Manchester's sizeable and global student population actually brings is still argued over, it is clear that the city centre functions as a spectacular stage for a cosmopolitan, international audience. No inconvenient breaks in this spectacle can be tolerated. And they weren't.

We need to teach ourselves how to see the local in the global in this way, and vice versa, via its traces in the everyday surface of the city, as the Deloitte players do, but for very different reasons. Deloitte want to aid the 'Northern Powerhouse vision' to 'take shape'. They explain how they 'can only expect more backing to help Manchester fulfill its promise'. It is, they say, 'by placing our faith in the magnetic power of Britain's other cultural gems' that 'we can help bring this international interest home and invest in our fast-growing urban areas.'

When you hear those suave, assured voices, expecting more backing to help Manchester 'fulfill its promise', I hope you are asking where that backing is coming from, and to whom Manchester has a promise to keep.

To its most struggling citizens, to the migrants in status limbo helped only by organisations such as the Boaz Trust? Or to global investors whose only entitlement is longer strings of numbers glowing through their online statement? To read Manchester properly, you must also read its global interests in America, China and India. What this also tells me is that the island is not the island.

The right, it is clear, understand how culture works, if only to the extent of how they can use it. But do many on the left even know what Deloitte are saying? Do they understand how these global, urban processes work? More importantly, do they understand how what is happening in front of their very eyes is inextricably linked to those processes?

The whole point of this series in many ways has been to ask them to look, and to ask: just how important is the magnetic, geographical 'north' in all of this, once you know what global forces and interests are assembled under the name of 'the Northern Powerhouse'?

What kind of work is the invoking, the spell of 'The Northern Powerhouse' really doing? And how do we then practice a kind of rhetorical counter-magic?

The function of the state has historically been the management of territory. But in the case of The Northern Powerhouse, the state has been reduced to a confidence trick, a spell. The Northern Powerhouse sounds state-ish, but it is really an argument for getting rid of all the unsavoury jobs of the state to private interests, interests many in Westminster have direct stakes in, at the same time as retaining the power that actually matters to them, for instance in relation to constituency voting boundaries. An old game.

The right is adept at using the rhetoric of the left. Aesthetics and politics have always been a deadly mix. The neoconservatives like to mist up the windows occasionally with breathy remarks about how leisure and work resemble each other, in creative romper rooms. How the unproductive and productive is being blurred, and it actually is, in some fairly sinister ways.

Dante's hell was vertical. It inverted the wedding cake hierarchy of its time. Dante, were he in Manchester right now, might create a horizontal inferno of creative and uncreative, network and un-network. Its hellishness would be constructed by its lack of a centre, or any other orienting, existential landmarks.

This thing that gets called 'the left', that isn't really a thing, and is more a circulation of nostalgic messages, clearly has no vision to rival that of Osborne's Powerhouse, thin though it is, in terms of advising how the future should crank into action.

If the Northern Powerhouse is going to be imposed upon the north, in the absence of any credible vision from anywhere else, then we say that the redistribution of wealth has to be part of the creative digital playing fields of the future, or they should be refused.

But only the people can demand that. And when you think about that, you realise that this could be The End of History, only with a little more shouting than before. Sad dialectics. But real dialectics. And we want a left who stare at that potential future reality, rather than gazing into a drugged past, before acting.

I don't think that decentralisation itself is positive or negative, it's how and why. Deloitte are viewing their own interests through the US side of the prism, but Jon Silver of SARF presents the most troubling analysis of the region, in terms of the neoconservative nation-state, capital and global power circuit, which will course through Manchester soon.

What is being dubbed 'Silk Road 2.0' is a global infrastructural space opening as China expands into the west, and northern Europe. It is likely that the local Labour councilors will sit down once again, behind closed doors, with China.

Silver explains that this move by local politicians is risky and uncertain in terms of its potential outcomes, but is nevertheless tying the city-region's future to global models of capitalism over which they will have very little control.

This opens questions about the position of the controlling Labour party across Greater Manchester, as it is aligned to Osborne's attempt at a shift in the UK's economic basis, by allowing a new Chinese infrastructural space to emerge, while delivering his devolution agenda. It provides a city that will either suffer the consequences of Osborne's plan, or reap many of the early benefits.

Clearly, there are risks here. Clearly, this has not been explicitly agreed by 'the people'. Silver explains how the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn now stands at odds with Manchester City Council's Labour players, something that 'leaves the local party locked into a model of capitalism that has little focus on social justice beyond trickle-down economics' and with 'a very different vision from the anti-austerity agenda being led by Corbyn, McDonnell and others'.

There are very serious questions about the role of the state and the public in all of this, and Silver explains that debate is urgently required to deal with the way the regional and city scales link with global interests, and still honour its citizens.

Silver is clear that this should not be a decision taken by local and national politicians alone, that 'it should be opened up to those living in Greater Manchester who might value human rights or alternative economic strategies more than another multi-million speculative development with no social housing', which pins all our futures to 'a state-building project by an authoritarian regime'.

Silver sees the wider historical ironies here. He explains that for 'a city-region that celebrates its radical past', now 'might be a time to show the world the values of social justice and freedom that are supposedly cherished' there. He gives the example of 'famine afflicted Lancashire cotton workers during the American Civil War adopting an anti-slavery stance' that 'stands out as a precedent in challenging unjust and seemingly unmovable infrastructures of global trade'.

Manchester Co-operative memorabilia still exists which uses the American spelling of 'labor' to side with the anti-slavery north in the civil war. Liverpool, conflicted because of its local interests in shipping routes, was less enthusiastic. But here perhaps is a way in which we can bring the past into the present again: We need a kind of new city Chartism, a movement for a New Urban Charter, in which citizens once more have a say in this increasingly fait accompli vision of the north. We have already argued for a space to do this in, for a new agora. Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will remains our coping strategy.

In the Greek city-state, the name for the people in the city and the city itself were one. The word for both things was the same: Polis. Žižek describes how in love, the object of desire and desire itself are extinguished. In the same way, everything must become Polis again. The Polis and People one, Citizens and City fused.

Democracy must become a proper democracy, not a perversity. We need a distribution system that is really that – a distribution system – not a chain of concealed banditry. Retreating to the shrinking border mentality of localism or euro-refusal is not an option either. This new island polity must look outwards from its coastlines, in co-operation, to others.

We need a horizontality that really is that, richer patterns of society, not ladders. We live in a system so inflexible that it cannot even announce its own inflexibility, hiding this efficiently under rhetoric about flexibility.

I fear that instead we may run up against the limit of the human species' ability to be civilised, yet again, and how. The universe of economics is one thing, the polity another, but when the universe of physics demands change, it doesn't mess around. The real 'radical' change is coming. Like the Northern Powerhouse itself, this series is a probably just a nice dream.

But I have a duty to outline this dream, or fantasy, because we either demand change our way, or someone else's idea of it will enslave our children for another thousand years.

And so I shall finally ask, can we aim to move from perversity to a proper polity, please?