City Regions and Devolution in the UK

Beel, David, Jones, Martin

Published by Bristol University Press

Beel, David and Martin Jones.
City Regions and Devolution in the UK: The Politics of Representation.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/82168.

⇒ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/82168
**Conclusions: City-regional futures**

*Learning from a civil society perspective has great value,* especially very early on before decisions are made. Firstly, it broadens the set of knowledge available for the deliberative stages before any pens are put to paper. As already noted, it does so in a way that is as close to communities and their localities as feasible at this stage. Secondly, it is a step towards making connections and having good communication with potential future partners. ([UK2070 Commission, 2020b: 6, emphasis added](#))

The building of a spatially balanced and inclusive form of growth is a task that Westminster and Whitehall have failed to fully embrace. That has got to, and looks set to, change. As the Government sets about its task, it is right to invest in towns (and cities). But places will be helped rather than profoundly changed by the policies on offer thus far. This is because the economic forces that are making some towns more prosperous and hollowing out others are much more powerful, more poorly understood and harder to change than we are yet as a country ready to acknowledge. That said, the link between towns and successful cities is a good start for building successful policy in many places. ([Emmerich, 2020a: 6](#))

**Introduction**

The first quotation is taken from civil society perspectives within the UK2070 Commission, which as noted in the Introduction, is investigating spatial inequality and proposes an agenda for strategy long-term action. The study examines experiences in ‘left behind’ places, by looking at perspectives on inequality of those civil society organisations who are already working in these contexts. This chimes with *City Regions and Devolution in the UK: The Politics of Representation*, which has probed on the ‘symptoms’ rather than the ‘prevalence’ of the phenomenon and the role of civil society actors therein. We have provided an overview of city-region building and considered how local governance restructuring shapes political, social and cultural landscapes.
Reviewing the GMCR, SCR, SBCR, CCR and the NWGD, we have exposed the tensions and opportunities for local elites and civil society actors. Moreover, the nature of the economic development that civil society actors are expected to work within is contradictory. We have identified the tension between civil society autonomy at the margins of city–region devolution and the abrogation of responsibility at the centre. Like the social economy localism debates that preceded this wave of devolution, dependent on state and its agents, city–region building with civil society is ‘a vehicle by which social and economic risks can be moved away from the state and on to local communities, which are expected to assume responsibility’ for economic governance (Leyshon and Lee, 2003: 19–20). We maintain a position, then, that to conceptualise and understand the dynamics of civil society within city regions requires, firstly, close attention to the state and its spatial manifestations and, secondly, to the links between the state and the mainstream economy. In short, this spatially selective incorporation of civil society only moderates the city–regional effects of capitalism and certainly does very little to actually reform or replace the prevailing growth model.

A new approach is clearly needed that recognises and empowers the ‘agency of those who are facing disadvantage directly, and brings insights about how civil society offers assistance’ (UK2070 Commission, 2020b: 3). Nothing short of a ‘fundamental shift is needed to address the deep-rooted or structural problem of regional inequality’. Yet, as this book has highlighted, inequality is also a problem that is directly experienced – communities live with it and ‘have agency in making changes’ (UK2070 Commission, 2020b: 3). This implies that policymakers and communities must work together in order to define the problem and work out solutions to it. An era of ‘civic repair’ is emerging in the UK on the back of a series of economic, cultural, political and technological upheavals that collectively and individually are reshaping patterns of social cohesion and stratification and the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in communities, labour markets and the practice of citizenship. Civil society is central to these dynamics, as a site in which change is negotiated and responses developed and implemented, but also the need for further study. Chapter 3 noted and warned though that relational and empathic aspects of civil society mobilisations vis-à-vis the economy and city–regional governance should not be inadvertently seen as an excuse to further roll-back or displace state socioeconomic duties.
This chapter looks at two pathways for the development of city regions in the UK. The first is the current preoccupation with city regions as agglomeration nodes in neoliberal networks – the ‘giantist’ (Lefebvre, 1976: 103) trickle-down sentiments expressed by Emmerich and others (see Katz and Nowak, 2017). Founder of the consultancy Metro-Dynamics and former HM Treasury and 10 Downing Street policy guru, Emmerich has played a key role in developing devolutionary momentum, advancing the agglomeration arguments in the Introduction (see Emmerich, 2017a), and specifically being central to the Greater Manchester devolution deals. The idea that ‘levelling-up’ (see King and Ives, 2019; Pitt, 2020; Tomaney and Pike, 2020) is a geographic issue though is misplaced and skews focus by putting emphasis on ‘regional investment’ (Emmerich, 2020b), rather than challenging the overall economic elite model, which remains overly driven by financialisation and the marginalisation of civil society actors. The chapter highlights a depoliticising condition being coined ‘the post-political’, where an array of players, stakeholders and organisations are playing active roles in the transformation of relations between state and market economy by also involving and increasing the influence of corporate interests and the privatisation of public services (Haughton et al, 2013; MacLeod, 2013). Related to this, power is often being transferred to, or captured, by an elite formation in terms of political, social and cultural influences (Crouch, 2004, 2020). Rather than promoting democracy and civil society empowerment, this new ‘regime’ of politics can undermine it; governance per se has bypassed direct elected and representative democracy (Swyngedouw, 2010: 6).

The second is an alternative socioeconomic model of economic governance being called the ‘foundational economy’, which encompasses those goods and services, together with the economic and social relationships that underpin them, that provide the everyday infrastructure of civilised life (Foundational Economy Collective, 2018). A non-exhaustive list includes gas and electricity, water, waste sewerage, retail food supply, telecommunications, health and social care, housing, education and public transport. Over the past 50 years or so, many of these goods and services have been increasingly incorporated within market logics by policies that promote commodification, privatisation and financialisation. Previously this would have been placed in the domain of civil society and subsequently a central–local nationalising state (see Duncan and Goodwin, 1988). The failure of these unfettered market policies and their impact on the daily lives of citizens in city regions is evident throughout the pages of this book, and the series of economic
and social events that unravelled across the world in early 2020. The chapter concludes by looking at the opportunities for instituting a ‘foundational city-regional economy’.

Post-political city regions and the depoliticisation of civil society

According to ‘post-political’ approaches a ‘regime’ of governance, which operates at different spatial scales and territorial reaches, is increasing the actors in policy implementation. Accordingly, the ‘status, inclusion or exclusion, legitimacy, system of representation, scale of operation and internal or external accountability of such actors takes place in non-transparent, ad hoc, context dependent ways and differs greatly from those associated with egalitarian pluralistic democratic rules and codes’ (Swyngedouw, 2010: 6). One of the key elements to this approach is the parallel role of depoliticisation – the narrowing of the boundaries of democratic politics, the displacement strategies used by the state to frame engagement, and the emergence of technocratic and delegated forms of governance (see Wood and Flinders, 2014). In the context of neoliberalist city-regional agglomerations, this process reinforces dominant ideologies and imaginaries around what is possible and required, restricting or foreclosing avenues for debate around alternative and critical discourses (Darling, 2016; Deas et al, 2020).

Extending Jessop’s analysis in the Introduction, depoliticisation is an increasingly important governing strategy for exercising state power, removing the political character of decision making by privileging certain elite interests in the state-making process, in turn framing politics and shaping political opportunities. The existence of the state being, among other things, a ‘political’ sphere, which presupposes the possibility of a depoliticisation of civil society, makes it ‘clear that the depoliticisation of civil society could only be achieved through bloody legislation against the expropriated – producing a “class” free from the means of production and “free” to sell their labour power – a process that could not in essence be more political’ (Burnham, 2014: 191). This is contemporised by Wood and Flinders (2014: 152), who emphasise that depoliticisation is a contingent neoliberal political strategy for managing conflicts and rationalising urban governance, which exhibits three forms:

- **Governmental depoliticisation**: focusing on the switching of issues from the governmental sphere through the ‘delegation’ of those issues by politicians to arm’s-length bodies, judicial structures or technocratic rule-based systems that limit discretion;
Conclusions

• **Societal depoliticisation**: involving the transition of issues from the public sphere to the private sphere and focusing on the existence of choice, capacity deliberation and the shift towards individualised responses to collective challenges;

• **Discursive depoliticisation**: the role of language and ideas to depoliticise certain issues and through this, define them as little more as elements of fate.

State agents deploy three patterns of intervention across these forms for deferring, displacing, and transferring the political moment and containing, albeit temporarily, crises further. By *deferring* the political, the state can enact strategies of deferral of conflict to some future point in time. By *displacing*, the state can shift political problems to other arenas and groups. By *transferring* the political, conflict can be removed from immediate community and representative processes into new, fuzzy communities of interest and democratic processes that may not align or map onto experiences of change ‘on the ground’ (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2015: 44).

In short, depoliticisation characterises the neoliberal political-administrative state system, the operation of which requires a careful unpacking of the ‘organizational form and sociopolitical bases of the state’ (Jessop, 1990: 345). In this approach though there is a need to not only examine where it takes place (such as sites of government and governance), but also how policy and politics are defined by their contents and in situations where choice, capacity for agency, deliberation and social interaction prevail. In short, depoliticisation, as Jessop points out, can only be guaranteed through a process of ‘repoliticisation’ and an assertion of the ‘political’ in and through the state – underlying the point that both are integral to each other (Jessop, 2014). Moreover, these ‘attempts may involve reorganising the integral state in the shadow of hierarchy and, indeed, serve to enhance state power by exercising influence indirectly and/or at a distance from the state’ (Jessop, 2014: 214).

*City Regions and Devolution in the UK* has accordingly sought to demonstrate how the city region–state nexus operates not just in relation to the state’s organisation form and sociopolitical bases, but also how crises, contradictions, depoliticised politics, and struggles can emerge within a devolved governance framework and create opportunities for civil society. In effect, through depoliticisation as a governing strategy, state managers are also able to spatially reorganise the state apparatus to retain arm’s-length control over crucial economic and social processes, while simultaneously benefiting from the distancing effects of
depoliticisation. As a form of politics, depoliticisation also seeks to change market expectations by rationalist assumptions regarding the effectiveness and credibility of policymaking in addition to shielding the government from the consequences of unpopular policies. Depoliticisation, then, draws attention to the representational regimes of state-making through civil society: those social forces outside the political system.

Depoliticisation operates through hegemony-seeking ‘discursive institutions’ (Fuller, 2017), which establish semantic links between the discursive aims of those seeking to control, and the pragmatics of the everyday lives of those subject to such institutions. The various chapters of this book have highlighted these processes at work through the creation of precarious city regions in the context of a central–local politics of austerity fiscal localism. In short, as argued throughout the book, ‘ideologies of growth’ (Lefebvre, 1976: 102) and devolved forms of austerity are being reproduced through city regions and the ability of civil society groups to set the agenda, including proposing alternatives to the urban regime, is limited. The perceived post-political consensus around the ‘local growth agenda’ though implies that to critique this is not in the spirit of being a city-region team-player and ‘scuppering social progress’ (Emmerich, 2017b: 6; cf. Etherington and Jones, 2016a). There is, indeed, to further paraphrase Lefebvre (1976: 102) on the politics of growth poles, almost blind-trust agglomeration ideologies hiding reality: ‘an idyllic picture of the economic situation, ignoring the clouds on the horizon …’

Civic repair and the foundational economy

One alternative to this growth model starts with a reconsideration of the socioeconomic foundation of the city-regional economy and offers a more ‘constitutional’ political economy for promoting ‘place-based social innovation’ (Morgan, 2018). The FE rejects the traditional focus on city-region based agglomeration and productivity in favour of ‘that part of the economy that creates and distributes goods and services consumed by all (regardless of income and status) because they support everyday life’ (Bentham et al, 2013: 7). FE draws on Braudel’s (1981) tripartite architecture of society, where the economy is conceptualised in three layers: the world economy of large companies and institutions engaged in global export markets; the local market economy of anchor institutions, SMEs and the self-employed addressing local needs; and a subsistence economy of informal activities (see Haughton, 1999: 9). Whereas conventional sector-based city-region economic development foregrounds the first, most visible layer, the FE draws attention to the
latter layers – those more mundane and overlooked, yet fundamental, economic activities that constitute the foundation of everyday life and as Lefebvre argues, ‘the critique of everyday life’ and its reconstitution holds the future for understanding and challenging capitalism (see Brenner and Elden, 2009; Whitehead, 2005).

Reflecting Polanyi’s (1957) concept of embeddedness, the FE presents public services and civic infrastructure – frequently delivered ‘outside’ the economy by the state and third sector – as much a part of the economy as the ‘world economy’ of marvellous export industries. Foundational sectors are seen not as some unproductive drag on the ‘real’ economy, paid for out of tax receipts from ‘productive’ sectors, such as high-tech and knowledge-intensive industries, but as the real foundation of our economy generating social value and providing the majority of jobs (at least 50 per cent in some city regions). FE scholars, then, posit the ‘grounded city’ as an alternative to the free-floating and disconnected agglomerative ‘competitive city’ – ‘the city as a space of collective civic provision, which meets social needs’ and whose economy is ‘grounded’ in its locale and local population (Engelen et al, 2017: 408). ‘Grounded’ means three things: a city’s development is inter-dependent with, and rooted in, its metropolitan regional hinterland of resource and labour inputs; that one of the major ‘accelerators’ of urban-economic growth is rising land values; and grounded in the sense that cities are built on their FE, acting as a ‘stabiliser’. While accelerators provide opportunities for (inclusive) growth, stabilisers help ‘ground’ a city, acting as a ‘buffer’ to the vagaries of changing market dynamics. With the FE, city-regional growth can refocus on more controllable and locally embedded ‘accelerators’ of growth balanced by ‘stabilisers’ of provision of essential services. Thompson et al (2020) cite grassroots innovation and entrepreneurship at a local level as an important accelerator, in capturing ‘unearned social increment’. Rather than rely on large corporations from elsewhere to drive economic growth (and extract wealth created rather than re-investing locally), this involves incubating SMEs, social enterprises and entrepreneurs in ways that not only generate economic value through new business activity but also connect local labour markets with large-scale ‘innovation assets’ and ‘growth sectors’ (Thompson et al, 2020: 1177). Focusing on Greater Manchester, Folkman et al build on this to suggest a ‘new civic offer’ based on:

the city and economy as it is. With 80,000 on the housing waiting lists of the ten GM boroughs, the first priority should be social housing; with so many on low wages, the
first priority in transport should be much lower public transport fares; with so much employment in sectors like retail and hospitality, the first priority should be to ensure that all chain based operators in these sectors pay the GM Living Wage. The Brexit result is a warning to Greater Manchester politicians who need now to reconnect with their voters, by renewing the civic offer. Instead of relying on property development as the accelerator in the centre, they need to rely on the foundational economy as the stabiliser in all ten boroughs. Because the quantity and quality of foundational goods and services is the social precondition of civilized life, and in activities like adult care the GMCA could start out on the road of social innovation and radical experiment to benefit all citizens. (Folkman et al, 2016: 3)

Enacting and embedding this strategy, of course, requires a fundamental challenging of the logic of indefinite agglomeration and rebalancing of the priorities between the market economy and social economy. Deas et al’s research on Greater Manchester’s ‘agglomerationist growth model’ notes the arrival of FE discourses in policy interventions, with some 27 references in key documents pertaining to spatial and industrial strategies, but ‘it is merely used as a loose signifier for low wage sectors such as retail and social care, rather than concerns over subsistence economies and alternative coping strategies’ (Deas et al, 2020: 9, emphasis added). Much research is still to be done on the ways in which civil society organisations have emerged as key players in the delivery of public services with consequences for civic gain and loss. The challenge, of course, is upscaling, as a ‘perennial issue’ this is how ‘the influence of these groups and the lessons learned from them can spread beyond their immediate locality’. An ‘urban platform’ mechanism is often needed to allow for the ‘integration and deliberation of these multiple concerns’ (Hodson et al, 2020: 213). Moreover, advancing Deas et al (2020) and previous research on the social economy and civil society (Amin et al, 2002, 2003), strategies and their interventions need to move beyond mitigating against the effects of capitalism and make that shift towards fundamentally challenging and replacing the current growth model.

In Wales, FE thinking is beginning to address some of these difficult questions, by focusing on underpinning policies and action plans as part of the proactive ‘governance of the future’ (R. Jones, 2019) agenda within civil society. In the context of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (Welsh Government, 2015a), which as
noted in Chapter 5 is central to new narratives of justice, the Welsh Government has been supporting and developing the FE as part of a desire for a better and more socially and spatially just Wales by the year 2050 (see Davidson, 2020). State strategy since 2019 has focused on three areas.

First, a £4.5 million Foundational Economy Challenge Fund has been established to support a series of experimental projects that test how the Welsh Government can best support the FE and which government interventions work best. Second, a renewed focus has occurred, growing the ‘missing middle’ to increase the number of grounded firms in Wales and establish a firm base of medium-sized Welsh firms, which are capable of selling outside Wales but have decision making firmly rooted in communities. Third, spreading and scaling best practice follows this by looking at social value within procurement. Critical here are the strengthening of local supply chains and changes to local governance within city regions via the recently created Public Service Boards. These have been designed to renew local state democracy, but suffer the initial problem of adding to ‘regional partnership complexity’ (WLGA, 2017: 2) and alongside city-regional governance, not linking with the more progressive Future Generations Act interventions on spatial justice (Axinte, 2020). Monitoring these developments and their impact on civil society will prove critical for assessing if, how, and where the FE is being translated from theory, to manifesto, then into geographical practice.

Postscript: Landing the foundational economy post-COVID-19

CORONAVIRUS ALERT. New rules in force now: you must stay home. More info & exemptions at gov.uk/coronavirus Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save lives. (Text message from UK Government to all UK mobile phones, 15 March 2020)

It's important for me to level with you – we know things will get worse before they get better. But we are making the right preparations, and the more we all follow the rules, the fewer lives will be lost and the sooner life can return to normal. (Letter sent by Prime Minister Boris Johnson to all UK homes, 8 April 2020)
At the time of writing, there is a coronavirus global pandemic (COVID-19) outbreak. This started in Wuhan, China, possibly originating in a seafood wholesale market as the original source of transmission from bats to humans. As of 1 February 2021, there have been over 2.1 million confirmed worldwide deaths and 101 million confirmed cases. The pandemic has resulted in mobility restrictions and nationwide ‘lockdowns’ to slow down the rates of infection and ease the pressure on national health and other services.

The lockdown has created the conditions for a worldwide recession by exposing the ‘frailty of the social contract’ (Financial Times, 2000: 10) and the ‘imbalances in contemporary society’ (Elliott, 2020: 2). With productivity slowing and large groups of individuals on either short-term contracts or unable to work from home, millions have been forced out of work and onto a series of welfare benefits such as (in the UK) UC. In the early months of lockdown, for instance, the UK unemployment count rapidly increased with over 1.5 million new benefit claims and predictions of 8 million (25 per cent of the workforce) jobs being at risk (McKinsey & Company, 2020). This has impacted disproportionality on civil society, heavily reinforcing existing patterns of labour market inequality and precarity. Weak labour markets dependent on low skills and localities of poverty within the areas of multiple deprivation have taken the brunt of intense economic restructuring (compare the accounts of Berry et al, 2020; Centre for Cities, 2020; Etherington, 2020; Guinan et al, 2020; Local Trust, 2020). Moreover, COVID-19 related death rates in the most deprived areas are more than double those of the less deprived and the socioeconomic gap in COVID-19 mortality is larger than the general mortality gap (ONS, 2020).

**Economic recovery and growth models**

The political economic geography of (de)growth and recovery is critical, with predictions of economic contraction being at least 20 per cent for the UK economy, compared to an OECD average of nearly 10 per cent, with time periods being modelled and supply-chain critical sectors (such as advanced manufacturing) being hit hardest (see Gregory and Arnold, 2020; Midlands Engine, 2020). In March 2020, with a Coronavirus Act, the UK Government stepped in to rescue the economy with an unprecedented £350 billion financial package to support jobs, incomes and businesses, acting in nothing short of a ‘wartime … do whatever it takes’ measure by the Conservatives. The stimulus package, which included a Job Retention Scheme for
‘furloughing’ 8 million jobs (covering one-third of all private sector employees), a massive new government loan guarantee scheme for businesses and a three-month mortgage holiday, was worth around 15 per cent of the UK’s total GDP and far exceeds the scale of the rescue measures taken in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. There is limited provision for contingent workers identified by zero-hour or seasonal work and those in rented accommodation (see Etherington, 2020; Thomas et al, 2020). In short, the spectre of Lefebvre looms: ‘[t]he reproduction of the relations of production, both as a concept and as a reality, has not been “discovered”: it has revealed itself’ (Lefebvre, 1976: 7).

At the local level, LAs were asked by the government to ‘make things happen’ to prevent societal collapse, particularly for older and disabled people at risk. Councils were to be given ‘the resources they need[ed] to do the job’ (Jenrick, 2020: 1). The Local Resilience Forums, created under civil contingency planning legislation, were activated and previous discourses of ‘big community’ and ‘self-contained social units’ (Senior, 1969: 46) deployed at LA spatial scales in England and the city-region scale in Wales to provide the conditions for multi-agency strategic and operational responses. Gaps immediately emerged between the metagovernance rhetoric of planning (see Haughton et al, 2020) and the continued march of austerity and its impact on the local state. A study undertaken by the Special Interest Group of Municipal Authorities estimated, for England’s 343 LAs, a financial shortfall of £8 billion for 2020 – caused by increased emergency expenditure (food packages, social care, and so on) not covered by central government and lost revenues from business rates, council tax and commercial activity (Butler and Syal, 2020: 6; see also LGA, 2020). In the case of Greater Manchester, the city-regional ‘comeback kid’ (Williams, 2020a: 3), government intervention initially covered only 12 per cent of the forecast financial impact of COVID-19. This produced a shortfall of £541 million, putting Manchester City Council ‘on the brink of ruin’ (Williams, 2020b: 2). With civil society actors claiming locality experiences of ‘nothing like this since 1930s’ (Williams, 2020a: 3), wider claims of the fracturing and even ‘collapse of central-local relations’ in the wake of this crisis have been made (Harris, 2020; Williams, 2020c).

The ‘COVID-19 crisis’ exemplifies what many who have made arguments around the FE and more broadly the concept of Social Reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2017) have been outlining. In simple terms, the functioning of the economy is fundamentally built on these concepts and when these foundations are rocked, the entire economy
very quickly starts to shake and crumble (see Berry et al, 2020). In this context, as we noted in the Introduction, the state is forced to reconcile an ongoing tension between the neoliberal necessity to maintain the expansion of surplus value, the accumulation strategy of the economy at large, with the need to sustain social harmony and its own legitimation during the crisis. This is most present in the context of care, healthcare being obvious, but also broader notions of social care (including childcare, disability care, care for the elderly and so on; see Askew, 2009). Many currently working from home have discovered this for themselves; without the support of nurseries, schools and home caring services, their ability to complete a day’s labour has become increasingly difficult. Added to this, has been an awareness of what industries really matter in a crisis by what is comprehended as ‘key work/worker’; those who have had to keep going despite obvious risk represent the parts of economy and society that cannot be allowed to stop in order to not only maintain the current economy, but the fabric of society itself. There are also parts of the economy and society that simply cannot afford to stop or cannot work remotely from home. This is either due to the nature of their employment, particularly those self-employed, or the nature of the work they do, which has meant COVID-19 has increased their precarity.

The need for and belief in a FE solution to the contemporary crisis, however, has not been reflected in the policy choices of the past 10 to 15 years. Whereby, the focus shifted towards the maintenance and recovery of the neoliberal accumulation strategy, for the UK state, following the 2008 global financial crisis. This coincided with an ideological attack on the functioning of the state (especially the local state) via austerity, as we have outlined here. ‘Austerity localism’ (Griggs et al, 2017), which we have identified through this book, and associated with austerity plus the devolution of risk and responsibility away from the state to protect both state and market from undue demands on their resources, defines this retrenchment of the local state and has greatly undermined a whole series of foundational institutions therein. This means austerity, combined with multiple waves of privatisation, in the years prior to the COVID-19 crisis has routinely stripped sectors (particularly those around health, social care, worker support, police and LAs themselves) of their capacity to act with, or without, the current crisis, while focusing spending on other sectors of the economy (Monbiot, 2020). Yet, it is these underfunded parts of the economy, the state and more broadly civil society that are now most crucial to dealing with the crisis. Summarising these manifold economic and social concerns across the UK:
Conclusions

The Covid-19 pandemic has caught the United Kingdom woefully underprepared. The present crisis has revealed the distressed state of our local economies and the brittle condition of the local public sector, following decades of underinvestment and disrespect. At the same time, this dual public health and economic emergency has underscored the centrality of community to our everyday lives. As we ready ourselves to rebuild and reconstruct within the shattered post-Covid-19 landscape, we must strive to make the economic recovery the starting point for economic reform and a new birth of community in this country. (Guinan et al, 2020: 3, emphasis added)

The redistributive switching of the UK state under austerity has also, in a deeply contradictory sense, sought to empower the ‘local’ via devolution to city regions. This has been a very specific form of ‘empowerment’ (Amin et al. 2002, 2003; Bailey and Wood, 2017), that should be viewed as a broader metagovernance state strategy, which is ‘spatially selective’ (Jones, 1997) and seeks to only give agency to certain strategically-significant actors. As we have demonstrated in this book, this economy-first narrative with an emphasis on agglomerative growth (often measured in terms of GVA uplift) has been written through the process of building city regions. This agenda has focused on high-end growth, while simultaneously ignoring the foundational aspects of the economy on which it is built (see Jonas, 2012; Schneider and Cottineau, 2019). This further distances ‘non-economic’ actors from positions of agency and through the creation of institutions such as LEPs, alongside devolution, city, and growth deals, new ‘citizenship regimes’ (see Jenson and Phillips, 1996) are collectively instilled. As our chapters have revealed, this positions civil society on the outside, whereby they have to contest (with some albeit limited success,) the prevailing direction of city-region building.

The cumulative consequences of the above have, of course, resulted in an unbalanced form of economy being developed. We have argued that the paralleled or entwined processes of austerity and city-region devolution have disempowered, depoliticised and weakened the structures of social reproduction in favour of a neoliberal growth model. This means that during the COVID-19 crisis itself, the state is and has been less well equipped to deal with the strains that are being placed on it (Berry et al, 2020; Dodds et al, 2020; Etherington, 2020). This could have catastrophic effects in the short to medium term with regards to how the crisis will develop, but it also grants an
opportunity to think through what next and what sort of economy should be built post-the-crisis.

**Research agendas on foundational economy city regions**

Commentators are talking about the need for ‘Local Marshall Plans’ to guide the economy in and through a period of ‘multifaceted recovery’ (Localis, 2020). In the coming months and years, it is hoped that the mistakes of austerity in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the increased awareness to what the FE does as a vital service for people’s lives and livelihoods, pushes societal and governmental thinking towards a new way of conceptualising the economy that places these needs first. The FE is that part of the economy which produces essential goods and services consumed by all (regardless of income and status). This part of the economy is well suited to developing new models of co-production for the design and delivery of public services such as education, care for the elderly and housing, where LAs need to work with civil society. This different approach to areas of our lives, such as the provision of food in schools and social care, requires politicians to leave behind the austerity agenda and instead tap the power of purchase in more strategic and transformational ways to promote public health, social justice and ecological integrity. The Foundational Economy Collective (2018: 7–11) accordingly points to a ten-point plan for post-crisis restructuring and renewal, which we feel provides city-region building with new opportunities and challenges:

1. Start the extension of collective responsibility for foundational basics with health and care.
2. After health, housing and energy are the other immediate foundational priorities.
3. Food is altogether more complex but needs tackling.
4. Introduce social licensing: regulation which imposes social and environmental obligations on all corporate providers of foundational services.
5. Reform taxes on income, expenditure and wealth to greatly increase the capacity of government to raise revenue.
6. Disintermediate investment from pension funds and insurance company bailouts so that it goes directly into provision of material infrastructure.
7. Shorten fragile long supply chains in foundational commodities while recognising the futility of local autarchy.
8. Every city, town and peripheral rural area should develop a live/work transition plan within nation state and EU enabling frameworks.
9. Rebuild technical and administrative capacity at all levels of government.
10. Finally, the European countries need to accept some responsibility for completely inadequate foundational systems like health care in adjacent regions.

This extensive list points to a very different conception as to how to form governmental city-regional infrastructures and what their priorities should be. In short, it seeks to rebuild the capacities of the economy and the state (many lost through austerity) to give the support needed for citizens to live better lives in all places. This deviates greatly from the direction of travel perpetuated by the UK Government and development of city regions discussed throughout this book. City regions, if they are to have a future post-COVID-19, need to be reconstituted to embrace the foundational aspects of the economy and be opened up towards more politicised and open forms of democratic participation. A repoliticisation project is urgently needed, which ‘attempts to rekindle political debate, whether by engaging with formal democratic institutions or by fusing “soft” institutions with mechanisms through which ideas and antagonisms can play out’ (Deas et al, 2020: 4). Finally, as the COVID-19 crisis in the UK and globally deepens, the unprecedented response, which has required, at high speed, increased investment in foundational aspects of the economy, as well as for new forms of financial support to be given, hints at what could and should be maintained after the crisis period. Whether this happens is a very different question.

A future research agenda for civic expansion and ‘civic repair’ (Lockwood, 1999) city regions should be concerned with action and other research in specific FE sectors. This should draw on heterodox conceptions in which social innovation, place-based innovation, smart cities and mission-led innovation oblige us to reconsider what ‘innovation’ actually means today and who are its principal agents. The ‘foundational turn’ points to the following questions: to what extent are local and regional growth policies focusing on foundational sectors? Are they addressing inclusive growth through social innovation in specific sectors? What forms of social innovation are being adopted in different regional contexts? How can interventions in FE sectors contribute to regional growth and civic gain? Addressing these points will deliver significant theoretical and empirical findings of relevance to academics and policymakers addressing the area of city-regions research. These
include: economic development (broadly), smart cities, regional studies, urban studies and place-based innovation in the contemporary crisis and beyond. In the UK context, 50 years on, a key question raised by the Royal Commission on Local Government in England remains for civil society and city-region building endeavours, with a contemporary reminder offered by Cumbers on democratic structures now being urgently needed to underpin economic life:

If one wants the interests of a region as a whole to prevail through the democratic process, one must create a structure which enables these interests to find effective expression in action. If one creates a structure that gives only sectional interests the power to take positive action, it is no use expecting the electoral process to negate itself in order to avert the natural consequences of one’s folly. To do so is not an act of faith in human altruism: it is an act of sabotage to democracy. (Senior, 1969: 22, emphasis added)

A functioning democracy, in a stable and civilized society, is one that respects the rights of individuals, citizens and communities to participate on equal terms in the public and civic realms of society. Given the central importance of the economy in providing the resources necessary for a society to flourish, the decision making around these resources should be a matter for public engagement and democratic debate. (Cumbers, 2020: 3, emphasis added, see also Cumbers, 2012)