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# Exploring the Political Potential of the Local State: Building a Dialogue with Sheffield in the 1980s

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**Abstract:** This article explores the political potential of the local state through an engagement with the case of Sheffield City Council in the 1980s. The new municipalism movement has generated renewed interest in the “local” and “urban” as transformative projects. The local state holds a pivotal if problematic role in these debates, often seen as the decisive force facilitating or impeding transformation. In building a dialogue with 1980s Sheffield, we provide a less certain account of the local state’s potential. Sheffield occupies an ambiguous position within and beyond traditional municipal labourism and therefore provides a potent example to explore tensions within municipalism between state and autonomist visions of politics. In Sheffield, radical intent turned into a more cautious governmental programme in the city, notwithstanding glimpses of political alternatives. The experience of those years provides insights on the contingencies of bringing movements and state politics together in what was then called “local socialism”.

**Zusammenfassung:** Dieser Beitrag untersucht das politische Potenzial des lokalen Staates am Beispiel des Sheffield City Council (UK) in den 1980er Jahren. Die politische Bewegung des neuen Munizipalismus führte zu einem neuen Interesse am „Lokalen“ und „Urbanen“ als transformative Projekte. Der lokale Staat spielt in diesen Debatten eine zentrale, wenn auch komplizierte Rolle, da er oft als die entscheidende Kraft angesehen wird, die den Wandel sowohl erleichtert als auch behindert. Mit dem Beispiel von Sheffield der 1980er Jahre liefern wir eine weniger eindeutige Darstellung des Potenzials des lokalen Staates. Sheffield nimmt eine ambivalente Position innerhalb und jenseits des traditionellen „Municipal Labourismus“ ein und bietet daher ein überzeugendes Beispiel für die Untersuchung der Spannungen innerhalb des Munizipalismus zwischen staatlichen und autonomen Visionen von Politik. In Sheffield verwandelte sich ein ursprüngliches radikales Programm in ein vorsichtigeres Regierungsprogramm, auch wenn es durchaus Anzeichen für politische Alternativen gab. Die Erfahrungen der 1980er-Jahre geben Aufschluss über die Kontingenz der Zusammenarbeit von sozialen Bewegungen und staatlicher Politik in dem, was damals „lokaler Sozialismus“ genannt wurde.

**Keywords:** urban politics, localism, municipalism, local state, Sheffield, new urban left  
**Schlagwörter:** Stadtpolitik, Lokalismus, Munizipalismus, lokaler Staat, Sheffield, new urban left

## Introduction

There is a long—if sometimes uneasy—history in which radical politics has intertwined forms of community, activism and the local state. In the context of urban austerity (Bayirbag et al. 2017; Peck 2012), and in parallel to stories of municipal entrepreneurialism (Beswick and Penny 2018; Fuller 2018), the possibilities of “progressive localism” (Featherstone et al. 2012) have become a focus of renewed attention within the United Kingdom and beyond, sometimes captured in the notion of the “new municipalism” (Featherstone et al. 2020). Community wealth building (Power and Goodwin 2021) and public–common partnerships (Russell et al. 2022) have been identified as providing a base for local initiative capable of delivering transformative economic and political change. There is a tension within these discussions (sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit) between approaches that start from initiatives sponsored through local government or the local state and those that are centred on mutualism and self-activity. The challenge is to identify and explore the ways in which the two may come together and reinforce each other or, if they ultimately remain incompatible, to clarify the limits of what is possible (see Russell 2019; Thompson et al. 2020; Vollmer 2017). The promise of a politics of transformation is always accompanied by the threat of incorporation into more conventional ways of working through the mechanisms of the local state (see, for example, Cockburn’s [1977] classic discussion). But it has also been argued that it is possible to operate through the local state to generate processes that undermine or challenge those ways of working (see, for example, *In and Against the State*, to which Cockburn also contributed [London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1979]).

In a thoughtful and comprehensive overview, building on Russell (2019), Matthew Thompson (2021b) explores the meanings and possibilities associated with the new municipalism, both locating it in longer histories and reflecting on the distinctive features of its various contemporary expressions. What holds them together is an emphasis on the role of urban solidarities in the face of neoliberal individualism and austerity and a belief in their potential to generate wider social and political change. But he also highlights key tensions within and across the three “ideal-types” that he identifies, particularly with respect to their relationship with the state. Above all he contrasts “autonomist mutualism”, which seeks to develop autonomous alternatives to the state, with “managed municipalism”, which aims to mobilise the local state to foster more democratic forms of social economy (Thompson 2021b:327; cf. Barnett et al. 2021). The third model—platform municipalism—offers the possibility of a more ambiguous politics, aiming to transform the state through what is described as “dual power”, working “in, against and beyond the state” (Thompson 2021b:328). Contemporary municipalism is best seen as a series of plural, context-specific projects, not only about places like Barcelona but also ones where social movements are weaker and/or the local state has less political autonomy (Beveridge and Naumann 2021; Cumbers and Paul 2020).

Underlying this discussion is a more fundamental one about the extent to which (building on Lefebvre [2003]) the urban may provide a key spatiality and imaginary for democratic politics (e.g. Beveridge and Koch 2023). In other words,

an issue that remains central to any discussion of the possibilities of localism is precisely the potential that the “local” and the “urban” might have as settings, sites and even stakes in politics around which new political programmes and political engagement could be developed (see also e.g. Harvey 2012; Russell 2019; Thompson 2021b; Wills 2016). A key question in these deliberations is, of course, what role the local state might play (see e.g. Joubert 2022).

From one perspective, local initiative might be understood as generating a series of experiments (or case studies) highlighting what is possible—what is capable of generalisation within a wider programme of change. From another, it might imply a reimagining of what is possible, generating spaces for different forms of politics that build more directly on mutualism and self-activity rather than relying on top-down initiatives or systems (see Russell 2019; Thompson 2021b). Rather than working both in and against the state, or simply bypassing the state, the task may also be defined as one of reimagining the state itself, problematising boundaries between state and societal forces, as recent work in this journal has argued from different perspectives (Angel 2021; Cooper 2017).

It is on these tensions that this paper focuses. Here we open up a dialogue with an earlier period of radical local politics in Britain that was directly rooted in the potential of the local state as a driver of change. In the early 1980s a series of urban and metropolitan councils (including, at various times, the Greater London Council [GLC], Sheffield, Walsall, Manchester, Liverpool, Stirling, Islington and Lambeth) were variously identified as the “new urban left” (NUL; Gyford 1983), expressions of the “new” municipal socialism or “local socialism” (see Boddy and Fudge 1984; Gyford 1985) or, from another perspective, as the “loony left” (Curran et al. 2018). The labels “new urban left” and “local socialism” (which we adopt in what follows) are helpful in providing an overarching framework within which the various individually distinctive local programmes can be placed, even if it remains important to acknowledge the extent of variation between them. In this context, the “local” assumed a distinctly urban or metropolitan placement, while also implicitly referring to a politics associated with elected local government.

The councils involved sought to reframe what was possible, for example, in developing local economic and cultural strategies as well as opening up debates around race, gender and sexual equality (Boddy and Fudge 1984; Cochrane 1988; Curran et al. 2018; Gyford 1985; Payling 2017a; Wainwright 1987) in opposition to both the Thatcherite “new right” in government and the stale labourism associated with the governments of the 1970s. This experience has recently found a more contemporary resonance, being revisited as an exemplar of alternative ways of governing (Cooper 2017; Frost and North 2013; Hatherley 2020; Joubert 2022; Massey, 2007; Payling 2017b; The GLC Story 2022). In the case of the new urban left, the role of elected political leaders was undoubtedly significant, but the promise of political and social change associated with it cannot be reduced to the delivery of any of the aforementioned political programmes.

We aim to explore these wider issues through an engagement with the case of Sheffield. It may have attracted less attention than the Greater London Council (GLC) in its heyday in the early 1980s, but Sheffield’s ambiguous positioning as it

emerged out of traditional municipal labourism provides a powerful case through which to explore the recurrent—and sometimes productive—tension between statist and autonomist visions of politics. Sheffield, alongside the South Yorkshire County Council, for a time attracted the label of the People's Republic of South Yorkshire (Alcock and Lee 1981; Clarke 1987; Jackson 2021).

For all its strength as an exemplar, moving beyond the GLC case is important for two main reasons. The GLC was abolished in 1986, which both gave it an almost heroic status and makes it impossible to reflect on how it might have coped with becoming a “normal” political space across the decade of the 1980s. As a strategic authority, the GLC in any case always fitted uneasily into the role of local government as a delivery agent for key aspects of the welfare state—most of those responsibilities remained with the London Boroughs. As Hilary Wainwright (1987:111) noted, the “GLC, as a ‘strategic authority’, had little responsibility for the delivery and maintenance of daily services, except for the Fire Brigade and, indirectly, London Transport. Moreover, until the tightening of the noose of abolition, the GLC’s budget gave it far greater scope for innovation”. It was in that context that the political leadership chose to develop a range of interventions enabled by a set of radical professionals. The case of Sheffield makes it possible to review the experience over a longer period (the Labour Party remained in control of the Council throughout the 1980s and beyond) and to reflect on the ways in which the politics of the new urban left were made safe for absorption into mainstream public policy.

Drawing on interviews with key participants conducted at the time, as well as documentary material from the period, this paper shows how new professionals with experience in community activism worked with local politicians to (re)shape the local state in 1980s Sheffield, advancing radical ideas in what (unlike the GLC) had historically been a stronghold of traditional Labour Party rule. The local state became a terrain for progressive and often contradictory social forces. This paper covers the decade of the 1980s, a period in which radical—and sometimes explicitly anti-capitalist—beginnings provided the basis for a more cautious programme of public–private partnership, albeit one still laden with glimpses of political alternatives. Opening up a dialogue with the experience of those years, as well as reflecting on the academic and media debates of the time, we examine the contingencies of the new urban left as a set of active political practices.

This paper has the following structure. The next section locates the 1980s Sheffield case within debates on the new urban left in the United Kingdom, outlining the contours of its, at least initial, political project. This section also incorporates a brief discussion of the methods adopted in pursuing the research. This leads into a discussion of some of the institutional and policy changes that occurred as the City Council launched its local socialist project, which, in turn, is followed by the analysis of a specific policy emblematic of the shifts of the period: the Council’s development of the municipally owned Red Tape music studios. The penultimate section reflects on the changing politics of the local state through the 1980s as its identification with local socialism was replaced by an emphasis on public–private partnership, and the conclusion returns to considering the wider relevance of the Sheffield case, seeking to construct a dialogue with contemporary debates.

## Locating 1980s Sheffield in the “New Urban Left”

The first half of the 1980s was a distinct period of transformative, rebellious urban politics in the United Kingdom that drew on a complex set of cross-cutting strands of political thought and experience, including community politics, the new left, neo-Marxism, Trotskyism, the women’s movement and anti-racist movements. The new urban left or local socialist authorities may not have had a shared programme, but they questioned traditional approaches, both seeking to challenge the policies of the (“new right”) Thatcher government and to develop active policies focused on the possibility of building socialist alternatives. One of the key distinctive features of the new urban left was a commitment to moving away from local government’s secondary role within a national welfare state—with the task of delivering nationally agreed services through professional bureaucracies albeit with some variation between authorities (Cochrane 1993). In part this shift reflected a widespread critique which positioned local councils (and indeed the welfare state as a whole) as little more than disciplinary agents with the task of maintaining a workforce for capitalism. Instead, the emphasis was on other sources of activism—such as community groups, feminist initiatives, anti-racist campaigns and rank-and-file trade unionism—as drivers for more fundamental political change (see e.g. Community Development Projects [CDP] 1977b; Cockburn 1977; Gough 1979; Rowbotham et al. 1979). But it also reflected a desire to take the initiative in areas that had traditionally been beyond the remit of the local state both as a means of fostering wider societal change and as a means of directly challenging the dominant narratives of Thatcherism and an emergent “authoritarian populism” (Hall 1979, 1988).

Sheffield was one of a small number of authorities that was identified with, and whose political leadership explicitly identified it with, the new urban left, even if they might not have used that term (see e.g. Alcock and Lee 1981; Blunkett 1981a, 1981b, 1984; Blunkett and Green 1983; Blunkett and Jackson 1987; Green 1987). Unlike some of the other councils, in Sheffield the shift in approach was not associated with any dramatic break with the past. Instead, the transition “was impossible to pinpoint, as the old guard was gradually eclipsed and incorporated rather than defeated, though the election of a radical administration in 1980 was a clear finale” (Green 1987:206) in “a bloodless palace coup” (Child and Paddon 1984:18). It was not the result of pressure from outside but was rooted in the machinery of the local Labour Party and its close relationship with the Trades Council also meant that (unlike the GLC) it relied less on relations with other forms of local activist politics, including feminism, so that the voices of such groups were filtered through the existing organisations rather than having a more autonomous status (Wainwright 1987:112).

If Sheffield’s brief experiment with local socialism was always expressed through the mechanisms of local government, for its political leaders (if not necessarily all of those who were active in seeking to deliver and shape the new agenda) it was also always positioned within a wider commitment to the Labour Party as an electoral force nationally as well as locally. Most of those who were in leading positions in the 1980s had become Labour MPs by the 1990s, and David Blunkett (who was leader of the Council) went on to hold various ministerial positions in

the Blair governments of the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is tempting simply to draw a clear line from local socialism in the 1980s to New Labour in the 1990s, but there was no inevitability about the process. And there is a risk that doing so would make it all too easy to dismiss the experience of a moment of local socialism in practice, from which more positive lessons might be drawn.

Blunkett, who became leader in 1980, captured the political shift of the early 1980s in his critique of municipal labourism, which “tended to be authoritarian: doing the right things for the people rather than with them. That’s not how socialism should grow. It is oppressive at worst and paternalist at best” (Blunkett 1982:56). In an interview conducted in 1983, one of the leading councillors emphasised the need to look back to radical visions of local government in which councils were “organs for change, as important as national level activity ... looking at ways in which there could be activity from the bottom” and stressed that this meant industry and employment matters should be as important to local authorities as the provision of services. Elsewhere, Blunkett stressed “the need to build democracy; since democracy is more than the mere right to cast a vote at elections ... Local politics is about its extension so that people can run their own affairs, adopting an increasingly broad perspective as confidence in democracy grows” (Blunkett and Jackson 1987:5). This was a vision that explicitly positioned the new politics as being constructed from below, rooted in local possibilities rather than national political programmes.

Here we proceed with a detailed engagement with the Sheffield case, revisiting research conducted in the 1980s by one of the authors in the process of completing a Ph.D. (Cochrane 1992). The paper’s central focus is on attempts to draw activists from outside the traditional professions of local government into key roles within the Council machinery and on the initiative to set up an Employment Department and associated Employment Committee to actively engage in generating positive initiatives capable of reimagining the local economy in the context of the secular decline of the steel industry. The core of the fieldwork on which this paper draws was undertaken in the early 1980s (1983–1984), when the ambitions of the local socialists were at their greatest and the impact of the changes was being felt most clearly. A lengthy and extensive series of semi-structured interviews was undertaken with politicians and officers (new and old). Further interviews were conducted with representatives of the District Labour Party, the Trades Council and the Chamber of Commerce. In total, interviews with 24 people were conducted at this time (in some cases, individuals were interviewed more than once). An extensive range of published and unpublished documents produced within the Council’s departments and by its politicians was considered, alongside other relevant local material (including local newspapers, reports and other documentary material prepared by the Labour Party, Trades Council and Chamber of Commerce) (Cochrane 1992:275–277).

In addition, the research involved direct participation in some aspects of the process (for example, in contributing to the preparation of a report on the future of the Lower Don Valley [Sheffield City Council 1984]). This participation made it easier to identify differences, tensions, power relations and areas of agreement between different groups, professionals and politicians. It highlighted not only

differences between the Employment Department and other departments but also differences in emphasis between politicians and the Employment Department as well as differences within the Employment Department.

Contacts were sustained over the rest of the decade, and concerns raised in the first phase of fieldwork were followed up on, often through more informal contact and discussion, particularly with senior officers of what became the Department of Employment and Economic Development. It was clear that changes were taking place, and it became necessary to undertake more consistent follow-up interviews and a review of documentary evidence which reflected these changes. Again, therefore, interviews were conducted (in 1989) with officers and councillors, but on a smaller scale than in the first round, since it was possible to focus more narrowly on a limited range of concerns around particular initiatives and apparent shifts in emphases (the initiatives on which attention was focused were Red Tape Studios and the Lower Don Valley as the significance of “partnership” emerged as a clear area of concern). It is on the case of Red Tape Studios that we reflect later in the paper.

In revisiting this experience, and following inductive rather deductive reasoning, the aim is to open up the Sheffield case, providing opportunities for critical reflection on the challenges facing contemporary (new) municipalist projects and a means of reflecting on the tensions around the state within progressive projects at the local level.

## **From Dreams to Practices: Creating Sheffield’s Employment Department**

The state machine inherited by the new regime was characterised by strong departmental structures driven through chief officers and specialist committees. The chief executive was in a relatively weak position, rarely able to impose a wider corporate agenda on the operations of those departments (Johnson and Cochrane 2017:74–75). The new approach promised a shift to emphasising the political nature of local government rather than the model of departmental empires jealously guarded by chief officers and their associated committee chairs. But in this reimagining of the local state, the politics were not just expected to flow from elected politicians.

Initially there was no clear political programme—the leading politicians were clearer on what they did not want than what they did. Two officers were appointed from outside to service strategy groups on economic and social policy, while a third was appointed to provide research support to the Council leader. Both strategy officers had backgrounds in community activism rooted in their experience working in senior roles within Community Development Projects (one in Coventry and the other in Birmingham). They were not expected to act as traditional council officers but rather to find ways of encouraging local activism as a means of shaping the local state, and that is what they sought to do. Although Sheffield’s political traditions (with a strong District Labour Party and Trades Council working together with councillors) may have limited their scope for independent action, the role of these officers (and others appointed later) was



analogous to that of the radical appointments made to the GLC in the same period, whose experience is charted by Tim Joubert (2022).

Their initial vision was clear: “Social democracy is over as it has been practised at a local level in the past. We think many of them [Councillors] recognise that, if they don’t we can’t help that” (quoted in Alcock and Lee 1981:90). In a review of their first year’s work, the strategy officers noted: “From the start the councillors recognised that there was no clear path to an agreed set of objectives; indeed there was some confusion on how to translate political principles into effective action” (City of Sheffield 1983:1). Strategy was to be built around “live political issues, being built block by block, developing a clear set of connections between political principle and local organisation, a balance of contradictory forces rather than a single solution, a resolution of priorities” (City of Sheffield 1983:2). The central role of the strategy officers was reflected in the publication of a Fabian Society pamphlet whose authors were identified as David Blunkett and Geoff Green (one of those officers), which set out the broad strategy under the rubric “Building from the Bottom” (Blunkett and Green 1983).

The development of a socialist economic policy was identified as a high priority, essential if “a truly socialist society is to be created by the people rather than the long held paternalistic pretence that it can be done for them” (Blunkett 1981a:1, based on an internal Council discussion document on “Implementing a Local Economic Strategy for Sheffield” prepared in 1980). In echoes of the national Labour Party espousal of an Alternative Economic Strategy, emphasis was placed on the need to develop “genuine alternative economic policies”, but in this context it was to be “fostered and supported by the resources available at local level and bridging the gap between the provision of services and the industrial manufacturing sector in local communities” (Blunkett 1981a:1; see also Blunkett 1982). A fundamental aspect of the shift in focus was to reposition the Council as an active participant in shaping the local economy and creating worthwhile employment for its people. Although the form it took may have looked familiar—with a new committee, new department and new chief officer—the Employment Department’s model was expected to be different, with a more politically committed staff seeking to generate cultural change across the Council, as well as more directly engaging with local communities and activists. The new approach implicitly (and often explicitly) suggested a move away from a narrow focus on service provision through specialist departments, towards a more ambitious re-shaping of the local state.

This represented a clear break with Sheffield’s historical approach to economic development, which had dominated in the 1970s, and has been summarised as “municipal property development” (Goodwin 1986:5), being focused on making land available for development by others (see also Johnson and Cochrane 2017:45–47). The Council was one of the biggest landowners in the city and the Estates Surveyor’s Department had a clear focus on commercial possibilities: land capable of generating capital gains. The work of the Estates Surveyor’s Department, where the Council’s industrial development officer was based, was not seen as political. It had the task of managing the Council’s estate (which was substantial), operating much like any other provider of land and

property for commercial purposes. At that time, its work was marginal to the main focus of Council activity, in education, housing, and family services and was not even integrated into the work of the Planning Department.

A dedicated Employment Committee was set up in May 1981, and an employment co-ordinator was appointed in September 1981; jobs in the new Employment Department were advertised in 1982. The person appointed to the post of employment co-ordinator (John Benington) did not have a traditional background in economic development or local government but had experience as the director of the Coventry Community Development Project, and of leading a community action organisation (Coventry Workshop) that grew out of it. Benington had written a powerful critique of corporate planning in local government (Benington 1976), and had been involved in the preparation of critiques of past industrial policies (Joint Trades Councils 1980) and in attempts to develop the ideas of popular planning arising out the preparation of an alternative corporate plan by workers at Lucas Aerospace (at the time, a major British-based engineering company), which inspired many of the economic initiatives launched by leftist councils in the early 1980s (Wainwright and Elliott 1982). He had previously worked with the two strategy officers and, like them, was tasked with going beyond departmental responsibilities to influence the operation of the Council as a whole, carrying politics into the heart of the local bureaucracy to shake up existing arrangements.

Looking back on the first year of the Employment Department's life, Benington stressed its:

role as a catalyst trying to affect the distribution of resources and the nature of decision making in the local authority as a whole ... There is no doubt that the work we have been doing has challenged many traditional assumptions—firstly, the notion that local government officers are there to provide neutral professional advice of a technical kind and secondly, that departments are there simply to provide services. We are quite clear that we are not operating with any neutral professionalism, and quite clear that we are committed. We have a particular analysis and that is shared with and in tune with the controlling group on the City Council, and what we are saying is that we are offering rigorous competent [advice] but not that it is neutral or technical. (in Alcock et al. 1983:74, 75)

This was to be a politics of contestation within the state machine as much as through the ballot box, community action or public political debate.

In research interviews conducted at the time, some of the tensions were clear. Several officers from other departments began by stating their support for the Employment Department in principle, before going on to identify specific areas of its work with which they were not happy. Members of the Treasurer's Department expressed fears about the likelihood that council funds might be wasted. The Estates Surveyors' Department remained critical of moves to use land and property in ways which did not generate most income. The intervention of the Employment Department into the field of training aroused irritation from the Education Department because it seemed able to draw on resources unavailable to them, undermining their provision. Even those members of the Planning Department who worked most closely with officers of the Employment Department

expressed concern about that Employment Department's commitment to what were perceived to be abstract political principles. They were concerned that the new officers did not have sufficient understanding of the "need" to work with and be sympathetic to the demands of developers to encourage investment by them. Several officers, including chief officers, commented on the lack of experience exhibited by officers in the Employment Department, noting particularly the extent to which there appeared to be divisions between them at meetings (see also Chandler and Lawless 1985:196).

The new council officers appointed to the Employment Department in this period reflected an attempt to break with more traditional forms of economic development work and of local government bureaucracy, which was also reflected in the naming of the Employment Department (with a focus on employment rather than economic development in a narrow sense). The expectation was that the Employment Department would work in a collegiate and collective fashion rather than the more traditional top-down model. Many of the new officers, including the Employment Department's principal development officers, were appointed from outside local government, often with backgrounds in community organising, while the person appointed to the equal opportunities post was someone with extensive experience in the local women's movement. Many of the new professionals had been active in the key staff, with experience working in Community Development Projects in the 1970s. These included the Council's two new principal strategy officers, the employment coordinator, one of the Employment Department's principal officers, and several of those appointed at lower levels.

The Community Development Projects had been set up in 12 inner city and older industrial areas of Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s as part of the United Kingdom's Urban Programme (see Loney [1983] for a comprehensive discussion of the CDP "experiment"). The assumption underlying the initiative was that the problems of Britain's inner cities lay in the dysfunctional communities that lived in them so that support for community renewal would provide a means of transforming them (CDP 1977b:12). In practice, that assumption was soon being questioned by those working in the projects as community workers and researchers (see e.g. CDP 1977a). One shared feature of many of the Community Development Projects was the balancing act their employees had to perform to sustain relationships with their management committees, whilst also actively supporting community-based organisations which tended directly to confront Council departments—particularly the Housing departments—or to place increasing demands on them for financial support. Paradoxically, perhaps, the CDPs, having been set up with very different aims, were among the very few practical examples of alternative ways of working within, around and possibly even against the state which had spawned them (Benington 1986:10).

In the next section the political practice of Sheffield's version of local socialism is explored further with the help of a particular case study—that of Red Tape Studios. Red Tape Studios was finally launched as a municipal enterprise in 1986, and it provides a powerful example of the ways in which attempts were made to move beyond past approaches to the local economy and to build connections that went beyond the traditional constituencies of local government and

municipal labourism, in an echo of what Thompson et al. (2020) describe as entrepreneurial municipalism. Although other initiatives (such as the Anvil Cinema) reflected a rather uncertain commitment to a wider cultural agenda (see e.g. Stevlor [2020:275–311] on some of the frictions apparent in the pursuit of that agenda), the main emphasis in the case of Red Tape was placed on the potential of the cultural industries as a source of employment. The story of Red Tape highlights the tensions and possibilities of working in and through the state and state machinery.

## Re-imagining Municipal Enterprise: Red Tape Studios

The idea for a recording studio came out of initial contacts with the Leadmill Arts Association and was confirmed in meetings with locally based bands and video companies. Some of the bands involved had already been successful (e.g. The Human League, ABC, Heaven 17, The Comsat Angels and Cabaret Voltaire), whilst others were still unsuccessful, and many of those active were unemployed. Of 500 bands in the city at the time, only around 25 had recording contracts. In an interview conducted in 1989, the strategy officer who had been given responsibility for developing proposals for municipal enterprise commented that “There was a wealth of activity which did not have any infrastructure to support it in terms of good quality rehearsal and recording facilities”. The idea came, therefore, from the people who needed the facilities. The existence of the Employment Department opened up the Council to demands from a group of people who had previously had little interest in its workings. Helen Jackson reports on a meeting of the Council’s Finance Committee “to discuss the capital costs and timescales. The four young, long haired musicians, dressed in colourful long cloaks, appeared bemused. A normal style of meeting was out of the question”. But the project was approved (Jackson 2021:175).

The initial phase of persuading the council to take the initiative was challenging, with various departments blocking proposals, including the Estates Surveyor’s Department which wanted to sell the property on commercial terms, and it was only pressure from the Employment Department which averted this. There was also, however, a high degree of scepticism among councillors about the project. Many were unconvinced by the argument that forms of economic activity like these were equivalent to the old industries which had historically dominated in the city. Eventually, the Committee and the Labour Group agreed to provide funding to pay for the building of two rehearsal rooms and a four-track portastudio. Some of the doubts of the finance officers about the project were overcome by the involvement of private sector accountants from the music industry (associated with the more successful bands who were involved), who were able to show that the project was likely to be viable.

The success of this initial development made it easier for the project to attract funding from central government budgets targeted at urban renewal (the Urban Programme), building a 16-track recording studio and a third rehearsal room (Red Tape Phase 2) as well as an additional rehearsal room, an eight-track recording studio and a library (Red Tape Phase 3). Alongside these developments, it was

possible to utilise Urban Programme funds to rehabilitate the building within which Red Tape was housed—renamed the Audio Visual Enterprise Centre (AVEC). In managing the tenants of the building, attempts were made to allow community-based groups to keep costs down by locating them next to offices or studios constructed by more commercial enterprises. At the end of the 1980s, AVEC contained three commercial recording studios, film studios and graphic design companies, including a women's film co-operative and a photography gallery. Red Tape and AVEC were effectively put together by a partnership between local government (providing property and “seed” money), central government (through the Urban Programme), the private sector (particularly those bands which invested in commercial recording studios within the building) and the community sector (who were tenants of some of the spaces within the building).

By the end of the decade, the ambitions of the early years had been reinterpreted but were still recognisable. The studios were open to a wide range of groups, from jazz to rock to opera, although there was some evidence that the local Black population felt excluded by the apparent rock orientation of the studios and support had been sought for a studio more oriented towards the Black population. The aim was to use these developments as a basis on which to foster a wider Cultural Industries Quarter in the area around Red Tape, where a number of other cultural facilities (such as the Leadmill and Yorkshire Artspace) were already located. In contrast to property-led initiatives targeted at attracting tenants to industrial estates with the help of initial subsidies, here the strategy was driven by a wider vision of promoting a new industrial sector for the city and backed up by a significant investment in municipal enterprise (Economic and Public Sector Development Team n.d.). Ultimately, however, realising the broader ambition still relied on attracting investment from the private sector, which was never available on the hoped-for scale.

## From Local Socialism to Public–Private Partnership

In this context it is important to recognise the ways in which the political emphasis shifted over the decade from a focus on the value of municipal enterprise as a challenge to existing arrangements to one that highlighted the need to build much more extensive public–private partnerships. One reason for this extension may have been that the scope for municipal enterprise was severely limited by financial constraints, but it was also actively embraced because (in a form of municipal entrepreneurialism) it seemed to promise the possibility of “leverage” to mobilise far more resources than would have been available from the Council, even if its spending had not been restricted by controls from above.

By the mid-1980s the hopes for dramatic change led by the local socialists had already faded, as a series of factors combined to create an increasingly hostile environment for them. The Thatcher government abolished the GLC and the Metropolitan County Councils (including South Yorkshire) in 1986 and introduced rate-capping to limit the extent to which councils could generate funding from local taxes, effectively setting their overall budgets. The local authority left was defeated as they sought to challenge the new rules: some refused to set a legal

budget (and councillors were individually surcharged as in the case of Lambeth), while others reluctantly succumbed. Sheffield's Labour Group was split, and a legal budget within the required limits was set, despite the opposition of Blunkett.

Although there was a final burst of resistance, largely expressed through attempts to maintain spending levels with the help of "creative accounting", the limitations of this became clear with the election of the third Thatcher government in 1987 (for a discussion of this period, see Blunkett and Jackson [1987] and Lansley et al. [1989]). Helen Jackson (2021:257) captures the feelings of the time: "The rate-capping trauma and raft of aggressive legislation provoked a variety of responses. No longer was the movement so sure of itself. Nor did it have the same confidence to initiate projects which translated equality policy into action. Some Council members were defeatist, believing resistance to the government was hopeless; others defiant, eager to find ways around the legal and financial constraints. A majority felt unjustly penalised ... the bold emphasis on people-led progress towards a fairer society, driven by the belief that what was good for social progress and equal opportunity would help the local economy thrive and vice versa, became more hesitant and muted". It was no longer possible for a council to pretend that it could stand out on its own against the pressures imposed from above, and it was still less possible for one department to suggest that it might do so.

In the case of Sheffield, it might have been possible to delay drawing this conclusion, but, however gradual the process of change, the direction of change in economic policies was clear enough. The emphasis in Employment Department publications first shifted towards the defence of local authority employment (e.g. in commissioned material on privatisation and its costs [Labour Research Department et al. 1985; SCAT 1985] and in Sheffield's employment plan [City of Sheffield 1987]) and then explicitly towards an emphasis on partnership with private sector agencies. The merger of the Estates Surveyor's Department and the Planning Department into a Department of Land and Planning in 1984 undermined the traditional conservatism of the old Estates Surveyors' Department, but it did so by enabling the development of a more "entrepreneurial" approach at the same time as a renewed emphasis on economic development found formal expression in the changed title of the Employment Department to the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED).

Nevertheless, tensions between the different emphases in the development of economic policy remained apparent into the late 1980s. The introduction to Sheffield's employment plan expresses these clearly, stating that "We advocate a new kind of partnership between government, local communities, the public and the private sector", but going on to argue that the "strategy we set out here is not to cut the public sector lifeline but instead to expand its role and use it effectively as a tool of economic regeneration" (City of Sheffield 1987:2, 4).

This was, perhaps, most notable in policies focused on the Lower Don Valley. Once the industrial heartland of Sheffield, it was here that many of its traditional steel and engineering plants had been located, and it is here that the problems of industrial dereliction were at their most apparent. In the late 1980s, around 35% of the Valley's land was derelict or vacant, and over a million square feet of industrial buildings were vacant (Sheffield Economic Regeneration Committee [SERC]

1987; see also Germer [1983] and Dabinett [1991:13–14] for a discussion of the Valley's decline as a location of employment). It had been the most direct geographical expression of Sheffield as “steel city”, and its decline underpinned some of the political pressures for developing a local economic policy. From the mid-1980s, the language of partnership became more pronounced, with the City Council seeing its resources as a lever for both public and private capital investment (Dabinett 1989:4). This vision found its institutional expression in the formation of the Sheffield Economic Regeneration Committee (SERC), which initially concentrated its attention on the Lower Don Valley. SERC commissioned a report on the Valley from Coopers and Lybrand (a major private consultancy), which concluded that the most appropriate body to oversee the regeneration of the Valley would be what the consultants called an Urban Regeneration Project. This project would be a “private sector led body in which the management board is elected by the participating partners (central and local government, private sector and community organisations)” (SERC 1987). Planning powers would remain with the council, but the organisation would have the image of independence.

The early ambitions of the Council's leadership and the disruptive professionals they brought in from outside may have been to use economic policies as a means of constructing a community capable of sustaining radical forms of local politics (Duncan and Goodwin 1985a, 1985b; Goodwin 1986), but any such ambitions had clearly faded by the end of the decade. In retrospect, Helen Jackson (who had been chair of the Employment Committee for most of the 1980s) celebrates the shift to private–public partnership while acknowledging the extent to which it reflected a rolling back of the city's more radical politics. She stresses that it reflected a shift by actors in the private sector (who had come to accept the need for partnership) as much as shift by politicians like her (Jackson 2021:261–264). In other words, from the perspective of the Council's leaders, the success of the “experiment” was reflected not only in particular initiatives but also in the extent to which private-sector actors became incorporated into the Council's vision. At the start of the decade, the Council was seen as marginal to any local development agendas by local business interests; by the end (in part because of its active involvement in economic initiatives), it was positioned as a “partner” in the process, to the extent that central government's imposition of a development corporation for the Lower Don Valley was seen as an ideologically driven attempt to undermine the possibility of more extensive partnership and actively to marginalise the Council in the process.

## **Conclusions: The Inevitability of Compromise or the Prospect of Transformation**

Reflecting on the academic and media debates of the time, the dominant analysis of Sheffield's experience across the 1980s can be summarised relatively briefly. According to this, the City Council began the decade committed to a process of radical interventionism and opposition to the operations of the market and ended it deeply embedded in partnership with the private sector. This is the view expressed at the end of the decade by Seyd (1990) and Lawless (1990), as well

as writers for the *Financial Times* and representatives of the local Chamber of Commerce (see e.g. Fazey 1987; Field 1990; Fogarty and Christie 1990:91–92). The underlying argument seems to be that the early years of the 1980s represented some kind of an aberration (or, more positively, an overambitious experiment), after which the Council's leaders moved back to a more moderate and responsible position. Just as the initiatives of the early period can be seen to have gone alongside turmoil (and the rise of a radical left) within the Labour Party, so these developments could be seen to reflect the construction of a more moderate Labour Party under the leadership of Neil Kinnock.

Patrick Seyd (1990:339), for example, argues that “the anti-capitalist ethos of the early 1980s was replaced by a new strategy of collaboration with local capital”, and senior members of the local Chamber of Commerce noted a move away from “megaphone democracy” (quoted in Fazey 1987:15), in which the Council and the Chamber of Commerce shouted at each other, to a relationship in which there is an “unofficial agreement” to leave disagreements to be dealt with behind closed doors (Field 1990:50). And there are certainly marked differences between the rhetorical emphases of the early 1980s and those of the late 1980s: the first stressing the role of the public sector, and the second emphasising the need for partnership between public and private sectors. Instead of arguing that market decisions and the private sector were to blame for decline, the new local realism stressed that “the two sectors shared enough common objectives to achieve some form of consensus” (Dabinett 1989:5). Paul Lawless points to a series of shifts in personnel (including the departure of John Benington and the absorption of officers from South Yorkshire, following the metropolitan county's abolition in 1986) and suggests that there was a growing understanding of the “intellectual sophistication, but practical irrelevance of radical municipal intervention” (Lawless 1990:13). In 1991, the Department of Employment and Economic Development was absorbed into the Planning Department—the great experiment was over. Seyd (1990:344) concludes by reflecting on the shift he identified:

If anything remains of the original socialist project, it is only the conviction that this local enterprise economy [which he says has replaced that project] can be more humane than the Thatcherite model, by dispersing economic benefits across the city and by maintaining as decent level of community services so that all citizens can participate in and benefit from the city's revival.

Whatever the strength of these arguments, there is a danger that they may fail to capture the significance of the moment. At the start of the 1980s there was little possibility of delivering partnerships such as those being fostered at the end of the decade. Paradoxically, it was the shift towards wider economic agendas by the local socialists that began to open them up. Rejecting the status of mere service provider, the City Council sought a more interventionist role to shape the deindustrialising economy it was faced with. The City Council's leadership was also willing to challenge its own bureaucracy, bringing in community activists, creating new structures of decision-making within certain departments. The taken-for-granted property-driven relationships of the 1970s had become largely irrelevant in the context of dramatic industrial restructuring. It was only through



the development of a more activist and interventionist role that partnership emerged as a shared strategy. The initiatives pursued in the early 1980s were undoubtedly concerned with challenging existing ways of thinking and seeking to build a different society. But they were also a precursor to wider shifts in local government, away from the local welfare state towards local corporatism, or local government as agent of economic development in forms of urban entrepreneurialism (see e.g. Cochrane 1993, 1999). While the local socialists were a locally specific phenomenon, in practice they were incorporated into wider processes of political change as states and economies were reconfigured in the context of globalised neoliberalisation (see also Eisenschitz and Gough [1993] for a critique of what they identify as an emerging consensus).

Equally important in retrospect, however, is the recognition that there are ways of opening up local possibilities (like those reflected in Red Tape) that point towards rather different futures, incorporating unexpected actors in developing workable alternatives (Benington 1986). It highlights some of the ways in which radical activists within the state can mobilise change, even if it also points to the limitations of such approaches unless they can foster more autonomous agencies capable of maintaining themselves, whether as campaigning organisations or self-sustaining collaborative institutions (Thompson 2021a).

How can we locate the Sheffield case in relation to debates on municipalism and progressive localism? What relevance does the case have for contemporary discussions? It certainly highlights key tensions within local/municipal socialism, reflecting on seemingly irresolvable divides: between radical intent and reformist accommodation and between building movements and working (with)in state institutions. Picking up on the distinctions made by Thompson (2021b), the Sheffield case cannot be seen as emerging from a route analogous to that of platform municipalism as a transformative project of radical democracy rooted in collective everyday struggles. It appears, therefore, distinct from the contemporary case of *Barcelona en Comú* ("Barcelona in Common"), where social movements and neighbourhood groups came together to form a political platform and successfully won governmental office. Instead, the Sheffield project appears to align more closely with managed municipalism or, simply, municipal socialism: a more top-down, state-centred form of politics, with local government as the vehicle of political change and left-wing political parties as the driver (see also Payling 2014). In Britain, the most well-known case is probably Preston, though other councils have been bought into the overall vision of the "Preston Model" (see Brown and Jones 2021; Centre for Local Economic Strategies [CLES] 2019). Yet, the Sheffield case differs from these contemporary examples in its clear initial attempt to transform the local state by bringing community activists into key positions. By contrast, in Preston, but also North Ayrshire and elsewhere, local politicians have brought in advisors from progressive a think tank, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), to advance change, most particularly devising community wealth building strategies. Even if, by the end of the 1980s, there may be a closer alignment between Sheffield and places like Preston, positioning Sheffield simply within the frame of managed municipalism may underplay the ambiguities and uncertainties of the process reflected in that case.

The literature on urban and local politics often seeks clear positions (or combines them e.g. “in-against-beyond”) vis-à-vis the state. However, it might be more productive to unsettle the notion of distinct boundaries between state and societal forces and provide definitive answers as to how they best relate. Municipalism both incorporates and exceeds government as a theory and project of local democracy (Magnusson 2015). The state may, from this perspective, be enrolled in, but can never be the driving force of, democracy, which will ultimately always lie in people coming together in movements and organisations to shape their everyday lives (Beveridge and Koch 2023). The notion of the “state nexus” from Cooper (2016:318) is a useful way of recognising that state and other political logics can sometimes productively interweave in projects—that the state can become part of, as well as necessarily subject to, localised understandings of citizenship, democracy and social justice.

The Sheffield case is of particular interest because in many ways it seems to lie between the fault lines of the debates—and emblematic cases—around the political possibilities of the state in Britain. While this was never exactly a grassroots, bottom-up project, as it was initiated from within the local Labour Party, and it never quite developed the insurrectionary approach (particularly with respect to the politics of sexuality; Payling 2017a) or alternative structures of power apparent in the GLC during this period, it nevertheless clearly represented an attempt to develop a new, more democratic, form of doing politics. Sheffield’s local socialism was instigated as a transformative project, aiming to incorporate as well as generate community activism. In this context, the case of Sheffield is ambiguous in the sense that it began as a more ambitious transformative agenda even if it ended up somewhere else.

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