Ruling the Regions:
An Interpretivist Analysis of Institutional Development in the English Regional Assemblies

by

Tatum G. Matharu

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an interpretivist analysis of institutional development in the English regional assemblies. It presents a history of institutional development in the regions, arriving at a conceptualization of this tier as a site of 'institutional ambiguity.' Exploring the theoretical bases of institutions and conducting a thorough critique of the schools of institutionalism, this thesis takes forward the theory of 'constructivist institutionalism.' A theoretical framework focussed on the processes of institutional design and change is built from constructivist institutionalism, as is a complementary and coherent methodological package to explore the empirical sites of the West Midlands and North West regional assemblies. The concepts of 'frames' and 'stories' are set out as interpretivist tools through which the primary interview data is analysed, to capture the development of the democratic institution of representation as it relates to the local government and stakeholder actors involved in these two regional assemblies.

This thesis finds actors engaged in interplay between structure and agency while contributing to the processes of institutional design and change. Actors draw together their ideas with the pre-existing institutional context, relating them together in discursive constructions (frames, stories) that underpin their strategic-relational action, which in turn underpins the institutions of the assemblies. Regional representation transpires to mimic local governmental norms due to the dominant influence of the pre-existing context.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

4NW	For North West
AGMA	Association of Greater Manchester Authorities
AWM	Advantage West Midlands
BERR	Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform
BG	Business Group
BLT	Business Leadership Team
CASE	Collaborative Award in Science and Engineering
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CLG	Department for Communities and Local Government
CPR	Common Pool Resources
CSR	Comprehensive Spending Review
CURDS	Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies
DETR	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
DTI	Department of Trade and Industry
DTLR	Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions
EERA	East of England Regional Assembly
EMRA	East Midlands Regional Assembly
ERN	English Regions Network
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FSB	Federation of Small Businesses
GLA	Greater London Authority
GLC	Greater London Council
GO	Government Office
GONW	Government Office North West
GOWM	Government Office West Midlands
HC	House of Commons
HM	Her Majesty's
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
IoD	Institute of Directors

KPG	Key Priority Group
LA	Local Authority
LCC	London County Council
LG	Local Government
LGA	Local Government Association
MEP	Member of European Parliament
NEA	North East Assembly
NLGN	New Local Government Network
NW	North West
NWRA	North West Regional Assembly
ODPM	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister
ONS	Office for National Statistics
OPSI	Office of Public Sector Information
OSG	Other Stakeholder Group
RA	Regional Assembly
RAWM	Regional Action West Midlands
RCU	Regional Co-ordination Unit
RDA	Regional Development Agency
REPB	Regional Economic Planning Board
REPC	Regional Economic Planning Council
RES	Regional Economic Strategy
RPB	Regional Planning Board (also known as Regional Planning Body)
RSS	Regional Spatial Strategy
SEEP	Social, Economic and Environmental Partner
SEERA	South East England Regional Assembly
SERPLAN	London and South East Regional Planning Conference
SNR	Sub-National Review
SWRA	South West Regional Assembly
TUC	Trades Union Congress
WM	West Midlands
WMIDA	West Midlands Industrial Development Association
WMLGA	West Midlands Local Government Association

WMPAC	West Midlands Planning Authorities Conference
WMRA	West Midlands Regional Assembly
WMRDA	West Midlands Regional Development Agency
WMREC	West Midlands Regional Economic Consortium
WMRF	West Midlands Forum of County Councils (later, of Local Authorities)
YHA	Yorkshire and the Humber Assembly

CHAPTER 1: GOVERNANCE, INSTITUTIONS AND AMBIGUITY

1.1 Introducing regional governance

'Governance' is ubiquitous. Use of the term in texts, academic or otherwise, has proliferated over recent decades. It has become shorthand for what is, arguably, a significant change in the way policy is designed and delivered. Dubbed the shift 'from government to governance,' this movement charts the gradual inclusion of multiple stakeholders in the policy-making process alongside or instead of the traditional units of government.

It is a contentious issue. Theorists debate its novelty and are divided over its normative value (e.g. Rhodes 1997; Stoker 1998). Particularly pertinent are the ongoing considerations over the democratic credentials of governance, leading to claims of a democratic deficit as well as to counterclaims of new or different types of democracy (e.g. Papadopoulos 2007; Peters and Pierre 2004). This contestation reveals that democracy is not one single, fixed thing, rather there are different conceptions and types of democracy. Democracy is best understood as rhetoric, something that is identified by how it is referred to in language and how this is then drawn upon when enacted (Saward 2003). Or, different types of democracy can be understood as different democratic discourses – collections of ideas and practices bound together through common discursive constructions that shape what is thought of as appropriate in the political world (Dryzek 1996; Skelcher *et al.* 2005).

What is, or has recently become, important is *how* these are enacted, how discursive constructions are used and how they become embedded, or institutionalised, in the political system. This is the stimulus for this research project. In this thesis I do not seek to contribute towards debates about the novelty or the democratic value of governance, but to explore how democracy or elements of democracy may be constructed or appealed to in institutional processes, or how actors may 'anchor' institutions in their design to understandings of democracy (Skelcher *et al*. 2005). And I do this through empirically researching a site that typifies governance, in which there is a significant degree of 'institutional ambiguity' (Hajer 2003): at the regional tier of English governance.

Over approximately the last decade, there has been significant activity at the sub-national level of British politics, which has led to the design and development of a regional tier of governance in England. A very brief summary of the recent regional developments in England starts after the Scottish and Welsh devolution projects. The then newly elected Labour Government prioritised London (and its surroundings) as what was effectively the first of the English regions, implementing a directly elected form of government following a referendum. Attention then turned to establishing the regional development agencies (RDAs) as bodies that would manage economic affairs in each region; and it is this legislation (the RDA Act 1998) which enabled the development of the bodies that came to be known as the regional assemblies (originally called regional chambers), designating them as the executive branch (over the RDA) in the region.

The eight regional assemblies (RAs) were intended to be a tier of sub-national government, like the arrangement in London, but the idea of a directly elected regional assembly failed to gain public support when put to referendum in the North East region in 2004. Despite this, the *non*-elected RAs continued to exist. Before and after the North East referendum, they brought together a range of actors from the local and regional levels and from different sectors to perform the statutory duty of scrutinising the RDA, as well as a range of other functions that they acquired over time. However, the Government's 2007 Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration discontinued the RAs 'in their current form and function' (HM Treasury 2007: 4), and it remains to be seen exactly what will develop next.

This brief introduction to the RAs reveals a number features that make them an interesting case study for institutional construction. Firstly, the lack of formality regarding the constitutional basis of the RAs is noteworthy. The RDA Act 1998 allowed for the development of these regional bodies but the RAs were not prescribed. The Government issued guidance for the RAs but there were few formal rules. Had the NE referendum returned a favourable result, a directly elected regional body presumably would have gained a constitutional base, and the other regions probably would have followed suit to establish a formal layer of regional government with clear rules and roles. But the course of events has meant that the RAs remained essentially voluntary bodies, and many subsequently obtained legal bases as companies. The implication of this in theoretical terms is that there was considerable scope for the participants at the sub-national level to design and develop their institutions.

Secondly, the composition of actors in the RAs is of interest as the RAs included a range of regional stakeholders in their membership. Central government guidance recommended that at least 30% of all seats were reserved for stakeholders nominated from arts, business, community, environmental and faith organisations (DETR 1998). These were known as the social, economic and environmental partners (SEEPs) and they sat alongside members nominated from the local authorities in the region that made up the other 70% of seats. This demonstrates that there were new actors involved in the policy-making process, and that the governmental actors traditionally involved were not necessarily the only or the obvious actors participating in both the policy-making and institution-building processes.

Finally, the lack of predecessor body at the regional level is significant. The designers of the RAs' operating rules did not have a clear pattern to follow or an institutional legacy to inherit (Jeffares and Skelcher 2007). The regions were, however, part of a longer and wider story of local government reform: units of local government known as metropolitan county councils, though abolished in 1986, were recalled as conterminous with current sub-region or city-region borders; and areas of two-tier local government structures in England would have had to undergo significant reorganisation with any strengthening of the regions. Thus, whilst institutions from other times, levels or sectors could have been mimicked, no single option was an obvious choice or generally accepted by all at the outset, meaning that the selection and deliberation of options formed part of the institutional construction process.

It is pertinent to note the source of interest in the regional assemblies in this thesis. This research was funded by a studentship from the Economic and Social Research Council

(ESRC) with additional assistance from the English Regions Network (ERN) – the umbrella body for the eight assemblies[1]. This was a collaborative arrangement, known as a CASE award, which supported the PhD process whilst also adding a 'real time' dimension that, in this case, required the research to be outputted as three policy papers alongside the thesis. The original plans for the research proposed an exploration into accountability, particularly into the performance of accountability by the stakeholder members and particularly with reference to the multi-level governance context of the RAs. This was revised over the course of the project, not least because of the significant changes in the policy-world with regard to the RAs, namely their dismantling, as mentioned above, which also brought about the disintegration of the ERN. The state of flux was felt keenly in the ERN, resulting in frequent organisational change (in terms of staffing and regional hosting arrangements), which in turn impacted upon the PhD. The instability meant that at times this project was a relatively low priority for the ERN, passing through four different people as supervisor, though at other points there was some attempt to capture the added degree of credibility lent by the academic input to advocate the continued inclusion of stakeholders at the regional level. This 'real world' complexity is reflected upon within the thesis.

1.2 The art of the state[2] and the state of the art

Away from the policy-world, back to academia, the discipline of political science could be said to be undergoing something of a transformation. Over the last decade, intellectual progress in the field has accelerated due to the growing acceptance by those

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[1] Award reference PTA-033-2006-00065
[2] (Hood 2000)

previously unconvinced of the contingent nature of human action. People are unpredictable. Whilst an individual's or a group's behaviour under certain circumstances or in given contexts can be studied and understood, this cannot provide the basis of a prediction of another individual's or group's behaviour in that same situation. Confidence is waning in the traditional assumption that general laws predicting human behaviour can be generated from theoretical modelling and empirical testing. There is greater recognition and acceptance that people are unlike cells, particles and forces, and thus the deep-seated aspiration to be 'scientific' as the natural sciences are perceived to be is gradually being relinquished (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Hay 2002; Little 1991; Stone 2002; Yanow 2006).

This is not to say that all are convinced. Indeed, positivistic political science lives on largely undisturbed, to the extent that the progressives described here are a relatively marginal group. But these scholars that are not content simply to conduct large-*n* empirical studies to uncover the 'truth' about specific social phenomena under the dominant paradigm, that are reflective about the ontological and epistemological foundations of their work, these political 'scientists' turned 'analysts' are at the forefront of developing the discipline (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Hay 2002, 2006). Key to this movement is the rejection of positivism's conception of an objectifiable reality and, instead, a sensitivity to the intersubjective nature of the material world; 'reality' is socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966) and shared through language, and this cognitive and discursive operation adds a layer of complexity that is inexplicable through the traditional methodological framework of the political science. And although this movement falls far short of a Kuhnian paradigm shift, it is gaining momentum and has attracted enough attention to be labelled, variously, the

'interpretive-' or 'constructivist turn' in political science (e.g. Rabinow and Sullivan 1979 and Checkel 1998, respectively).

Despite the novelty status signified by the label of 'turn,' the interpretivist perspective has a long-, if not well-, established presence in that part of social sciences that explicitly addresses ontology and epistemology, that addresses the *nature* of subjects under study and how that can be known (Little 1991; Taylor 1971; Marsh and Furlong 2002). Therefore, it can be easily be given in shorthand, as above, in a way that perhaps focuses too much attention to what interpretivism is not, or what it rejects, and also in a way that somewhat conflates the ontological and epistemological facets of interpretivism. These two are, indeed, closely related, and much of the position is, in fact, developed away from the dominant scientistic paradigm. However, it is useful to the wider thesis to separate out the strands and state positively what interpretivism is: at its core, it is constructivist, meaning that it perceives the nature of things to be socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966); and translating this to the theory of knowledge, interpretivists seek to *understand* meaningful human practices (Little 1991; Taylor 1971; Marsh and Furlong 2002).

It is from this basis that I attempt to develop an interpretivist position. Though the central concern of this thesis is the research project undertaken as my doctoral study, it can also be read as a running commentary that charts my development as an interpretivist researcher whilst undertaking that study. The central tenets – that (a) the 'real world' is actually socially constructed and (b) that knowing that world is understanding those constructions – are brought to bear upon the theory and methods used to research institutional development at the regional tier of English governance.

By building specific theory and a research design, as well as through physically conducting the research, the ontological and epistemological positioning is honed in on. Questions are raised, for example about how to access meanings and what purpose we can serve with our unearthed understandings, throughout the thesis as the interpretivist position is applied and figured through. But this is not to suggest that interpretivism was 'tried and tested' in this project. I concur with the key textbook advice that ontology and epistemology are together 'a skin, not a sweater' (Marsh and Furlong 2002), though, in the same vein, I add that doctoral training is the process of becoming comfortable in one's own skin.

Accordingly, this thesis is less about finding answers in the strictest sense, but about dealing with the implications of ontology and epistemology when turned towards the particulars of the research. Turning to the specific area that is concerned with the structures and process of policy-making, theorists have responded to the interpretivist turn by recognising the inherently political nature of any interaction involving more than one actor. Whilst previously the art of analysing the state's structures focussed on such problems as, for example the efficiency of bureaucratic networks, more recently the interpretive turn has highlighted the role of an actor's *interpretation* of efficiency as well as the contestation of such interpretations amongst actors, which draws out the normative basis of such understandings and leads to debates about whether (to continue with the example) bureaucratic networks should be efficient or in what ways they could be democratic. These are exactly the kinds of issues that could be raised about sites like the English regional assemblies. The discipline of public policy mirrors and reflects upon policy-making in practice, and so this academic movement towards interpretivism

has, through this lens, problematised anew issues relating to the topic of governance that has, as noted above, simultaneously been attracting increased attention.

This interpretive turn in public policy is an ontological movement. It operates at a level that concerns wholesale world-views. It draws on earlier and ongoing developments in the disciplines of philosophy and linguistics, and brings those to the political settings of state apparatus. And, because of the scale of change, theorists advocating the interpretive stance have thus far tended to focus on critiquing the dominant positivist perspective in political studies and on grand theory, developing interpretivism's fundamental premises with reference to politics (e.g. Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2010). In a similar vein, those academics more concerned with the ways in which the interpretive stance could be practically applied to public policy research have borrowed and adapted tools from other relevant disciplines, for example ethnographic data collection methods from anthropology and discourse data analysis methods from linguistics, to political settings (e.g. Yanow 2000; Farrelly 2010). Whilst these theoretical and methodological developments have been essential in asserting the interpretivist perspective, the movement is now ripe for opportunities to develop interpretivist positions on the traditional subject matters of political studies, such as political institutions. Rather than simply applying the interpretivist lens to political settings, trying to distil discourses and draw out contested meanings, attention should now turn to the significance of these discourses or contestations – on how people deal with these tensions, on the resultant processes – and develop mid-range interpretivist theories (Hay 2002).

This thesis seeks to address this need. Turning attention to institutions, it develops an approach to institutional analysis that is fitting with interpretivism. Institutions have long been scrutinised in political studies because they are essential components in political life: they are the structures that underlie and hold together whole political systems. This thesis takes a modern political setting – a site of governance, where there is 'institutional ambiguity' (Hajer 2003) – and asks, from an explicitly interpretivist perspective, how multiple actors together create or change the political institutions that provide the structure to their policy-making activities. It employs an institutionalist theory that is consistent with the foundations of interpretivism and develops a corresponding research design. The following section outlines how this thesis addresses this research problem.

1.3 Thesis outline

The first substantive chapter of this thesis expands of the empirical site that is the background to this research. In charting the institutional development of the regions, I highlight the unstable and contested nature of the tier. This chapter covers the ideas behind regionalism, the pendulous party political movement and the relationship of the regional agenda to the wider setting of British national politics. In short, it contextualises the regional assemblies. I bring the reader right up to date, describing the particularities of each of the assemblies as discovered in the early stages of this research project and summarising the national developments in the regional agenda that took place over its course. I then adjust the level of focus, detailing the points that make the assemblies particularly interesting to study and translating these points into theoretical

terms. I bring these points under Hajer's conception of an 'institutional void' (2003). And this concept points neatly and directly to a body of theory literature for further analysis, that which addresses institutions.

Institutions are significant and complex entities of political life. One of the key qualities of an institution, and perhaps the reason it remains an interesting and essential entity to analyse in political studies, is the difficulty in fixing their meaning. Institutions are defined by what they do. And, partly for that reason, they can simultaneously be understood as one thing and its opposite. The clearest demonstration of this relates directly with the central underlying issue of this thesis, that of structure and agency. There is a definitional bias in institutional analyses towards understanding institutions as stable structures in society, and yet they also exert agency in that they are a powerful force on individuals in society.

As chapter 3 will set out, there are a number of different conceptions and types of institutionalisms, which vary according to different reviewers' schemas. However, it is generally accepted that there are three main schools of institutionalism which vary according to their leaning on this central question of structure and agency, and which in turn reveals the ontological foundation of their stance. On one end of the spectrum, rational choice institutionalism privileges the agent over structure, focussing on the agent's attempts to create and use institutions to bind the choices and actions of others. On the opposite end of the spectrum, normative or sociological institutionalism concentrates on structure over agency, focussing on the constraining affects of institutions on people's behaviour. There is a third main school, that of historical institutionalism, of which advocates are united by the central idea that past decisions are

the key determinant of individuals' choices and actions but, even within this school, these advocates are divided along the same continuum i.e. according to structure and agency, along their 'cultural' and 'calculus' strands (Hall and Taylor 1996).

These institutionalisms are clearly closely related in that they bring together the factors of structure and agency, and they invariably reach a similar conclusion through empirical analyses: that both factors matter, though to differing extents. This is what makes the institutionalism difficult to compare. On one side of the central structure/agency 'cleavage' that Lowndes identifies (2002), the institutionalisms grouped by their inheritance of a rational foundation of human behaviour there is a focus on the individual agent's interaction with an institution whereas the normative/sociological institutional perspective explores the relationship between institutions and individuals from the institution outwards. Effectively their objects of analysis are different and the pull is in different directions.

After a critical analysis of the institutionalisms, I take forward constructivist institutionalism, which seeks to reposition the goalposts of this debate. Indeed, it is based on the premise that the structure/agency issue should not be seen as a binary debate, that is it something of a false dichotomy since, as mentioned above, studies regularly conclude that both structure and agency are both in operation together but to differing degrees. What is necessary, therefore, is a theorization of the relationship between these forces, which is the contribution that constructivist institutionalism makes to the wider institutionalist perspective. This theory takes the wealth of literature on institutionalism as a point of departure and it seeks to bring the interrelated concepts of structure and agency together as a starting point, thus it is based, first and foremost,

on a 'strategic-relational' understanding of human action, whereby an individual actor is at once strategic but also maps out their strategy according to the situation around them (Jessop 1990, 1996; Hay 2002). In this way, the individual actor has the capacity to act – i.e. has agency – but the choices made and actions taken are located within a context – i.e. this occurs within a structured environment. Thus, constructivist institutionalism moves institutionalism forward and places greater attention on how structure and agency work together.

Attention then turns to methods, or more precisely to methodology, given the sustained engagement with ontology and epistemology throughout this next chapter's development of a way to operationalise constructivist institutionalism. In chapter four I develop an analytical framework from the theory of constructivist institutionalism as it relates to institutional design and change, thus clarifying what data I need, to then state how I propose to collect and analyse that data. I work through the fundamentals of the research methods, such as why the case studies were selected and how the interviews were conducted, and I do this with frequent reference to the underlying position that sets out the vision and purpose of the research because, I argue, it is only through connecting to this that the methods and the way they are used can be justified. Methods are themselves neutral tools, not necessarily and certainly not exclusively aligned to a researcher's ontological position, but they are fundamentally driven by that position. The methods of data analysis make this point clear, as this iterative process is exploratory in this thesis. I employ concepts that are derived from previous interpretive work to help navigate through the data and I relate these together as they speak to and through the findings of the research project.

In this thesis and in this chapter particularly, I pay significant attention to issues of '-ology' because they have been raised, challenged and honed iteratively during the course of this project. I was wary throughout – and still am – of merely adopting a position within which I could problematise, reference and conclude a study, and instead I aimed to engage with limitations, work out issues and concentrate on the peripheries of agreements where there is scope for development, however small. Therefore, this chapter conventionally sets out the methods i.e. recognising and making explicit the limitations, but it takes this to a further level and re-engages with ontology and epistemology to consider limitations and criticisms of the perspective as a whole. In so doing, I balance what can appear to be quite a heavy critique of positivism and its scientism throughout the thesis by perhaps coveting to some extent that perspective's ability to *explain* confidently and to generate abstract, applicable knowledge. I recognise that these concerns are born of the CASE component of this research project and I describe my attempt to manage these issues over the course of the PhD.

The next four chapters present a developmental and exploratory process of empirical research. The first case study – of the West Midlands Regional Assembly – points to the significance of different sectoral groupings in this case. Using this information gathered in the early stages of fieldwork, the direction of data analysis is constructed around the idea of a 'frame.' This is used to re-present the different frames of reference of the different groups of actors – local government, business and others. However, this does not initially bear much relevance to the next case study – the North West Regional Assembly, where actors present themselves as much more united. The actors here repeat the same stories when describing their experience of institutional development,

and so the discursive construction of stories is taken forward as a tool with which to examine the data.

The two-pronged approach to data analysis is not separated out to the different case studies. Rather, the use of frames in the WMRA case and stories in the NWRA case leads to questioning about stories in the WMRA case and frames in the NWRA case. Chapter 5 presents the WMRA local government and separate (business, other) stakeholder frames and the following chapter presents their shared story of 'consensus.' And chapter 7 then presents the NWRA stories, followed by an exploration into the original frames that can be revealed. This generates an understanding that is the key finding of this research, brought together and presented in chapter 8: that actors initially identify with a particular frame when entering the institutional design/change process but they are able to discursively select, construct and share across those frames, thus forming collaborative stories that, in stages, realise institutional design and change. Finally, chapter 9 draws the conclusions of the project overall, relating back to constructivist institutionalism, reflecting back on the journey as well as looking forwards to future research with a final word on governance, institutions and ambiguity.

CHAPTER 2: A HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH REGIONS

Introduction

This chapter provides the background detail to the regional tier of governance in England that is the subject, in broad terms, of research in this thesis. It is useful to begin with this introduction to the empirical site in order to distil the details that are relevant to the wider research programme in this thesis. Deciphering the points for further study enables a translation of those points into more abstract terms that then, in turn, direct attention towards relevant theory in the following chapter. Further empirical detail is given later in the thesis with regards to the specific cases – the West Midlands Regional Assembly (WMRA) and the North West Regional Assembly (NWRA) – that are the subjects of the primary research in this project.

What becomes clear in tracing the history of regional development is how unstable and contested the tier is. Indeed, from a general perspective of the British political system, it is hardly considered a tier at all. However, as I point out in this chapter, it cannot be considered insignificant because there have been repeated attempts at establishing a regional governmental presence. This thesis explores, in particular, the most recent attempt at regional governance, approximately delineated in the decade of 1998 to 2008. This is a period of significant development in the regions but also one of significant ambiguity given the autonomy granted to regional actors for the institutional development of the English regional assemblies. This makes the regional assemblies both a suitable and an interesting site for research.

The first section of this chapter locates the concept of the region in the history of governmental expansion at sub-national levels in England and charts the formation of the first regional institutions. I then detail the development of the latest regional arrangements, including the main political parties' ideological battles over regionalisation and the practical hurdles encountered in attempting to establish a tier of regional government. Following this, the focus shifts to the latest regional arrangements as the chapter maps out the network of actors now populating the regional landscape and analyses the regional assembly in detail. Finally, the scene is brought fully up to date, pointing towards the continued ambiguity in this tier and adopting a fitting theoretical conceptualization of that ambiguity in the form of Maarten Hajer's 'institutional void' (2003).

2.1 From prehistory to precursor

In tracing the roots of the English regions, Mark Sandford states that the '"regions" have had only the merest of political and cultural existence since the eleventh century in England' (2006: 13). Through this attempt to assert the insignificance of the regions, however, Sandford reveals that there was at least some existence of the region many centuries ago. It is almost impossible to determine the shape and size of these regions, but they are unlikely to have resembled the regional boundaries in place today and probably more closely corresponded to the expansive shire counties dating back to Anglo-Saxon or Celtic times (Wilson and Game 2006).

If this was the case, there appears to have been a discrepancy between what was the region and what was the county, a confusion which extends to the 'shires' and in some places includes the historically large cities. These might all have been identified as a 'region' given the lack of clear constitutional settlement between the various spatial units throughout these Middle Ages. The region at this time was simply an abstract, relational concept, identified and constructed between the local and national. And yet there was little identification with and so 'only the merest' construction of the region, giving rise to the repeated observations of the lack of regional cultural identity and tradition in England (Sandford 2006; Tomaney and Mawson 2002), particularly in relation to other tiers of political organisation as well as to other countries.

Britain was, by the middle of the nineteenth century, 'a hodgepodge' or 'a tangle' of parishes, boroughs and counties (Wilson and Game 2006: 50). This hodgepodge was further tangled by a wealth of other 'ad hoc authorities' established during the nineteenth century, for example Wilson and Game note the examples of the Turnpike Trustees managing the growing system of roads and the Improvement Commissioners providing facilities such as street cleansing and water supply (2006: 51). With the onset of the Industrial Revolution, these public services became essential to alleviate the pressures of overcrowding and poor sanitation (Wilson and Game 2006: 51).

The new global economic imperative meant that Britain would be competing with, amongst others, the very well-organised French, who had established a clear system of communes (at the local level) and *départements* (perhaps equivalent to the county) at the time of the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century (Knapp and Wright 2001: 342, Wilson and Game 2006: 50). Government reacted by producing a spate of

legislation attempting to impose order on the medieval mess. In 1888, a tier of government was created at the county level across England and Wales (and across Scotland in 1889), including a county council for London (Wilson and Game 2006: 52-53). This was shortly followed by the creation of 535 urban district councils, 472 rural district councils and 270 non-county borough councils in 1894 (and town councils for Scotland in 1900) (Wilson and Game 2006: 52-53).

By the twentieth century, then, there were no Acts passed that legislated for the establishment of the region. The discussion above appears, therefore, to track only the development of local government in Britain. However, what this reveals is that there was still no significant regional imperative at this point in time. The parishes, boroughs, towns, cities, shires, counties, as well as countries in Britain were all in a state of flux, yet to be fully fixed. The English regions cannot be discussed in complete isolation from these other tiers of government; the regions can be separately focussed up on but developments in the localities and counties as well as, later, the countries of Britain are integral to the context within which regionalisation is to occur. It is important, therefore, to gain an understanding of the centuries of change in British sub-national governance whilst tracing the history of the English regions.

Following the reorganisation of local and county level government in the late eighteenth century, still more changes occurred in the early twentieth century and eventually a 'serious structural reform' was initiated in the 1960s (Wilson and Game 2006: 55). It was during this period – the early twentieth century – that the first demands for organisation at the regional level were made. Wannop hails the 1909 Housing and Planning Act as the beginning of an 'experimental era' in regional planning (1995: 1).

This, coupled with the division of England into administrative regions in case of invasion during the First World War (HC 2007: 6), provides the earliest examples of central government's recognition and tacit approval of institutionalising the region when appropriate.

Planning economic growth and land-use were quickly taken up as appropriate tasks to be conducted at the regional level, and so several towns and cities organised committees to discuss how to implement the Act. The first successful attempt at regional planning materialised in the form of the Doncaster Regional Planning Scheme produced in 1922, considered the 'first significant regional plan of modern British planning history' (Wannop 1995: 2). In the more complex situation of Manchester, where several small towns surrounded a large city, 76 local authorities collaborated under the Manchester and District Joint Town Planning Advisory Committee during the early 1920s (Wannop 1995: 2).

These are just two early examples of regional networks that became established throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The region was beginning to take root. The development of regional planning was stalled by the Second World War, but the region reappeared as the interim unit of government in case of emergency. In the immediate post-war era, eleven 'standard regions' were founded with the purpose of devolving decision-making and ensuring greater coherence between local and central government policies (Sandford 2006: 16-17). However, these new regional institutions had little opportunity to make an impact on the practices of sub-national governance as a change in Government triggered their demise.

The Conservative Government elected in 1951 did not support the gradual regionalisation in England, but the party governed Britain during an extraordinary time and witnessed ten years of considerable change. The decline of heavy industry and the growth of the service sector caused a shift in the pattern of employment across the country and a consequent movement of people from northern England, Scotland and Wales to London and the South East (Sandford 2006: 17; Wannop 1995: 9). The stark regional inequalities forced the Conservatives to accept the economic imperative of regional planning and to recognise its steady growth in demand over the three decades since the first regional planning experiments. Thus, the Conservatives made the first tentative steps towards instituting regional planning, primarily through a wealth of regional studies (Wannop 1995: 9), and in 1961 SERPLAN, a planning body for London and the South East (officially London and South East Regional Planning Conference), was established (Sandford 2006: 17). Soon after, planning committees and industrial development associations mushroomed across the country.

In 1964, a change in Government generated a change in tack. Having spent thirteen years in opposition, the Labour Party was eager to separate its ideas about regionalism from the Conservatives' eventual acquiescence. It focussed on the Conservatives' early attitude to planning, ridiculing their worries of the loss of liberty caused by planning (The Labour Party 1964, cited in Dale 2000: 104). It also criticised the Conservatives' late attempts at regional planning, disapproving of the concentration of efforts on the management of the pressures of population drift to the South East of England (through SERPLAN), rather than on the amelioration of the consequences of economic decline in Scotland, Wales and northern England (Lindley 1982: 171), which had been neglected. However, rather than supporting the planning committees and industrial development

associations that had organised in the regions and encouraging the establishment of others, the Labour Party proposed a National Plan supported by statutory regional plans (Lindley 1982; Sandford 2006).

Inspired by the pace of progress in other countries, the party looked to France which had initiated a programme of indicative planning with a National Plan and central-regional contracts (Knapp and Wright 2001; Lindley 1982; Sandford 2006). The regional element of this proposal was essential; regional plans would be able

> '…to solve the problems of slum clearance and overcrowding in our major cities; to carry out a vigorous programme for new town and overspill development […]; to clear up the ugly, scarred face of industrial Britain; to save the countryside from needless despoliation; and to get the co-ordination of higher education, further education and industrial training required to maintain economic expansion'
>
> (The Labour Party 1964, cited in Dale 2000: 112).

Importantly, the regional plans would no longer be developed in isolation, as they had been in the past, and instead they were to be designed 'in harmony both with each other and with national policies and priorities' (Lindley 1982: 171).

In 1965-66, the Labour Government instituted Regional Economic Planning Boards (REPBs) and Regional Economic Planning Councils (REPCs) in each of the eight newly defined regions (Lindley 1982; Sandford 2006). The Boards had responsibility over the regional plans; they were to draw together any streams of work from central government departments that had a regional dimension in a single, co-ordinated plan

(Lindley 1982; Sandford 2006). The REPCs were to assist the REPBs in this process by providing information about the region's particularities, for example their resources (Lindley 1982; Sandford 2006). Together, these institutions would

> 'provide for a full and balanced development of the country's economic and social resources; and […] ensure that the regional implications of growth are clearly understood and taken into account in the planning of land-use, of development […] and of services'
>
> (Brown 1964, cited in Lindley 1982: 172).

As explained above by the Secretary of State for the parent department for the REPBs and REPCs (the new Department of Economic Affairs), the Government was committed to incorporating the specific needs of the regions into the planning process and tailoring policies accordingly.

This systematic institutionalisation of regionalism could be viewed as a watershed in the development of institutions at the regional level. The REPBs and the REPCs were the culmination of decades of evolution, although now enhanced by a number of features that separated them from earlier structures. In contrast to the experiments of the 1920s, the new network of REPBs and REPCs across the country represented a systematic approach to regionalism; they did not develop on an ad hoc basis, but were established in each region. And in contrast to the standard regions founded in the 1940s, the new institutions sought to include the demands of the region rather than only ensuring local and central government objectives were met. In bringing these two – standardised institutions and regionalism – together, the first regional institutions were established.

The Government openly stated an intention to include a region's particularities and demands into planning, but how was this to be achieved? The REPCs, tasked with providing information about the region, were to be composed of people from the region. Described by Sandford as what the French would call '*notables*' (2006: 18), these people were noteworthy, distinguished individuals from the region deemed to be able to collate information about the region and communicate its needs. The Secretary of State selected and appointed 25-30 of these people to form the REPCs. Lindley describes them as 'drawn from both sides of industry, local government, and other walks of life in the regions' (1982: 172), and Sandford points out that 'business, trade unions and the universities were all represented on the REPCs' (2006: 19). In contrast, the REPBs were made up of senior figures from central government departments involved in or affected by regional planning. Together, these bodies were to create a more consensual approach to planning.

The members of the REPCs, being people from the region with an interest in the region, could be seen as regional 'stakeholders.' Their inclusion in the planning process, assisting in decision-making that could effect and affect regional policies, was novel. It could be seen as the first of many attempts to involve territorial and/or sectoral interests in policy-making processes, as an experiment in corporatism and perhaps the germination of the Labour Party's recent interest in the ideals of 'partnership.' Some suggest that the inclusion of the regional perspective in the planning bodies of the 1960s could have been part of the Labour Party's mimicry of the French National Plan, which too allowed an advocacy role for regional representatives (Lindley 1982; Sandford 2006). Equally, it could be inferred from the Labour Party's specific history with the trade union movement, from which it is commonly understood to originate, that the

Party has a long-standing willingness to involve societal interests in public policy and thus the REPCs were an early embodiment of this predisposition to corporatism.

The Labour Government, whether through imitation or due to principle, appeared to be committed to involving regional stakeholders in the planning process. Despite clear intentions, though, there was some confusion about the stakeholders' representational role. Whilst Sandford describes business, trade unions and universities as 'represented' on the REPCs (above, 2006: 19), he also points out that the members were appointed 'for their individual qualities rather than as representatives of particular sectoral interests' (Friend *et al*. 1974: 86). And yet at the same time, 'representativeness' would also be taken into account. In this respect, the national and regional planning in the UK contrasted starkly with the French model, in which regional actors had a clear mandate to act in the interests of the region as well as significant power in the planning process (Lindley 1982: 174; Wannop 1995: 34).

Further questions arose around the regional planning bodies and their roles just two years after their establishment, when they changed function. In March 1966, responsibility for drawing up the regional plan was shifted from the Boards to the Councils (Lindley 1982; Sandford 2006). It appeared that the REPCs, and thus the regional stakeholders, had gained weight vis-à-vis the REPBs, the arm of central government. However, although the Government transferred the task, it did not transfer the attendant power; the plans would now not be written by civil servants, and so would no longer be binding on Government (Lindley 1982; Sandford 2006).

This discussion raises a number of issues that are relevant to the current regional institutions. A significant feature, the inclusion of regional stakeholders, has endured; the tensions around the stakeholders' representational role persist; and the regional landscape continues to be subject to frequent changes, relative to other tiers of government. These themes and issues will be discussed in detail below, following an exploration of the developments that led to the establishment of the current regional institutions.

2.2 An attempt at regional government

In the post-war era, the successive Labour and Conservative governments engaged in an ideological battle over the regions. The Labour Government of the late 1940s instituted the standard regions, which the Conservative Government of the early 1950s promptly discontinued. However, during their time in power, the Conservatives recognised the necessity of strategic planning at a regional level and established SERPLAN, the planning body for the South East region of England mentioned above. The eventual election of a Labour Government in 1964 saw the replacement of SERPLAN with two standard regional planning bodies, common to all the redefined standard regions.

The Conservative Party was then elected to government in 1970 but it defied the adversarial pattern of developments in the region. This Conservative Government instead decided that a reorganisation of local government was required, rather than an attempt to reform the regional tier which it had previously deemed unnecessary and undesirable (Lindley 1982: 179). Dismissing the recently published recommendations

to establish a system of all-purpose unitary councils by the Redcliffe-Maud Commission initiated by Labour, Heath's Conservative Government created a two-tier system of county and district councils (with metropolitan county and district councils in major conurbations) across England (Wilson and Game 2006: 57-58).

Following a relatively uneventful (in terms of sub-national government) period in office for the Labour Party between 1974 and 1979, the Conservative Party, now with Margaret Thatcher at the helm, was elected to government. During its first year in power, the new Government abolished Labour's REPBs and REPCs. This was not, however, simply a continuation of a pattern of adversarial politics. The regional Boards and Councils were discontinued because they were no longer serving their purpose. Indeed, these bodies had been ineffective for approximately a decade before they were abolished (Sandford 2006: 21). Some, including the former Labour Minister of Housing and Local Government, argued that the REPBs and REPCs were bound to be 'inadequate and meaningless' since their founding as they had to be cautious around physical planning, which was firmly a local government domain (Crossman 1975: 93, cited in Lindley 1982: 173). But ultimately it was not local government concern that brought about the demise of the planning Boards and Councils, rather macro-economic factors caused the National Plan to fail, which in turn brought an end to the need for regional plans and planning (Lindley 1982: 178).

The Thatcher Government's efforts to 'streamline' government structures also extended to the recently reorganised city councils (The Conservative Party 1983). Just over a decade after the last Conservative Government had legislated to restructure local government, the Thatcher Government proposed and passed its own Local Government

Act in 1985, which abolished the metropolitan county councils that had been established by the last. Wannop describes this as a 'curbing' of local government, and notes the growth of a range of government agencies, for example Urban Development Corporations, City Action Teams and Enterprise Zones, created to undertake former local government tasks (1995: 39). The Government made no other significant changes to the regional landscape until 1994, when it established a network of regional Government Offices (GOs) to co-ordinate the multitude of government agencies and departments at work in the regions (Russell Barter 2002; Sandford 2006).

Despite the failure of the regional planning Boards and Councils during the 1970s, the Labour Party continued to be committed to the idea of devolving governmental powers to both the regions of England and the countries of the UK. The Labour Party spent eighteen years in opposition, and during this time it witnessed an intensification of economic disparities across the UK and a growth in the number of government agencies and quangos (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations) operating at the regional level (Russell Barter 2002; Sandford 2006). In this context the Party's arguments for regionalisation, which were at once practical and ideological, gathered strength.

The decline of industry in the 1980s gave rise to economic arguments for regionalisation. Partly compounded by the pace of globalisation, which had accelerated due to the advance of technology, there was a competitive imperative to assist the northern English regions in diversifying their economies from industry as well as to better support the weaker areas overshadowed in the more prosperous regions (Russell Barter 2002; Sandford 2006). By establishing regional institutions that could provide

more focussed attention for these tasks, it was hoped that the whole national economy would be better able to compete in the global economy (The Labour Party 1997, in Dale 2000). At the same time, this fulfilled the core Labour value of equality, by reducing disparities between and within the regions (Russell Barter 2002; The Labour Party 1997, in Dale 2000).

It could be argued that a degree of Europeanization, too, may have contributed to Labour's drive for regional institutions. Some thought that creating a tier of regional government, as existed in other European states, could generate practical advantages for the UK. For example, as an organised institution, the English region could participate in EU arenas such as the European Committee of the Regions and the regions would be better able to prepare successful bids for EU funding (Russell Barter 2002). Ideologically, the move towards regionalism could be seen as an approval and institutionalisation of the EU-inspired principle of subsidiarity, whereby tasks are delegated to the lowest, most appropriate level of government. Indeed, the Labour Party General Election Manifesto 1997 claimed that 'subsidiarity is as sound a principle in Britain as it is in Europe' when making the case for devolving powers to Scotland and Wales (cited in Dale 2000: 375).

Alongside these bids to improve the economic fortunes of the UK and to create a tier of government that could most successfully strategise to this end, the Labour Party put forward the democratic case for institutionalising and formalising the regions. It argued that a tier of regional government already existed in the form of quangos and GOs, but this was uncoordinated and unelected and so a democratically elected and transparent regional government was required to address the democratic deficit (The Labour Party

1997, in Dale 2000; Russell Barter 2002: 13). It was thought that the quangos operating in the region ought to be held to account by the region, which could be achieved through regional government.

Finally, regionalisation was, in part at least, a tacit recognition of feelings of regional identity that existed in some areas of England. Although uncommon, there were dispersed minority groups in the population that did acknowledge a regional particularity but had no opportunity to express this in the policy-making process (Russell Barter 2002; Tomaney and Mawson 2002). At the same time, the Labour Party understood that the vast majority of people did not experience these sentiments and so included a manifesto pledge to not impose a uniform blueprint of regional institution but to allow the regions to decide for themselves whether to establish one via referenda (The Labour Party 1997, in Dale 2000).

The Labour Party, by then refashioned as 'New Labour,' eventually won the general election of 1997. After a lengthy period in opposition spent preparing for the devolution of decision-making powers to the countries of the UK and regions of the England, the Government was quick to act. Within months the Government had published White Papers about the proposed devolution and soon after held referenda in Scotland and Wales (Wilson and Game 2006: 83). Having gained public approval for a Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, the Government legislated for their establishment and the first Scottish and Welsh elections were held in May 1999 (Wilson and Game 2006: 83).

During the same period, the Government was working to institute a regional government for London. A city-wide referendum was held in May 1998 and was followed by the Greater London Authority (GLA) Act 1999 establishing a directly elected mayor and assembly for the city. This assembly has 25 members, all of which are politicians directly elected into their posts. Just over half of them – 14 – are elected by constituencies, each made up of two or three London boroughs, and the remaining members are elected to represent all of London. London could be seen as England's first region. Indeed, in its early days the GLA described itself as such (Sandford 2006: 62). Although not explicit, London's new government was a model for other regions in that a regional assembly, where a referendum approved its establishment, was intended to be a directly elected body (Straw 1995). The assemblies were designed, in part, to strengthen accountability (Straw 1995; Tomaney and Mawson 2002) and so it was anticipated that they would be directly elected, therefore resembling the GLA. However, in a number of ways London was and remains an exceptional case. Regional government was established in London before in any other region and it has since remained unique in status.

The prioritisation of a regional government for London is easily attributed to the exceptional needs of the region. Being the largest city in the UK with a high population density, there is a clear need for the local government units to co-operate at a city-wide level in order to, for example, improve housing provision or maintain transport facilities. This necessity to collaborate at a scale higher than the individual councils in London is not novel, and nor are London-wide institutions designed to manage it. Before the creation of the GLA in 1999, there existed the Greater London Council

(GLC) since 1963, and this, too, was preceded by the London County Council (LCC) established in 1899 (Wilson and Game 2006).

These numerous organisational changes reflect, in part, national changes in local government structures (noted above), however the more recent changes in London were arguably the manifestation of an extraordinary party political battle. The GLC was abolished by a Conservative Government in 1985, which is openly considered a wholly political move against the Labour Party that had control of all of the London councils as well as against a particular individual, the Labour politician 'Red Ken' Livingstone, then leader of the GLC (Travers 2004; Wilson and Game 2006). Despite the abolition of the GLC, Ken Livingstone remained a campaigning figure at the forefront of London politics and became the first directly elected mayor of London as soon as this post and the GLA were established in 1998.

The Labour Government published the Regional Development Agencies Act during the legislative flurry that occurred in its first year of office. This Act instituted Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), bodies tasked with economic planning, in each of the regions[3]. It did not establish a tier of regional government across England, as the Government had pledged to gauge public opinion before taking such a step, but the Act did allow for the establishment of voluntary regional chambers (Section 8.1 RDA Act 1998). These took shape whilst the Government focussed on the countries and the capital of the UK.

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[3] The regions, by this stage, were defined by the boundaries of the Government Office (GO) for the regions, in place since 1994 (Sandford 2006: 41).

During this interim period, before the regional referenda could be organised, guidelines were issued for the chambers (DETR 1998). These were not prescriptive, corresponding with the thinking that the establishment of regional government should be a voluntary and regionally determined decision, but they did include recommendations for the involvement of non-local authority actors in the chamber (DETR 1998). Whilst the majority of chamber membership was to be made up of leaders or deputy leaders from local councils, stakeholder partners were to be drawn in from a range of organisations and make up at least 30% of an RA's membership (DETR 1998).

These arrangements were intended to be temporary, and the move towards more formal, elected regional assemblies returned to the fore during New Labour's second term in power. The Government, spurred on in particular by the then Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, who is seen as Labour's keenest supporter of regionalisation, released a White Paper entitled '*Your Region, Your Choice*' (Cabinet Office 2002). This reiterated the point that the establishment of a directly elected assembly was dependent upon popular support in each region. If such a motion was carried following a referendum, a fully and directly elected assembly would be instituted, although alongside elected members, regional stakeholders would continue to be involved (Cabinet Office 2002). Stakeholders could participate in all aspects of the assembly's work (Cabinet Office 2002), but they would not constitute the 30% of assembly membership as had been recommended in the interim arrangements (DETR 1998).

Plans were made for regional referenda in the three northern most regions, those furthest from London, where feelings of regional identity were thought to be strongest

(Tomaney and Mawson 2002). The first of these was held on 4th November 2004 in the North East region. It returned a majority against the establishment of an elected regional assembly (Sandford 2006; Tomaney and Mawson 2002). Although some claimed that the '"no" vote' was an expression of dissatisfaction with the Government's performance in other areas unrelated to regionalism (Sandford 2006; Tomaney and Mawson 2002), it could not be ignored that only 22% of the regional population that voted were in favour of an elected regional assembly, which was insufficient to be seen as any sort of even tentative general support. The other two planned referenda were postponed indefinitely.

The Government's interest in regional government waned. In effect, Labour simply adhered to its manifesto pledge – if elected regional assemblies were not wanted, there was little the Government would or could do. However, neither the result of the North East referendum nor the lack of central government direction could bring about the demise of the regional chambers. These bodies had become entrenched enough in the regional landscape to at least attempt to continue to operate and to develop as they saw fit. These bodies thus flouted electoral defeat, renamed themselves 'regional assemblies,' and remained operational for a number of years.

2.3 From regional government to regional governance

This section sketches the regional scene as it was during the majority of the period of this study. This PhD project started after the NE referendum and so amidst significant ambiguity in the regions. Indeed, the impetus for the research on the CASE partner's

part was most certainly related to this ambiguity, giving rise to questions about the unclear patterns of working in sections of the assemblies. This gave the research a 'real time' dimension that is now tricky to report (particularly due to a significant turn of events in the early stages of the primary research with the announcement in mid-2007 of the abolition of the RAs from early 2010). As such, an approximate point in time has to be selected to now set the 'current' scene of regional development and, given that the bulk of the primary data collected in the case studies refers to the period after the 2004 North East '"no" vote' but before the 2007 announcement of abolition, the 2005-6 period is taken as 'current.' It is important to note that the primary data in this research draws on both the past and the anticipated future beyond the 1998-2008 period, but a narrower perspective is necessary for the present purpose of describing the regional scene and the regional assemblies as they were for the best part of this research.

Rejoining the story of regional institutional development after the North East '"no" vote,' it is important to note that the landscape which the regional government institutions were expected to enter was already a crowded space. As mentioned, the outgoing Conservative Government left a network of Government Offices that were surrounded by a multitude of government agencies and quangos. The establishment of regional government was, however, supposed to resolve this problem and bring order to the region. When the idea of regional government failed to gain public support and the interim regional institution failed to quietly disappear, the renamed regional assemblies, still unelected and therefore without jurisdiction over the quangos, became yet another piece of the regional muddle. Before analysing the regional assembly, it is helpful to examine its spatial context in further detail.

The first component of the regional tier is the network of regional Government Offices (GOs). These were established in 1994, in an effort to bring together the various units of government departments that were already working separately in the region (Russell Barter 2002; Sandford 2006). Their role was then and now continues to be an agent or an extension of the centre – they effectively represent central government in the regions. The GOs are part of the national civil service, and so are made up of public sector employees rather than politicians, stakeholders or appointees. These regional civil servants ensure that national, centrally determined objectives and targets are met and oversee the implementation of a range of government policies. The policies come from a number of different government departments and so there exists a Regional Co-ordination Unit (RCU) as part of central government administration to aid the communication between the GOs and the government departments.

In 1998, the Labour Government created the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs). The RDAs could be described as wholly economic and rather technocratic bodies. Charged with the task of reducing economic disparities within and between the regions, the RDAs plan and implement policies to encourage economic growth and instigate regeneration. This includes increasing the rate of employment in a region, as well as ensuring that the regional workforce is able to gain and develop the skills necessary for their employment. These are business-led bodies, with their chairs appointed on the basis of their success in business combined with experience of working and understanding of the region. The appointments are made centrally by what was the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), more recently the Department Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR). The key responsibility of the RDAs is to draw up a Regional Economic Strategy (RES), a 10-year plan for the regional economy.

In preparing this document, the RDAs work closely with the regional assemblies as the RAs draw up regional strategies for housing and transport, which should be compatible and complementary, and later scrutinise the RES. In many regions this relationship has become one of continual collaboration where the RDAs seek to gain the input of the RAs earlier in the process than at the final stage of scrutiny.

The plethora of government agencies and quangos operating in the region, which was criticised by Labour while in opposition and a significant part of Labour's democratic case for regional government, remains in place. Given that the proposal for regional government was not endorsed, the government agencies and quangos could not be reined under democratic control. Now, the RAs are situated alongside this teeming web of regional organisations. Examples of these agencies include the Learning and Skills Councils, the Environment Agency, the Arts Council for England and English Heritage (Sandford 2006). It could be argued that the RAs have compounded the regional clutter. Critics of the entire regional project could claim that the RAs are themselves just another unconstitutional regional organisation or government agency. Nevertheless, it is apparent that a number of new regional organisations have become established since the RAs have been in place. Perhaps having recognised the value of co-ordinating their work and seeking representation at a regional level, these regional organisations have grown 'like creepers round a tree' (Sandford 2006: 59). The clearest example is this is from the voluntary and community sector, where a number of typically small and resource deficient organisations joined forces to create regional umbrella organisations and thus gained representation on the RAs.

That there is scope for regional organisations to gain representation on the RAs is pertinent. A number of seats on the RAs are reserved for social, environmental and economic partners, which means that the RAs are inextricably linked to a number of regional stakeholders. These may be local or regional organisations, as well as regional offices of national organisations. Examples of these include local and regional housing groups and voluntary and community groups, as well as trade unions, NHS trusts, the National Trust and the Confederation of British Industry. The RAs clearly operate in a complex regional environment.

Internally, they are equally complex. The constitutional basis of the regional assemblies is confused. The Government's intention was to legislate for a tier of regional government but when its efforts collapsed, legal clarification for the RAs regarding their status and roles was not forthcoming. The RAs fell back on the guidelines issued for their operation before the North East regional referendum. Given that this was merely guidance, hence technically not enforceable, the RAs were never and still are not statutory bodies; their legal form is equivalent to unincorporated associations or private companies (Sandford 2006: 49). However, the RAs do have an 'existence in statute' (Sandford 2006: 50). The RDA Act 1998 that allowed for, and consequently initiated, the establishment of the RAs stated that the RDAs were to provide information about their work to these bodies (Section 8.1). This means that the RAs, although not statutory bodies, were granted a statutory role. And whilst it is not described as such in the legislation, this role has now developed into and is commonly described as the RAs' statutory responsibility of scrutinising the RDAs (Sandford 2006; Tomaney and Mawson 2002: 50).

The RAs worked to strengthen their position in the region, taking on the role of co-ordinating regional work and publicising themselves as the region's representative. In 2004, the RAs gained another statutory role – they were designated as Regional Planning Bodies (RPBs) under the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (Sandford 2006; Tomaney and Mawson 2002). In these ways, the RAs had gradually become entrenched both in the region and in the law. For many regions the North East '"no" vote' caused little disruption to operations, bar the prevention of providing the RAs with a written constitutional base, which is arguably unnecessary given the acceptance of convention in Britain's uncodified constitution.

The description above of the RAs' constitutional basis revealed their first and main function: the RA is to scrutinise the work of their RDA (Section 8.1 RDA Act 1998). The RDA is responsible for designing and implementing a Regional Economic Strategy (RES), which involves making decisions about public funds with potentially huge financial and other implications. An RA, with its political and other regional representatives, holds these decisions and plans to account. Through select committees and/or public hearings, an RA aims to ensure that the RES meets the needs of the region.

The RAs' second main function is to act as the designated body for regional planning (Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004). This involves drawing up statutory documents such as a Regional Housing Strategy and a Regional Transport Strategy, as well as planning for the environment and waste. These plans feed into an over-arching planning framework, the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS), which sets out the region's

long-term plan for sustainable development. This responsibility can generate a number of subsidiary tasks, for example planning for social inclusion or health.

Complementing the roles of scrutineer and planner, the RAs have the task of strategic oversight of the region. In order to ensure that all the separate strategies fit together, the RAs work to integrate regional policies. The RAs also aim to co-ordinate the work of other regional organisations, preventing the duplication of efforts and attempting to ensure that all regional working complements the RSS. And the final role of the RAs is to be the 'voice of the region' (The Labour Party 1996, cited in Dale 2000). Being a body that brings together local authority members with stakeholders from the social, environmental and economic sectors, the RAs can claim to represent the people and organisations of the region and to protect and further the interests of the region as a whole in all partnership working.

As stated earlier, the RAs are made up of representatives from local authorities and partners from the social, economic and environmental sectors. Approximately 70% of the membership is nominated from the local authorities in the areas bounded by the RAs and no less than 30% of the RAs' membership is made up of social, economic and environmental partners (SEEPs) – representatives nominated from arts, business, community, environmental and faith organisations (DETR 1998). These SEEPs are also called 'stakeholders,' demonstrating that they are seen to have a 'stake' in the region, an interest that grants them a right to be involved in dealings that might affect that interest. A SEEP member could be, for example, a trade union representative, a chief executive from an NHS trust or a Member of European Parliament (MEP).

Similar provisions were made for the involvement of social and economic partners in Scotland, Wales and London, although these partners did not gain the full member status granted to the regional stakeholders. Partners and partnerships have become central to New Labour's 'joined-up government' (Newman 2001; Sandford 2006) and could now be described as an embedded feature of modern public policy. The concept of partnership built on that of consultation in that it recognised the equal footing of partners (Newman 2001), granting them a higher status than those who were occasionally consulted as and when policy-makers saw fit. In the same vein, the use of the stakeholder label has promoted these agents again; they are more than consultees – they are entitled to a role in the decision-making process (Sandford 2006).

These rights are conferred on the SEEPs not only because of the potential impact of an RA's work on them, but because they themselves could affect the work of the assembly. Their connections to a variety of local and regional organisations across different sectors give the stakeholders invaluable knowledge which can benefit the regional assembly as well as the region as a whole. This knowledge is not bound by the lines that traditionally demarcate policy areas but can contribute to the development of strategies in a variety of areas. The stakeholders are, therefore, not restricted to the policy areas for which they are deemed relevant to consult but they are involved in all aspects of the RAs' work. They aid the integration of strategies in planning, housing and transport, which are themselves inextricably linked. The purpose of this inclusiveness is to encourage a well-rounded approach to the functions of the RAs, one that takes a range of interests into account in order to stimulate economic growth that is both socially and environmentally sustainable.

There is some differentiation across the regions regarding the stakeholder members. In some regions, the SEEP group is further divided into sub-groups – the economic partners are organised into a separate groups and this allows them a greater proportion of the third of seats reserved for all three stakeholder categories (i.e. social and environmental as well as economic). In some regions, seats are allocated to town and parish councillors and/or MEPs, who are technically political members but not local authority representatives and so take up SEEP seats. These are just two examples of the variation across the RAs.

Within the RAs, too, there are different conventions regarding the individual stakeholders, for example whether they are personally known members of the group or whether they are seen only in terms of their seat – for example, John Smith may be a well-known personality in the region or he may be labelled 'an assembly member,' 'a stakeholder member,' or 'the Trades Union Congress (TUC) seat.' This gives rise to questions about the representational role of stakeholders, mirroring the uncertainty experienced regarding the members of the Regional Economic Planning Councils in the 1960s.

2.4 An ambiguous present and future for the regions

The previous section described the regional scene and the RAs as they were at the point in time of starting the research and as they were discussed by interviewees in the primary research phase of this project. As mentioned at the beginning of that section, the North East '"no" vote' was followed by a period of sustained ambiguity for the RAs

(that is the main interest in this research) and marked by an (anticipated) announcement of the RAs' discontinuation. A very recent change in Government has since hammered a final nail in the coffin for regionalism. It is to this period (and back again) that this chapter now briefly turns before attempting a translation of the 'current' scene into theoretical terms.

Back to the North East '"no" vote,' opinion was divided over how to proceed. Given that Labour's original intention was to institute regional government that would improve accountability in the regions, allowing the RAs with their non-elected membership and non-local authority members was considered an uneasy settlement. The Opposition during that period continually criticised the RAs and, gradually, a number of independent analysts joined them. The New Local Government Network (NLGN), a think-tank promoting the primacy of local authorities, was influential in reigniting the debate about the form and function of regional institutions (2006, 2007). A range of other ideas also came to the fore, for example that of 'city-regions' for the parts of England that surround and depend on large conurbations.

As a result, the then Government responded by re-examining the RAs as part of its regular Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR). Conducting a separate and specific review of sub-national economic development and regeneration, the Government demonstrably thought it had to take a decision on the future of the RAs. The conclusions of the Sub-National Review (SNR) were soon published and it was decided that the

'Regional Assemblies in their current form and function will not continue. Instead, local authorities in the region will be responsible for agreeing the regional strategy with the RDAs. Local authorities will also be responsible for effective scrutiny of RDA performance…'

(HM Treasury 2007: 95).

It was clear that the RAs would be discontinued and that their key statutory functions of planning and scrutiny would return to local authorities (from March 2010). However, it had not been specifically stated that the RAs would be abolished or dismantled, only that they would not continue in their then current form and function. This fuelled suggestions that either another body would soon emerge to fill the new gap or that the RAs could continue in an altered form with different functions. It is in this phase and in this mood that the bulk of the primary data collection for this thesis took place. Hence, there was a significant amount of ambiguity but also a degree of opportunity. Indeed, the assemblies had arguably already used the ambiguity and opportunity to the extent that there were perceptible differences between them. It is useful to map out (literally, as the figure below shows) the different assemblies and roughly fix a snapshot of them as they were at the early stage of this research[4].

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[4] These 'snapshots' are drawn from the scoping work undertaken prior to and in conjunction with the case study selection process, discussed in chapter 4.

Figure 2.1 A map of the English regions (Source: Cabinet Office 2002:8)

The North East

It is apt to begin with a snapshot of the North East because of this region's prominent role in the story of English regionalisation. Supporters of the regional assembly considered the North East 'the first English region' (NEA 2001), not only because of its speed in response to the challenge of forming a regional chamber but because the North East had been influential in creating the opportunity for regionalisation to occur. With a relatively strong sense of regional identity and relatively long history of regional institution building (Benneworth and Tomaney 2002), this region furthest from London gave the loudest call for regionalisation. For these reasons, demand was thought to be highest here for a directly elected regional assembly and so the North East was the chosen site for the trial in the form of a region-wide referendum. As stated above, the referendum returned the infamous '"no" vote' and the North East Assembly (NEA) remained constitutionally powerless.

This brief outline of its early history reveals that the NEA is in many ways an exceptional case. The North East's level of civic regionalism is commonly accepted as higher than in any other region, despite the '"no" vote.' And it came closest to instituting a tier of government, due to its long-standing desire to gain some regional control over regional affairs from the distant Palace of Westminster. These factors have generated considerable academic attention for the North East case. Perhaps because of its status as an exemplar case or perhaps simply because many of these academics were based at the Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies (CURDS) in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne at the time of writing, the NEA is one of the most researched regional assemblies (for example, Dixon 2006; Humphrey and Shaw 2006; Pike, O'Brien and Tomaney 2006).

The North West

Moving westwards, the North West Regional Assembly (NWRA) presents us with a very different story. Although the North West, too, was understood to be one of the regions in which a directly elected assembly would be supported by the public[5], this was not due to any feeling of identity with the region. On the contrary, the North West is seen as one of the most fragmented regions in England. Many critics of the entire regionalist project look to the North West and specifically Cumbria as an example of the artificial construction of the English regions. Cumbria has historic ties with the North East and Scotland, and its capital, Carlisle, is geographically closer to both of these than the North West's major centres of Manchester and Liverpool (Giordano 2002). Indeed, these two cities themselves sit together uneasily due to an historic hostility. But assembled together as the North West, these parts make up the second largest English region, home to 12% of the UK's population and marked by wide economic disparities (Giordano 2002).

The assembly has responded to these challenges by acting as a collective of 6 sub-regions: Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside. This unique pattern of working has been institutionalised into the organisational structure of the NWRA, in which an executive board is made up of 3 representatives from each of the 6 sub-regions, plus 6 stakeholder representatives. This institutional arrangement raises interesting questions about the geographical spread of stakeholder representation. Just a brief exploration into the organisation of stakeholders exposes another situation unique to the NWRA: in some assemblies (as will be revealed shortly) the economic

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[5] This understanding was based on the Government's 'soundings exercise' in which the regions were asked if they would vote for a directly elected regional assembly (ODPM 2003). This measure of public support is often misunderstood or misquoted as an indicator of the strength of regional identity (which is obviously not the same thing).

partners are separated from the social and environmental partners, but in most assemblies they form one group. In the NWRA, the stakeholders have moved from having a wide collection of stakeholders together, to a smaller group arguably only loosely linked to the stakeholder representatives, providing an interesting case for research.

Yorkshire and the Humber

Sandwiched between the North East and the East Midlands and bordered on one side by the North West, the most immediately distinctive feature of this region is that its name does not refer to a compass point position of England. And like its north eastern counterpart, it has also dropped 'region' from its title, becoming Yorkshire and the Humber Assembly (YHA). This was the only other region where demand for an elected assembly was deemed sufficiently high for a referendum to be planned (but later postponed due to the North East result) although, again, this was not due to any particularly strong feeling of regional identity but rather support for regionally focussed action (ODPM 2003). Like its two northern neighbours, Yorkshire and the Humber in the late decades of the twentieth century was a region suffering the consequences of deindustrialisation and actors were eager to collaborate in order to qualify for European Union structural funds (Lee 2002).

As the YHA developed, important decisions were made about its composition that have given rise to its two very distinctive features – firstly, this is the smallest assembly with only 35 members and secondly, this assembly allocates the largest proportion of seats to its stakeholder partners. Government guidance stipulated that 'at least 30%' of assembly membership was to be drawn in from the social, economic and environmental

sectors; and whereas most assemblies have effectively spun this around and interpreted the rule as requiring at least two thirds of seats to be filled by local authority representatives (which is obviously not the same thing), the YHA has allocated a relatively large 40% of seats to its stakeholders. This means that 14 stakeholder partners sit alongside 21 councillors in this exceptional regional assembly.

The East Midlands

Leaving the North and entering the Midlands takes us away from the regions where the North-South divide was acutely felt to a region where demand for an elected assembly was absent. In the East Midlands there was no real need or desire for regional working, nor much consideration of its potential benefits. However, as regionalism came onto the agenda with the Government's drive for subsidiarity, the East Midlands responded with enthusiasm. Key actors grouped together and formed a strong regional partnership in this region that was 'working with a "blank sheet of paper" unencumbered by historic roles and animosities' (Foley 2002: 150).

Over the years, the East Midlands Regional Assembly (EMRA) has adjusted its structures and practices. For example, the assembly now includes the region's Members of European Parliament (MEPs) in its membership, making it one of only two regions to do so (the other being the North East). It has also drawn up a constitution and a members' code of conduct, as is found in some but not all regions. In an appendix to its constitution (EMRA 2003), EMRA sets out the allocation of the stakeholder seats and states that the stakeholder members are generally organisations, not individuals (which is also true of other regions, but perhaps not as explicit). These documents are in the public domain and (were) available online.

These actions suggest that EMRA is a particularly reflexive organisation, one that has evolved since its inception and has thoroughly and publicly considered the questions that could be posed about its operation and composition. Its distinct lack of regionalisation prior to the design and development of the assembly makes it an extraordinary case in the story of English regionalism.

The West Midlands

To the west, the West Midlands Regional Assembly (WMRA) provides a complete contrast to EMRA. The West Midlands has an exceptionally long history of partnership working across the region, which is perhaps due to its uncomplicated city-region shape, where there is not a competitive hostility but rather a mutually supportive relationship between the greater Birmingham area and the surrounding countryside. During the post-war era, ties between local government units and key economic actors in the region were forged for the purposes of strategic planning and these soon became formalised, creating organisations that can be recognised as predecessors to WMRA. These long-standing links with the economic community were understandably maintained as WMRA developed, whereas the 'other' stakeholders (as they are labelled in the assembly) were a relatively new addition to regional working. The current organisational structure of WMRA reflects this legacy: the economic stakeholders form a separate group to the social and environmental stakeholders, and each group has 16 seats on the assembly.

This appears to be a harmonious arrangement as WMRA has operated under this 68:16:16 structure for a number of years, but it does mean that the economic partners have half of the seats reserved for the all the stakeholders, which allows them a

relatively loud voice, louder than in most other regions. Furthermore, the relative weakness of the other stakeholder group is arguably accentuated by the lack of co-ordinating officer or key contact for the stakeholders within WMRA – the stakeholders are expected to organise themselves (although they are supported financially), which may be difficult for small voluntary organisations that continually report a lack of 'capacity' and could explain the persistent absence of WMRA stakeholders at national stakeholder meetings. These factors taken together lead to a questioning of this institutional design and development in a region that promotes itself as a beacon of successful, long-standing partnership working.

The South West

The South West is probably the region least engaged with the entire regionalist project. It is described as having one of the lowest levels of regional identity and one of the lowest levels of 'institutional inheritance' (Bridges 2002) and, although actors in the East Midlands experienced similar circumstances, the South West could not respond to this challenge with the East Midlands' enthusiasm. Being the largest and most diverse English region, the South West faced significant barriers to regional integration, similar to the North West. In place of the 'Cumbrian question,' the South West was confronted with the much tougher 'Cornish question.' Cornwall has a distinct regional history and identity, and has long fought for recognition of this, so the move to institute an artificial South West region did not help but hindered this effort. Furthermore, the South West region has had more experience with sub-regional working than partnerships at the regional level and, whilst the North West made use of such prior arrangements, the South West yet again faced a greater challenge because its sub-regional partnerships often cut across regional boundaries.

The South West did, however, overcome initial frustrations and form a regional assembly. This may not be surprising given the Government's drive for subsidiarity but it is worth remembering that the chambers were technically voluntary organisations, to be established only where regional actors saw fit and to be elected only where there was sufficient public demand. The South West Regional Assembly (SWRA) perhaps mobilised around EU funding bids and other strategic ends, and has since developed into an important regional actor. But it appears unwilling or unable to assert its independence, demonstrated by the fact that it shares a secretariat and website with the South West LGA and the South West's Local Government Employer's Association (although it is not alone in this arrangement), and thus the SWRA appears something of a formality or an afterthought in the region.

The South East

In the South East, there was a similar discomfort with the crusade to create regional assemblies, but this came in the form of a direct opposition to the regionalist imperative contrasting with the nonchalance experienced in the South West. The resistance of regionalism in the South East came from the large number of Conservative county councils in the region. As part of the move towards directly elected regional assemblies, the Government had indicated that a reorganisation of local government would be likely in regions where the elected assemblies were supported. This would have involved the replacement of county councils with unitary authorities. Thus, the county councillors felt understandably threatened by the move. Furthermore, the prevalence of Conservative-led county councils in this wealthy region meant that a free-market attitude was widespread (John, Musson and Tickell 2002). With high levels of prosperity, there was no need for economic institutions such as the regional

development agency and a certain resistance to an 'extra' tier of government 'intervention' or 'bureaucracy,' as it would have been viewed.

However, as highlighted above, the South East region did have a planning body at the regional level in the post-war period. The existence of SERPLAN demonstrates that the South East did have an understanding of the need for regional strategic planning due to the particularly high demand for housing in the region, as well as the need to tackle or plan for other consequences that arise from neighbouring (indeed, nearly encircling) the capital city. Thus, the South East of England Regional Assembly (SEERA) was born. Like WMRA, SEERA has separate groupings of stakeholders, although the economic dominance is perhaps understandable here and cross-stakeholder activity is facilitated by an 'Assembly Partner Support Manager.' This, coupled with the clear focal point of London, has led to a good deal of consensus and supra-regional working.

The East of England

Flanking the other side of London, SEERA's regular partner in economic development was, too, partly born out of SERPLAN. Areas that were included under this organisation's banner are now part of the relatively new geographical construct that is the East of England region. What this region has in common with both SERPLAN and SEERA is its proximity to and preoccupation with London. However, it also contains an area that feels a distinct separateness from both the capital city and the artificial East of England region that surrounds it. East Anglia has strong ties with Europe and, as its enthusiasts point out, its capital city – Norwich – is physically closer to Amsterdam than to London (Ward and Tomaney 2002: 114).

Despite this bipolar attitude to regionalism in the region, the East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) appears to have responded to regionalism like its northern neighbour. Like EMRA, it seems eager to publicise its regional working arrangements, making an 'EERA Position Paper on Regional Governance' (EERA 2004) easily accessible through its website as well as a 'stakeholder template' (EERA 2005) that clarifies which organisations its stakeholders are drawn in from. EERA also organises its stakeholders collectively, unlike WMRA and SEERA, and has given this group the novel and inclusive label of 'community stakeholders.' Overall, EERA appears to be one of the more proactive and reflexive regional assemblies.

All the regional assemblies, therefore, have interesting points to them, ripe for further research. However, it is beyond the scope of this project to further engage with them all. Beyond the research conducted to capture the snapshots above (through general scoping involving primary and secondary sources), two case assemblies were explored using in-depth methods. Chapter 4 later sets out this selection but, here, while bringing the reader as far up to date as possible, it can be noted that the two cases taken forward – the West Midlands and the North West regions – took fairly different approaches to the SNR announcement, which affected the direction of the research to some extent. In the West Midlands, the response to the SNR was much like their response to the North East '"no" vote' in that they were both taken rather calmly and the RA rather quietly transferred to the recommended Leaders' Board format, now (as at March 2011) 'West Midlands Councils.' In the North West region, the SNR was anticipated to a large extent and preparatory measures were built into the institutional development explored in that case study. The format that ensued endured beyond the SNR announcement with

minor rebranding of their '4NW' model as the region's Leaders' Board, discussed further (as is the West Midlands case) later in the thesis.

Instability and contestation have continued at the regional tier past the SNR announcement. A recent change in the political complexion of Government (in May 2010) coupled with a period of significant austerity in British politics have led to an even wider-reaching weakening of the regionalist project. The new Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition Government, having conducted their Comprehensive Spending Review, decreed the abolition of both the Regional Development Agencies and the regional Government Offices network. These details are less significant to the primary research of this thesis, but serve to demonstrate the continued uncertainty that actors involved in the region find themselves in. As clearly stated, the specific period under study does not (and could not) stretch to the present situation briefly given above. What is of prime interest is that period of institutional ambiguity between 1998 and 2008. There are a number of reasons why this specific period is of interest. The first has already received attention: the original plans for the RAs allowed the actors involved here a significant degree of autonomy. The description above of the RAs' unclear constitutional basis emphasises this autonomy. This means that the RAs provide a rare opportunity to explore the process of institutional development.

This opportunity to explore institutional development is made much more interesting and relevant to modern policy-making sites due to the inclusion of stakeholders in the process. During the period of time under analysis and even with the SNR, there was significant scope for stakeholders to be part of regional institutional development. There is frequent mention in the SNR of continued stakeholder involvement, for

example in housing and neighbourhood renewal, and a particular emphasis on engaging private sector partners, with whom 'effective working [...] is required at every level' (HM Treasury 2007: 3). However, it was not entirely clear how and how much stakeholders would be able to participate. These decisions had yet to be finalised at the time of conducting the fieldwork for this research. Thus, many stakeholders and their supporters were vocal in reiterating the rationale for their inclusion and the value that they added to regional working, feeding 'live' into the policy papers for the CASE component of the research. From the informally gathered primary data, I could distil that many believed that the original reasons for including the stakeholders had not changed. They still provided the RAs with a wide range of expertise, helping to develop well-informed policy. The stakeholders' continued involvement in their nominating organisations alongside their participation in the RAs allowed them to channel information in both directions, encouraging a collaborative approach to working as well as achieving wider regional consensus.

In addition, some argued that there were a number of potential problems inevitably associated with the local political representatives that the stakeholders could help to alleviate, thus complementing the councillors and improving regional working. Firstly, SEEPs were not constrained or distracted by the instructions of political parties. Stakeholders were not obliged to follow a party line which may have been decided upon due to issues not related to the region. This reduced the potential of an adversarial style of working, which was not unusual at other levels of government in England. The stakeholders could instead focus their attention on the social, economic and environmental concerns of the region. Secondly, the stakeholder members were not tied to a particular locality. Councillors were attached to their local authority area and more

specifically their council ward, whereas stakeholders were able to work for the region as a whole. When brought together, as in the regional assembly, the local knowledge of council members and the regional oversight of stakeholder members could generate more effective policy decisions.

Some stakeholders also argued that they were not wholly without democratic credentials. Stakeholders could be seen to ensure regional accountability in two ways: firstly, stakeholders ensured regional accountability to more constituents, their constituencies being those organisations that were both affected by and able to affect regional policy-making; and secondly, the stakeholders were themselves accountable to these organisations due to their election from them and their continual involvement in them. They could be seen as enhancing democracy because they were, or at least claimed to be, elected into their positions by the organisations they represented, just as the local authority members were elected by the people they represented. They were in constant dialogue with their nominating organisations, thereby constantly engaged with and accountable to their electorate. Furthermore, they could help to ensure that the regional assembly was representative of society as a whole due to the greater levels of gender and minority representation in these stakeholder groups (Aulakh *et al.* 2005).

Thus, not only does the empirical site of the regional assembly enable the opportunity to research the process of institutional development, it also allows research of this process with the inclusion of stakeholders. It allows the stakeholders to voice their arguments for inclusion in public policy, as summarised above, and thus to carve out and to confirm a role for themselves in the regional arena alongside those more usually involved. In this way, due to the inclusion of a multiplicity of voice, the regional

assemblies provide a site in which to research the potential for specifically intersubjective institutional design and change. Because of the instability and contestation demonstrated as inherent in this tier throughout this chapter, the RAs in this period also allow for the consideration of what Maarten Hajer labels an 'institutional void' (2003). Hajer's concept of an 'institutional void' is a site where 'there are no clear rules or norms according to which politics is to be conducted' (2003: 175). In the regions, given their almost continuous state of flux, the RAs correspond with this conception. There are no clear patterns to follow in the process of regional institutional development. The intersubjectivity here, born of the inclusion of stakeholders alongside traditional policy-makers, further complicates matters by introducing more rules and norms into the site without bringing any further clarity but, indeed, muddying waters. It is in such instances that Hajer depicts a scenario in which institutional design results from the deliberation between different actors.

There are a number of specific points in Hajer's projection of institutional design in an institutional void to which the RAs correspond. Hajer describes a modern world of policy making in which there is a 'new order' and a 'new spatiality' of decision-making whereby he is pointing specifically to a movement away from the traditional mode of public policy to one where there is cross-level working and a new 'territorial synchrony' paving the way for greater recognition of other levels of identification (2003: 178-179; 184). The examples he gives makes it clear that he is referring to instances of global, European and regional (in the trans-state sense) institutional design, however these ideas are relevant within the British context at the regional level precisely because of the lack of institutionalised entity yet here. The attempt at institutional design and change towards the development of the RAs exemplifies a new level of identification for the

actors that have become involved, thus this is a new spatiality. And the RAs also move the process of policy-making out of the exclusive domain of traditional actors and into an arena in which stakeholders can participate, hence fitting the description of a new order.

Hajer draws specific attention to the rethinking of the standard view of participation and democratic governance, thus capturing the inclusion of multiple actors (2003: 179). These actors bring with them their own rules and norms into the site and into the institutional mix. Hence, there is a mire of institutions but none that are generally accepted, until new ones are discursively designed. This clarifies the point that by use of the term 'void' Hajer does not mean a site that is devoid of institutions, only that there are not (yet) any '*generally accepted* rules and norms according to which policy-making and politics is to be conducted' (2003: 175, emphasis in the original; 2006: 53, fn1). Given the regular misinterpretation of his term, Hajer revises the concept to 'institutional ambiguity,' which better makes reference to the presence of institutions but the lack of clarity concerning them (2006: 53, fn 1).

This is clearly not a full analysis of Hajer's work on this concept, and it is not intended to be. It is included here because of the goodness of fit of the void/ambiguity concept to the empirical site of research in this thesis. It enables a translation of the RAs, or more specifically the points of interest of the RAs' institutional development, into theoretical terms, pointing to large bodies of literature (institutionalism and interpretivist policy analysis) that underpin the theoretical and methodological development of this project, and thus allowing for further engagement with Hajer and colleagues later. Suffice to state that this institutional void or ambiguity concept (which will be used

interchangeably herewith) is more than an interesting hook to hang this work from and contributes to the articulation and the development of the ideas of institutional design and change together with the potential impact of intersubjectivity in sites of institutional ambiguity.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a detailed history of the regional tier in England. Stretching back into the Middle Ages for any reference to or identification with the regions, it charts the slow pace of development, and even recognition, of this concept. The chapter then addresses the early attempts at regional institutionalisation, demonstrating how rife adversarial party politics hindered attempts to sustain a regional governmental presence. The latest attempt at institutional development is finally reached, and this section portrays the current regional scene and details the current form and function of the regional assemblies ('current' being relative to the majority of the primary research phase of this research project). The final section of this chapter briefly updates this now historical account before returning to and detailing the specific points of interest for further research.

The central point of interest is obviously institutional development in the regions. But what is unique about this site is the opportunity it presents for exploration into the process of institutional design and change. The regional assemblies were granted a significant degree of autonomy regarding their institutional arrangements and, therefore, there was potential for the actors in the region to come together around this process.

The multiplicity of actors is another specific point of interest. The role of intersubjectivity in institutional design becomes a route for theoretical and empirical research. And, finally, given the multiplicity of actors as well as the unstable and contested nature of the site, as demonstrated throughout the chapter, the regional assemblies are theoretically conceptualized in Hajer's terms as site of 'institutional ambiguity' (2003, 2006).

CHAPTER 3: TOWARDS A THEORY OF INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

Introduction

In this chapter I present the theoretical development that underpins the research project. This chapter builds on the advance towards theory presented in the final stretch of the previous chapter that translated the empirical site of this research into a site of 'institutional ambiguity' (Hajer 2003, 2006). As such, there is a clear and logical pointer towards addressing theory on institutions more generally. It is now necessary to get to the foundation of Hajer's concept, to address what institutions are before being able to better understand institutional ambiguity, institutional design and change as well as the potential impact that intersubjectivity may have on the process of institutional development in such ambiguous sites, which is the central research problem of this thesis.

Questions and considerations about the background ontological position of this research are brought to bear on the analysis of institutional theories within this chapter. The foundational ideas of interpretivism, which highlight the significance of actors' interpretations and the critical role of discussion in sharing and shaping those interpretations, leads to a thorough analysis of recent contributions to institutional theory that draw attention to and address these central interpretivist tenets. Constructivist institutionalism is taken forward as an institutional theory that broadly fits with the interpretivist ontology. Its key author, Colin Hay, puts forward a distinct ontology that draws attention to the strategic capacities of political actors (2006). This

raises an issue for consideration within and beyond this research. Alongside this, discursive institutionalism is discussed and considered, but constructivist institutionalism is preferred for its open engagement with questions around ontology and how this impacts upon the empirical analysis of actors, their discursive selections and their strategic-relational action in processes of institutional design and change.

In the first section of this chapter, I break down the basis and development of institutional theory, from old to new institutionalism and from three new institutionalist schools to one central cleavage around ontology. In the following section I trace how new institutionalists have addressed their theoretical weaknesses, the issues of institutional emergence and transformation, and explain how further research in these areas is leading towards the refinement of the institutionalist perspective into a useful, coherent theory. This useful, coherent theory, constructivist institutionalism, is then detailed. Contributions from other pools of literature that help to address the specific point of intersubjectivity, or more precisely the discursive sharing it implicates, are also taken forward as supplements to constructivist institutionalism.

3.1 Institutionalism

Institutionalism developed over the final decades of the twentieth century in reaction to the behaviouralism and rational choice theory that was dominant in the decades before. Colin Hay usefully maps the mainstream of political science since the 1950s, charting the dominance of behaviouralism since the 'behavioural revolution' in the 1960s and the growth of rational choice theory from the 1970s (2002: 7-13). Behaviouralists focus

on behaviour, apparently without prior theoretical assumptions, attempting simply to derive generalisations and predictions based on empirical observations of regularities in human action. Rational choice theorists also focus on the behaviour of individuals, although they start (and end) with the theoretical position that human action is motivated by the principle of utility-maximisation.

Both of these perspectives aspire to be scientific. They aim to generate predictive models of individual behaviour, treating people in political environments just like the natural sciences treat organisms or physical forces in natural environments. They produce parsimonious accounts of human action and, in so doing, they lean towards a 'methodological individualism,' whereby they tend to overlook the potentially different dynamics of social behaviour, preferring instead to view this as simply the aggregates of individual action (Hay 2002; Schmidt 2006). Institutionalism takes specifically this as its point of departure (Hay 2002; Rhodes 1995). It is not the scientism *per se* that is an issue (indeed, one strand of the new institutionalism, that of rational choice institutionalism, is arguably just as scientistic (Steinmo 2001)), but that the behaviouralist and rationalist accounts of political life are pared down to the individual.

Institutional theorists reject the reductionist tendency of behaviouralism and rational choice theory, and emphasise instead the impact of collections of individuals. They explore the effects of group behaviour, the patterns of which are inscribed into or effectively realised in the form of institutions in society. Institutionalists draw attention to the structuring effects of institutions, arguing that the behaviour of an individual is affected by its institutional context. In short, 'institutions matter' (Weaver and Rockmann 1993; Rothstein 1998). These new institutionalists argue that human action

cannot be assessed without recognition of the social context in which it is structured. Therefore they seek to bring structure into the picture. At a time when political science was dominated by a concern with the individual actor, institutionalists sought to 'bring the state back in' (Evans *et al.* 1985).

It should be noted that this growth of interest in institutions since the 1980s constitutes a second wave of institutional analysis[6]. Institutions were being *re*-discovered (March and Olsen 1989) and the state was being brought *back* in (Evans *et al.* 1985) because institutions of the state had previously, indeed even traditionally, been of prime importance in political science. Studying the organisational blocks of government and the mechanisms of democracy that together made up the apparatus of the state gave political science its identity apart from other disciplines of the social sciences. Indeed, as Lowndes states, this 'institutionalism *was* political science' (2002: 90, emphasis in the original). State institutions had been a central subject matter in the discipline during the 1950s, prior to the behavioural revolution (Lowndes 2002: 90). However, as Schmidt points out, this earlier interest with institutions was qualitatively different from the new wave of institutionalism, in that the former was primarily descriptive and concerned with assessing components parts of government against concepts of political philosophy (2006: 99, 100).

The new wave of institutionalism did not represent a return to the institutionalism of old. The new institutionalists were keen to stress the progress that they made and distinguished their perspective from what can subsequently be understood as 'old' institutionalism. Hay (2002), Lowndes (2002) and Schmidt (2006) all begin with

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[6] Note that this is not the same as the second *movement* of *new* institutionalism, as conceptualized by Campbell and Pederson (2001) and discussed later in this chapter.

setting out this history in their reviews of new institutionalism because it is useful to see where it came from in order to understand what it developed into. Key to this development was a reconceptualization of institutions as 'the formal rules, compliance procedures, and standard operating procedures that structure the relationships between people in various units of the polity and economy' (Hall 1986: 7). This is by no means a definitive definition of an institution, but it clearly demonstrates the movement away from the old institutionalist pre-occupation with the machinery of government to the more intangible structures that underlie that machinery.

Whilst these concepts of rules and standard operating procedures are helpful, they are not strictly synonymous with institutions. Institutions are notoriously difficult to define succinctly, and this is not because the definitions put forward are contested as such but because institutions are complex entities that they are difficult to capture. Vivien Lowndes has identified six 'analytical continua' constructed around six points of development from old to new institutionalism that, taken together, can facilitate a greater appreciation of the conceptual complexity of these entities in contemporary institutionalist literature:

> (i)   *From a focus on organisations to a focus on rules*
> The contemporary understanding of institution moves away from the organisation of government to focus on the practices of people, on the rules that guide the patterns of behaviour that underlie and sustain political organisations, and exist between or beyond those organisations;

(ii)   From a formal to an informal conception of institutions

The regular and regulated patterns of behaviour that are studied are not only driven by formally constituted rules, so new institutionalists also explore the informal rules that guide individual or group behaviour – these theorists focus on unwritten conventions as well as codified constitutions;

(iii)   From a static to a dynamic conception of institutions

Through developing the conception of institutions from formal organisations to informal rules, new institutionalists have come to regard institutions as processes rather than solid structures, however although they are stable entities, new institutionalists theorize that this stability is achieved through human action and they explore the relationship between this dualistic stability and dynamism;

(iv)   From submerged values to a value-critical stance

The contemporary reflection on what is now old institutionalism revealed the normative undercurrent running through this body of work – old institutionalists were concerned with 'good government' and tended to advocate particular models of political organisation, whereas new institutionalists are sensitive to the multiplicity of peoples' values and the contestation that arises from this, exploring how this impacts on institutional forms and processes;

(v)   From a holistic to a disaggregated conception of institutions

Whereas old institutionalists tended to research whole systems of government, new institutionalists focus on the component parts of these

systems and on the 'differentiated' nature of institutions, recognising that the component parts do not necessarily fit neatly together, that they embody power differentials by privileging certain actors and actions over others, and that contestation and institutional shifts result so that institutions are never fully 'closed;'

(vi)   From independence to embeddedness

Moving away from the static whole systems approach through which institutions could be viewed as independent entities, the reconceptualization of institutions in the contemporary approach recognises the embeddedness of institutions, that they are part of layered webs of institutions, as well as part of their temporal and spatial contexts

(2002: 97-101).

Lowndes unpacks these analytical continua in a way that not only demonstrates the movement from old to new institutionalism but also brings together what is a relatively fragmented body of theory. The divisions in the literature contribute towards the difficulty in pinning down institutions because they have differing understandings or, at least, differing foci with regards to the direction of institutional processes. Institutions are variously seen as the subjects as well as the objects of research (in a literal grammatical sense), in that they can perform actions (or, if such expression is excessively animate, they can exert such force in society as to induce certain actions of individuals) and they can also be on the receiving end of action through individuals' perpetuation, modification and creation of them. To appreciate the interesting

implications here raised, the separate schools of new institutionalism must first be addressed.

New institutionalism is commonly divided into three schools of thought (after a seminal article by Peter Hall and Rosemary Taylor (1996)), reflecting the schools' roots in different traditions and their subsequent differences in approach. These are briefly introduced below. Firstly, rational choice institutionalism is considered in terms of its perforated relationship with pure rational choice theory. Next assessed is an institutionalism that is variously labelled normative, organisational or sociological institutionalism. These labels are here understood as synonymous, the reasons for which will become clear. Finally, the school of historical institutionalism is reviewed with specific attention paid to its central division that has contributed towards a rethinking of the divisions, indeed even the internal diversity, of new institutionalism overall.

Rational choice institutionalism, like its theoretical bedrock of rational choice theory, is based on the underlying assumption that actors are strategic, utility-maximising agents. From this point onwards, however, rational choice institutionalism moves away from rational choice theory. This new institutionalism sheds the reductionism of rational choice theory and instead views institutions as the key explanatory factor in instances of collective action that rational choice theory fails to explain. By extension of pure rational choice theory, attempts at collective action can only fail as the rational, utility-maximising actor would strategically calculate that they could benefit effortlessly from the collective action of others. And yet societies are replete with instances of collective action. Thus this, Mancur Olson's now classic 'free-rider' problem (1965), revealed

rational choice theory's limitations and instigated an examination of social action that recognised the importance of institutions.

The converts to the new rational choice institutionalism (e.g. Knight 1992; North 1990) emphasise the embeddedness of regular and regulated patterns of behaviour between individual actors. From this perspective, acting collectively is something that social actors believe they have to do because breaking this pattern results in negative consequences. Elinor Ostrom (1990, 2000), at the forefront of this development, argues that collectivism and rationality do not have to be mutually exclusive through her case study research of institutions that actors have designed and developed together to protect 'common pool resources' (CPRs) in which

> 'the appropriators designed basic operational rules, created organizations to undertake the operational management of their CPRs, and modified their rules over time in light of past experience according to their own collective-choice and constitutional-choice rules'
>
> (1990: 58).

Institutions are thus conceptualized as rules, however informal, and these are met with sanctions, again however informal, if not followed. This modifies the wholly rational motivating principle of rational choice theory into one here known as the 'logic of consequentialism,' which still has echoes of rationality in that action is taken with what is effectively calculated risk but there is equal recognition that this rationality is 'bounded' within society's structures (i.e. by institutions). However, rational choice institutionalism retains its focus on the (still rational) actions of the individual actor and

could therefore be described as an agency-centred approach. Whilst the autonomous effect of institutions is recognised, institutions are viewed primarily as the deliberate constructions of strategic actors seeking to reduce the uncertainty of decision-making by controlling the actions of other actors through rules (i.e. institutions). Weingast expresses the conscious rationality of, in his case, legislative representatives who by 'pursuing their own interests will prefer institutional arrangements (or norms) which increase their chances of success' and, as he continues with clear connections to rationalist game theory, these actors 'in choosing their operating rules, must decide which games to play' (1979: 250).

In contrast to this parsimonious account of political action, there are a group of new institutionalists that perceive political life to be much more complex. As mentioned above, they are known by different labels, but they are united by their leaning towards a much more structuralist approach, which, in new institutionalist terms, renders them effectively the opposite position of rational choice institutionalism. These institutionalists work with a broader understanding of institutions (Hall and Taylor 1996). Institutions are conceptualized as not simply the rules that constrain behaviour, but also the norms and values that guide behaviour. Given this emphasis on 'norm-governed' behaviour, one of this group's names, that of normative institutionalism, becomes understandable and most apt (and is the favoured in this thesis hereafter). In a similar way, the prefixed terms of 'sociological' and 'organisational' demonstrate this group's primary interest in society's structure or organisation (as well as the connections to the disciplines of sociology and organisational sciences, respectively), but these perhaps draw attention too far away from what individual actors are doing or

how they are thinking. The label 'normative' institutionalism, like rational choice institutionalism, makes direct reference to actors' logics, and is thus most useful here.

Whilst structure is key, the feature that gives new institutionalism its distinction is specifically the (causal) relationship between institutions and individuals. Normative institutionalism is structuralist, relative to the agency-centred rational choice institutionalism, but the theoretical interest focuses on the impact of institutions *on* actors. Here, norms and values are internalised and become part of the logic of an individual, shaping behaviour prior to or instead of any consideration of what course of action might generate the greatest utility. This is captured by normative institutionalism's 'logic of appropriateness,' whereby an actor faced with a given situation will act in a way that they deem to be appropriate, that is understood to be the logical course of action (March and Olsen 1989). In this way, the normative strand of institutionalist literature emphasises an explicitly cognitive dimension to institutionalism (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Hall and Taylor 1996; March and Olsen 1989).

Finally, a collection of theorists concerned with the ways in which the past shapes the present and future are grouped together under the banner of historical institutionalism. Much of the theorizing from this perspective has developed from and retained a decidedly statist and comparative starting point. Being concerned with the ostensible differences between institutional systems, these institutionalists have looked back into history in an attempt to explain those differences (e.g. Castles 1993; Hall 1986; Katzenstein 1985; Pierson 1994). And a number of theorists hold that history accountable while explaining instances of continued divergence, particularly with

regards to contemporary institutional development in relation to the European Union (e.g. Bulmer and Burch 1998, 2005; Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Majone 1991). For these institutionalists, decisions taken along the route of institutional development are made in accordance with, or at least are coloured by, the pre-existing cultural and temporal context. Historical institutionalists have developed the concept of 'path dependence' to capture this dynamic: it is argued that institutions will develop along certain trajectories due to contextual features inherited from the past, and actors will be adversely affected if they deviate from this path (Hall and Taylor 1996; Pierson 2000).

Hall and Taylor (1996) detect a division in historical institutionalist literature, between a 'calculus' tendency and a 'cultural' tendency. Although both strands share an assumption that past behaviour affects present-day decision-making, they differ in their expression and emphasis while explaining political action. The calculus strand shares the premise that actors are strategic utility-maximisers with rational choice institutionalists; their explanation of path-dependent behaviour stresses the conscious, strategic choice of continuing on a given trajectory due to the cost of deviating (Hall and Taylor 1996: 940). Theorists tending towards the cultural strand, however, emphasise the normative element of path-dependent behaviour, arguing that decision-making is less consciously strategic but rather more bounded by perceptions of a situation and its appropriate response (Hall and Taylor 1996: 939).

These three strands of rational choice, normative and historical institutionalism constitute the most commonly cited categorisation of the institutionalist perspective, but this is not the only method of organising the literature. Bob Goodin (1996) focuses on the new institutionalisms as they have developed directly from their respective social

science disciplines, in relative isolation from each other, and Guy Peters (1999) identifies as many as seven institutionalisms, not dissimilar to Goodin's discipline-based distinctions. Indeed, even Hall and Taylor's now classic three institutionalisms began life as four in earlier versions of the paper (Hay 2006: 56). New institutionalism can thus appear as something of an incoherent assortment of positions that simply share a common interest in institutions. This is certainly a fair assessment of the literature as it would have appeared to these early reviewers, but as the perspective has matured, many new institutionalists are keen to stress the commonalities between the schools.

Taking a stride in this direction, Lowndes' 2002 review of new institutionalism already presents a significantly more tidy depiction of the new institutionalist landscape. Lowndes argues that new institutionalists are divided by one central cleavage (2002: 95). This is essentially based around their fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of political actors. Quite simply, theorists either believe that actors are utility-maximising rationalists or that they are norm-governed. Under this schema, rational choice institutionalism remains undisturbed; although they have modified their position significantly from pure rational choice theory by recognising the importance of institutions, they remain convinced that actors behave rationally within or to create their institutional context. On the other side of the divide are those theorists that object to the ontological foundation of rational choice. Here, these new institutionalists believe that actors are governed by norms. This position does not necessarily preclude rational action because rationality can be one of the norms that govern behaviour, although rationality would not be seen inherent but rather as a norm socially constructed.

This cleavage is fundamental not only to the distinction between the rational choice and normative schools of institutionalism, but also to the calculus and cultural divide within historical institutionalism. What is significant, now, is that the other clusters of new institutionalism can be positioned around this cleavage between rational choice and normative institutionalism. Hence, rational choice and normative institutionalism comfortably fit on their respective sides of the divide but theorists under the banner of historical (and other topic-related institutionalisms if they are deemed relevant) must critically assess and be assessed for their ontological and epistemological assumptions in order to identify with either one side. Schmidt presents a similar portrait, charting the new institutionalisms on a continuum with rational choice institutionalism and normative institutionalism at either extremes and also relates these to the divide (or, again, continuum) between the positivistic and constructivist ontologies respectively (2006: 116).

Lowndes' concept of a central cleavage and Schmidt's (multi-dimensional[7]) chart of new institutionalisms are not simply tools with which to organise and analyse this body of research. They are related to an important and growing debate within the literature that considers the ability of new institutionalism to progress beyond this divide. This mirrors a key ontological battle within the discipline of political science as a whole (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Giddens 1984). As introduced above, theorists have traditionally been divided over their regard for either 'scientific,' parsimonious agency-centred explanations of political action or more complex, structuralist (often descriptive) accounts of political life (Campbell and Pedersen 2001; Goodin 1996; Hay 2002). A number of contemporary researchers (both institutionalists and others),

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[7] Schmidt's second axis of her chart organises the institutionalisms along a static-dynamic continuum (2006).

however, aspire to generate more sophisticated analyses that capture the *relative* influence of structure and agency (Hay 2002, 2006).

New institutionalism, in general, already represents a significant step in this direction. Regardless of whether scholars lean towards rationalist explanations or normative accounts of political life, their theories highlight the interplay between structure and agency: in rational choice institutionalism, agents create institutions that then structure other agents; and in normative institutionalism, agents are structured by institutions that they then perpetuate. Thus, whilst institutionalism is divided, the positions within this perspective are seen as remarkably close relative to the wider discipline of social science, and arguably show signs of convergence (Campbell and Pedersen 2001).

Having condensed the separate schools of new institutionalism into two main clusters, these theorists are now faced with issues surrounding the potential convergence of rational choice and normative institutionalism. How compatible are these positions, and is such a development desirable? Again, positions are divided. Many argue that these two opposites are fundamentally incompatible due to the ontological premises upon which they are built, whilst others value progress beyond the binary debate that plagues this perspective and the wider discipline (Blyth 2003; Hay 2002; Hay and Wincott 1998; Lowndes 2002; Schmidt 2006). The normative stance underlying the latter argument is, at least in part, related to a critique of the theoretical status of new institutionalism. Because of its appearance as an eclectic collection of positions brought together by the causal relevance they attribute to institutions, it has been argued that new institutionalism is better viewed as an 'organising perspective' than a theory (Lowndes 2002; Rhodes 1995).

New institutionalism is very much in a state of development, building into its theoretical exploration considerations about ontology and epistemology that are impacting upon the discipline as a whole. This has been, in part, galvanised by and is most clearly demonstrated by new institutionalist attempts at theorizing on the issues of institutional transformation and emergence, where it has been formerly described as weak (Lowndes 2002). The following section unpacks institutionalism's exploration into the matters of institutional stability, design and change, before then turning to the ontological developments that have occurred while addressing these points.

3.2 Institutional stability, change and design

Institutions, by their very definition, are stable entities. But inextricably linked to defining the nature of institutions is understanding the dynamics of institutions. What institutions do, i.e. how they function, particularly as they have been reconceptualized in the new institutionalist literature, is central to the definition of institutions and institutionalism. And, within this, dynamism is intrinsic but implicit: although institutions are stable social structures, their stability is created or ensured by the activity of actors, such as through an adherence to rules or the repetition of social practices. Lowndes makes this explicit in her third analytical continuum (above, 2002: 99). Both rational choice institutionalism and normative institutionalism take a similarly process-oriented approach to institutional analysis, although they differ in their emphasis on the direction of movement and, therefore, the object/subject positions in their theoretical causal chains.

The rational choice institutionalist literature, ever fixated with the utility-maximising agent, concentrates on the creation of institutions by actors for their gains i.e. to reduce uncertainty in decision-making by controlling the behaviour of other actors. The institutions created are rules, and actors adhere to these rules. Recall that pure rational choice theory struggles to explain the existence of collective action institutions (Olson 1965), therefore the theorists that seek to modify the idea of full or 'perfect' rationality focus on how and why rational actors can and do create collective action institutions to resolve the free-rider problem (e.g. Ostrom 1990, 2000). The activity on this rationalist side of the new institutionalist cleavage put forward by Lowndes or at this positivist end of Schmidt's chart, then, focuses on the individual agent as the designer of institutions that structure others as well as on the adherence by those others to the institutions designed.

In the normative institutionalist literature (e.g. March and Olsen 1989; DiMaggio and Powell 1991), given its structuralist leaning, stability appears even more emphasised relative to the wider institutionalist perspective. Institutions are social phenomena through which collections of people – social groups, societies, nations etc. – understand and perpetuate the 'standard operating procedures' of social life (Hall 1986). Institutions give meaning to social practices and provide the 'cognitive scripts' for the performance and continual re-enactment of social practices by actors (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Thus, there is a force that could be described as a mutually constitutive dynamic between institutions and actors: institutions are stable social entities whilst their stability is a process realised by actors (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Hall and

Taylor 1996; Offe 1996). Therefore, whilst this perspective generally emphasises the structuring effect of institutions on actors, it also allows for the activity of people.

This activity may not be tantamount to the agency of rationalist institutional designers, as can be demonstrated by actors' predisposition to sustain institutions even beyond their use in a number of instances i.e. because they are structured to do so. But within this activity there is considerable scope for institutional adjustment over time. Lowndes' fifth continua on the disaggregated nature of institutions whereby different individuals may be operating under different institutions (2002: 100) can be taken forward to generate an understanding of how and why there is potential for institutional change. Lowndes goes further, stating that 'normative institutionalists *expect* institutions continually to evolve' (2002: 150, emphasis added). The implicit dynamism at this normative structuralist end of the new institutionalist continuum, then, focuses on the structuring action of institutions on individuals but also allows for institutional change as individuals perpetuate and enact institutions.

Institutionalists, therefore, account for and emphasise stability, though they do not imagine institutions to be static, impervious entities. These theorists recognise that there is underlying movement that holds institutions in place, and that individuals play an active role in the process of creating and sustaining stability. Thus, they are relatively stable, but not static. As explained above, both sides of the institutionalist cleavage recognise the dynamism of or within institutions. And, furthermore, this recognition gives rise to the ideas and issues of institutional design and change. New institutionalism has often been charged with being 'weak' in addressing the issues of institutional design and change (Lowndes 2002: 104). The question asked is: if

institutions are stable structures, how does institutional change occur? If stability is emphasised, it follows that institutionalism's key challenge is explaining instability, or change. But this 'if' is significant and, as has been demonstrated, the dynamism that is intrinsic in the new institutionalist conception of institutions means that it does implicitly allow for institutional development.

New institutionalism's weakness, then, is not being explicit or exacting enough about the definition of institutions including the processual element. Or perhaps its greater weakness in this regard arises, again, from the different and conflicting ontological roots that are held together within this perspective because new institutionalists cannot present a single, coherent stance on theory regarding institutional design and change. As summarised above and by working through the implications of the definition of institutions, rational choice institutionalism does tackle design and normative institutionalism does address change, but they each struggle with their counterpart's strength and they battle on the grounds of their opposing ontologies.

Before explaining these points of conflict and exploring the implications of these battles further, it is useful to begin with a clarification of the concept of specifically design. The two actions of design and change are effectively very similar. The terms 'change,' 'transformation' or, most clearly, 'redesign' make implicit reference to the prior presence of something, here the institution or the institutional context, from which the change is occurring, whereas 'design' suggests something altogether more novel. Design implies, in the first instance, an activity that occurs from scratch – it evokes an image of a designer with a clean slate, free to innovate at will. It is questionable, though, whether this genuine design can happen in a social world already replete with

institutions. Public policy environments are densely populated with institutions and so new institutions are not designed 'de novo' but 'social engineers always work with materials inherited from [...] the past' (Goodin 1996: 30). Thus, an understanding of design as wholly novel is misleading and institutional design may refer to a movement involving a greater degree of change or one not ostensibly linked to the pre-existing context (Goodin 1996; Hajer 2003; Offe 1996).

What is arguably more significant about the terminology is the difference in approach ascribed to the different words: change, development, emergence and transformation can be interpreted as actions without actors, although they can also be processes led by actors. Design, however, is much more readily understood and is much more frequently interpreted as an intentional action attributable to the rational, resourceful actor (e.g. Pierson 2000). The term presupposes intentionality. It follows that institutional design is an action or set of actions undertaken to make an institution (and thus its adherents) be or behave in a certain way. It is no surprise, therefore, that rational choice and calculus historical institutionalists better deal with this issue. Normative institutionalism does not allow much space for this institutional actor-cum-designer, and yet someone somewhere at some stage must have intentionally designed institutions if they are understood to be the embodiment of embedded value and power differentials in society (Goodin 1996: 20; cf. Lowndes' fifth as well as fourth and sixth continua, as above, 2002: 97-101).

However, this depiction of a fully intentional designer arguably rests on narrow view of design. Goodin, again, widens the notion of design by including accident and evolution, arguing that if some factor or a combination of factors contributes to the establishment

of an institution, then those factors can be seen as part of the process of institutional design (1996: 24-27). Those factors have helped shape the institutions to become what they are, they have helped create them, and so they have played a role in the design process. Goodin warns against the 'myth of the intentional design' (1996: 28), i.e. design 'de novo,' and goes on to argue that both accident and evolution are attributable to intentional actions by agents. Accidents may be unintended outcomes but they are consequences of actions that are intentional in the first instance despite the erroneous results, as in oversights and miscalculations (1996: 25). And institutions may evolve via a Darwinian 'survival of the fittest' mechanism or by means of a 'central animating idea...working itself pure' in a Hegelian vein (1996: 26), but these movements are subject to the intentional actions of actors that cause or allow institutional development (1996: 24-30).

The distinguishing feature of design, then, as against change, is the recognition of and the emphasis placed on intentionality. This touches upon a major debate regarding intentionality in general, about whether it is an innate quality or capacity in an individual, and so it relates to the ontological position that underpins and therefore impacts upon the assertions of an institutional theory (Bevir 1999; Bevir and Rhodes 2006a; Dowding *et al*. 2004; Hay 2006). However, this debate will not be repeated here. Taking institutionalism as a mid-level theory, something of a 'mid-level' interpretation of intention will here suffice; it is recognised that intention grants a level of autonomy to the individual actor, but whether that actor's intentions are *a priori* structured or are an expression of 'true' agency is beyond the scope of this thesis. The thesis, presenting an interpretivist analysis, places the actor at the centre and will gradually demonstrate the interplay of their agency and their interpretation of structure.

Thus, I allow for some degree of autonomy, whilst noting that the implicit connectedness of strategy and intention, present in the processes of institutional design and change.

Where prior intentionality is embedded in resultant resources (power, knowledge) differentials in normative institutionalism, it needs to be drawn out. And engaging with the parts of new institutionalist literature that do make an attempt to address design and change more fully with intention – rational choice institutionalism and the calculus strand of historical institutionalism – is necessary. After all, describing new institutionalism as 'weak' at explaining institutional design and change is not to say that explanations of design and change have not been attempted. Indeed, arguably, a significant proportion of historical institutionalism has come into being through its engagement with observable, large-scale institutional difference and the *development* of those institutional differences (e.g. Blyth 2002a; Castles 1993; Hall 1986; Katzenstein 1985; Pierson 1994). However, this part of the literature, in highlighting the path dependency of institutional development, particularly deals with incremental and less intentional change. The charge of weakness arises because institutionalism's attempts at explaining more transformative and more intentional design and change have thus far proved unsatisfactory. Historical institutionalist theorists have attempted accounts of change though they, unhelpfully, rest on what could be deemed 'wild cards.' This literature tends to rely on the concepts of 'exogenous shocks,' 'punctuated equilibria' and 'unintended consequences' to explain the cause, tempo and direction of institutional

change, reasons which are ambiguous to the extent that they are 'non-falsifiable'[8] (Blyth 2002b; Hall and Taylor 1996; Krasner 1984; Steinmo *et al*. 1992; True *et al*. 1999).

Rational choice institutionalism, as has been stated, posits institutional creation at the centre of its account of the form and function of institutions: actors create institutions to control the behaviour of others. However plausible this line of argument, though, it entails a degree of cognitive manipulation and embedded power differentials that could be said to belong to the normative camp of institutionalism. This, in itself, should not pose a significant problem, but it demonstrates that the way out of the impasse presented by institutional design/change has necessitated ideational explanations, i.e. they involve the adaptation of cognitions under the influence of ideas. These institutionalisms' treatments of design and change will now be explored with reference to a key debate between the two that has revolved around the introduction of ideas.

Progress has been made on these questions of institutional design and change with a turn to ideas. Ideational factors have received greater attention throughout the discipline in general, doubtless linked to the growing regard for a more interpretivist approach to political analysis in which actors' perceptions are of prime importance. The new institutionalist literature has been at the forefront of this development. Already working with a cognitive element within the perspective, a number of new institutionalists have focussed upon and developed the role of ideas as a causal factor. Their argument, in short, is that it is ideas that shape behaviour via institutions. This is most clearly demonstrated by normative institutionalists: actors' decision-making

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[8] This term is used with caution, hence the inverted commas, because of its positivist connotations, but the adoption of the word in this instance serves to judge historical institutionalism on its own basis and in its own terms, in which case these concepts are rendered 'non-falsifiable' in that they could effectively be used to explain away any and every change.

behaviour is shaped by what is appropriate, or rather what is *thought* to be appropriate, for a given situation, thus it is determined in the cognitive or ideational realm rather than the material. Similarly, although more implicit, rational choice institutionalism must contain an ideational element in that, if actors are all innately rational, their motivating principle of utility-maximisation must be modified to persuade them to act collectively and follow rules.

Contributions from Mark Blyth (2002a; 2002b; 2003) have been critical in the development of the ideational as a causal factor in the process of institutional development or change, and even design with a broader reading. He is, however, critical of the rational choice school of thought, from its very foundation to its ability to subsume ideas as factor in institutional design and redesign. His critique demonstrates well that the divisions between the (already close) institutionalisms rest on their foundational ontology. The following discussion draws from Blyth's engagement in battle with other key authors (e.g. Hay 2002, 2006; McNamara 1998; North 1990; Ostrom 1990; Pierson 2000; Wendt 1999) revealing that, whilst it may be interesting and fruitful to encourage dialogue between the institutionalisms, the camps will remain divided if the theoretical developments are inconsistent with their respective ontological positions. These authors and the fissure between rational choice institutionalism and the calculus strand of historical institutionalism in particular are now focussed upon because they both conceive of a strategic actor (agent) acting in and with an institutional context (structure) while questions are raised about their ability to do so on ontological grounds.

Rational choice institutionalism is based on the premise that rational actors endeavour to establish institutions – rules – to structure the choices of other actors and, therefore, reduce the uncertainty in a decision-making environment, in order that the rational actor – the designer – can make decisions so as to derive maximum utility from the given situation. Thus, this school of institutionalism depicts a rational designer that is endowed with the resources, the power and the full or perfect information required to create such institutions that function as desired. This is already implausible, or at least it is an account that is restricted to but few actors. If pre-existing institutions and the resource differentials they embody are held to account for the unequal capacity to design, this position is hardly distinguishable from historical institutionalism of the calculus strand.

A fundamental problem exists with relation to the reasons behind institutional creation, or more precisely to the discovery of reasons for institutional creation. If institutions are purposefully designed to constrain the actions and structure the choices of individuals, how do those individuals conceive of creating institutions for their own self-interest? It does not seem plausible that actors, themselves structured by existing institutions, would be able to detach themselves from their institutional environment in order to consider establishing new institutions (Blyth 2002b: 301). This echoes of the same problem that plagues normative institutionalism's difficulty in explaining institutional emergence or design. Calling upon the disaggregated and embedded nature of the pre-existing institutional context to explain this again demonstrates how the institutionalisms are brought together.

The very stability that institutions are brought into rational choice theory to provide is suspect. If individuals are all rational agents motivated only by their self-interest, why would some individuals allow themselves to be subjected to rules created by others? It would appear that all individuals are rational, but some – institutional designers – are more rational than others – rule-followers. In following the rules, that individual would effectively be serving the interest of the designer, rather than exclusively themselves. Or, if they refused to follow the rules and instead tried to create other rules for their own benefit, the decision-making environment would be one of extreme volatility (Blyth 2003: 695). Yet, empirical evidence suggests that it is not; indeed, rational choice theorists brought institutions into their paradigm exactly in order to explain the prevalence of stability.

Rational choice institutionalists respond by emphasising the presence of enforcement mechanisms: individuals would follow rules because this is more rational than suffering the penalty associated with breaking rules (Ostrom 1990). However, establishing a system of monitoring and penalty is itself an exercise in designing an institution for collective action, therefore the same problems would come into play, as well as the original free-rider problem meaning it is more rational for individuals to defect. As Blyth highlights, rational choice institutionalism seeks to resolve a collective action problem with another collective action problem; the argumentation is circular (2002a; 2002b; 2003). Again, rational choice responds, this time with the concept of incentive systems (Ostrom 1990). Resonating with the utility-maximising principal, individuals can be persuaded to follow rules if the protection or furthering of their own interest can be demonstrated. In this way, the concept of self-interested utility-maximisation is modified to accommodate a longer-term self-interest.

These modifications of rationality demonstrate how rational choice institutionalists have joined the turn towards ideas. In attempting to respond to problems, these theorists have relied upon ideational constructs as explanatory factors. The long-term rationality of collective action, for example, is an idea of which actors must be convinced and must work towards to create and sustain institutions. Indeed, even the rational choice institutionalists' acceptance of the structuring capacity of institutions admits a degree of cognitive manipulation that belongs to the realm of the ideational rather than the material. These are in themselves plausible arguments, but they do not fit with the ontological foundation of rational choice.

The underlying, and hard-wearing, assumption of this perspective is that actors are, and can only be, motivated by the principal of utility-maximisation. Therefore the pursuit of collective action, even if it is rational in the long term, cannot provide the basis for motivation. Granted, it could be argued that this is a rather severe reading of the rational choice institutionalism. This institutionalism choice does not, after all, determine *a priori* what 'utility' in a given situation might be and, therefore, long-term rationality may be the end from which an actor derives greatest utility. However, such a move away from the central premise of rationalism would allow theorists of this persuasion to explain almost all situations, except that persistent free-rider problem, which would probably require altruism to be assimilated into the paradigm as utility, demonstrating the absurdity of stretching the concept in such a manner.

Prevalent in the literature is an account of institutional design based on functionalist argumentation. According to this line of reasoning, an institution is efficient, meaning that it functions as intended, and that this intended function was the reason for its

design. Paul Pierson's summation draws out the backward-facing logic of this argument: 'the explanation of institutional forms is to be found in their functional consequences for those who create them' (2000: 475). And as Blyth continues, redesign is explained through the same direction of logic: 'the elements of a present set of institutions are juxtaposed to those of a previous set, and then a (usually exogenous) variable is imputed that "explains" why the latter emerged out of the former. [...] The logic behind this model is *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* – that is, that which comes after explains that which comes before' (2002a: 7-8). This argumentation is itself inadequate, but it is further weakened by the same obstacle that rational choice faced in explaining (in)stability, which is that the empirical evidence points to the contrary. Society is replete with institutions that are inefficient, unintended and even undesirable (Dryzek 1996; Goodin 1996; Offe 1996).

This could be resolved through an insistence that institutions, if not already efficient, will eventually become so via mechanisms of perfectibility. Institutions will shed their inefficient or irrational elements through the processes of learning and evolution. Blyth points out that this grants institutions a level of animation not consistent with the rational choice ontology (2002b), though Goodin argues that such processes are always attributable to rational individuals within institutions, as are even the accidents and errors made en route which 'arise in the backwash of intentionality' (1996: 25). Whether or not it is individuals or the institutions themselves that are agents in these processes of learning and evolution, Pierson (2000) argues that institutions are resistant to change and that any gradual development occurs in accordance with past decisions, i.e. along a path upon which that institution is now dependent. His argument typifies the historical institutionalist position. And whilst this argument is significant, it rests

within the bipolar structure-agency debate, in this case weighting structure over agency, rather than focussing on any flaw internal to the rational choice position. This means it faces the same criticisms as the structuralists, restarting the cycle of questioning rather than advancing beyond it.

The mechanisms of learning and evolution can, within the rationalist perspective, be brought into question on wholly theoretical grounds. Pierson moves towards this with his recognition that '[p]olitical actors frequently pursue a range of goals. While politicians often will be focussed on reelection, others (e.g., bureaucrats, interest groups) have different ambitions' (2000: 489), thus there is no single, universal optimum, he argues, for political systems. This argument is relevant at the individual institutional level as well as the system-wide level. Since institutions are understood to be social phenomena and individuals are, according to the rationalist perspective at least, all utility-maximisers, there cannot be one single optimal institutional form towards which the processes of learning and evolution are moving. Each actor would have their own, individualistic optimum, deriving maximum utility for themselves by constraining the choices of others.

If there is one optimum, however, it follows that it would take the form that would be most beneficial to the designer who created it. And, if this is the case, the line of reasoning returns to a situation where apparently some actors are more rational than others. Even if it is conceded that some actors are more 'bounded' than others, i.e. they have different levels of information and resources, and that the processes of learning and evolution do develop institutions towards their designer's goal, by extension all institutions, and presumably whole political systems, have an optimal end-point towards

which they are advancing. This conclusion is consistent with the kind of pre-destiny associated with extreme structuralists and brings the apparently agency-centred rational choice perspective under a whole new line of questioning (Hay 2002).

As has already been conceded above, it could be argued that this is a particularly harsh reading of rational choice institutionalism and that it is more accurately described as a critique of rational choice not modified by institutions, but this point renders a number of things of note. Firstly, though perhaps least importantly, there is a degree of defensiveness on the part of some institutionalists that view their institutionalism as 'best' and not needing to progress through dialogue and development with others, thus their critiques will lean towards criticism over appraisal (Schmidt 2006: 116). Secondly, it could be argued that rational choice institutionalism (as others) have to be judged on their core principles, in this case of utility-maximisation as motivation for action specifically because this is its single, distinguishing feature.

Finally, this is not intended to be a critique of rational choice institutionalism *per se*, but a demonstration of how extremely close the new institutionalisms are. In general, all the institutionalisms are pointing, with differing degrees of emphasis, towards a mix of intentional strategy with some mediation by the pre-existing institutional context, which happens in the ideational realm and transpires into the material. This effectively points towards a dialectical relationship between structure and agency in which actors realise institutional stability, design and change. The proximity of institutionalisms is best demonstrated at the border between rational choice institutionalism and the calculus strand of historical institutionalism. And it is also at this point that new institutionalism, in terms of the classic three schools at least, has advanced explorations into the

interactivity between individuals and institutions that gives rise to stability, design and change.

This section of the chapter has highlighted, furthermore, that there are significant implications held within the conceptualization of institutions that require greater attention. Firstly, there is a multitude of actors involved in institutional processes and, secondly, there is a definite cognitive element to the perpetuation and development of institutions. Thus, there arises an issue about the multiplicity of cognitions and how this transpires into institutional stability, design and change – the subject of this thesis. The discussion above also demonstrates how progress, for those who do have such a goal, will continuously be precluded if the theoretical advances on institutional processes are not developed together with consideration and development of a compatible ontological base regarding human action. The following section takes these issues further.

3.3 Towards an interpretivist institutionalism

As has been demonstrated, rationalist choice institutionalism is fundamentally weak. Being the product of two perspectives – rational choice theory and institutionalism generally – forced together, rational choice institutionalism is at times ontologically incoherent. When faced with challenges, theorists have tried to soften and modify the utility-maximising principle upon which their position is founded with structured ideas. In this way, it can appear to be ceding ground to the normative institutionalist perspective, which does allow for such structuring both theoretically and ontologically. However, this should not induce a wholesale disqualification of all things rational.

Indeed, the assumption that individuals are rational utility-maximisers is not 'incorrect' or even, in many instances, implausible; it is only the ontological status of this claim, i.e. that actors are intrinsically rational, that is problematic. Otherwise, this institutionalism has illustrated the now most significant point that the processes of institutional design and development combine both rational, utility-maximising considerations and norm-governed behaviour.

This 'concession' represents a positive development for many theorists who advocate greater dialogue across and progress beyond the new institutionalist ontological cleavage, or engage in what Campbell and Pedersen describe as a 'second movement in [new] institutional analysis' (2001: 249; also Rhodes 1995 and Schmidt 2006). However, Campbell and Pedersen have a tendency to focus on the methodological traditions that appear to separate the schools of institutionalism and overlook the ontological divisions from which those methodologies stem. Thus, they would not convince those theorists that oppose such a movement on the grounds that the ontologies of rational choice and normative institutionalism are incompatible. The foundations of these positions *are* incompatible, indeed they are diametrically opposed. This does not, however, need to preclude progress – progress does not require the merging of ontologies. The only requirement is consistency between a perspective's basic understanding of the nature of, in this discipline, political actors and its theoretical premises.

Normative institutionalism possesses this consistency, or has at least has this potential. Its stance on the nature of political actors emphasises the complexity, especially the multiplicity, of values and norms that motivate (political) action. Importantly, these

motivations are not innate, but are socially constructed, and they build up towards a logic of what is thought of as appropriate behaviour. Normative institutionalism rests on a constructivist, anti-foundationalist ontology, at the opposite end of the spectrum from the positivist, universalist ontology of rational choice institutionalism. This allows normative institutionalism to be more flexible than its rational choice counterpart, to the extent that it does not preclude the intentional, strategic behaviour as that could be just one of many norms constructed in, arguably, all modern societies (with capitalist economies). However, it could be argued that this is as generous an appraisal as the previous critique of rational choice institutionalism was harsh, because normative institutionalists do not themselves bring even that structured level of intention to the fore.

Thus, having disallowed the rational choice perspective its modifications (although reasonably, because of their lack of coherence with its ontological foundation) and assessed it in its most rudimentary form, it is fair that normative institutionalism is assessed in a similar light. Whilst it does not suffer serious ontological problems, as explained above, it does lean towards structure over agency, rather than transcend the binary debate or even grant adequate attention to the dialectic relationship between the two forces. As a consequence, the majority of theorists that incline towards structuralism within the normative school face the same questions as rational choice institutionalists that seek to draw attention to structure: where does the impetus for institutional design come from – how can actors detach themselves from their institutional context enough to think they require or desire institutional design/change?

Beyond the implicit incremental change born of the multiplicity of actors, such questions on institutional design/change are not addressed. Normative institutionalism remains wedded to its structural bias, denying any space for an intentional designer, and is therefore rather left behind the other two schools in developing the perspective (hence the relative brevity of its inclusion in this and the previous section). It is the critical engagement of rational choice institutionalism and historical institutionalism that has advanced the perspective to a centre-ground where both interests and ideas are deemed to matter. However, that centre-ground is, at this stage, a morass. The position that has been distilled from the institutionalisms requires an ontology that gives it coherence.

Colin Hay develops constructivist institutionalism to that end. Building on Blyth's work and the turn to ideational factors in institutional processes, Hay recognises the structuring ability of institutions in shaping people's cognitions, in line with the basic premise of new institutionalism. At the same time, Hay brings the agent back in, by conceiving of people as intentional actors that have the autonomy to cognitively manipulate the ideas and interests that are manifest in the pre-existing institutional context. Neatly summarising the position, Hay states that

> '[a]ctors are strategic, seeking to realize certain complex, contingent, and constantly changing goals. They do so in a context which favours certain strategies over others and must rely upon perceptions of that context which are at best incomplete and which may very often prove to have been inaccurate after the event. Moreover, ideas in the form of perceptions "matter" in a second sense – for actors are oriented normatively towards their environment. Their desires, preferences and motivations are not a

contextually given fact – a reflection of material or even social circumstance – but are irredeemably ideational, reflecting a normative (indeed moral, ethical, and political) orientation towards the context in which they will have to be realized'

<div align="right">(2006: 63-64).</div>

Constructivist institutionalism brings equal attention to both the structure – the institution – and the agent – the actor that is constructing the ideas and interests that inform the institutional (re)design process. Here, the actors are intentional. This does not mean that they are fully rational as rational choice theory and its derivatives would have them; they are unlikely to be conscious of or informed about the wider impacts of their actions and it is unlikely that institutions are realised exactly as intended. But actors use the ideas and information that they have, their perceptions of reality, and act accordingly (Hay 2002; Jessop 1990, 1996). This is intentional action, even if by acting according to these perceptions effectively amounts to those actors being structured into particular ways of thinking and behaving (Goodin 1996). The distinguishing feature is that actors are able to use or choose the structured ways of thinking (i.e. the pre-existing institutional context), to discursively select them, in order to achieve their ends. In this way actors are strategic but contextualised, which is an explication that marks a significant step in institutionalist theory.

Bob Jessop, later assisted by Hay, developed the 'strategic-relational' model to capture the mutually constitutive nature of the ideational and the material (Hay 2002; Jessop 1990, 1996). To begin, structure and agency are reconceptualized as context and conduct, which usefully brackets the ontological baggage and allows a more readily

understandable relationship between the two: context shapes conduct just as conduct shapes context. Thus, the strategic actor selects between courses of action it perceives as available in the context, but they are circularly related because the actor's perceptions of the context are affected by and will affect the material circumstances. As Hay explains

'to act strategically is to project the likely consequences of different courses of action and, in turn, to judge the contours of the terrain. It is, in short, to orient political courses of action to perceptions of the relevant strategic context and to use such an exercise as a means to select the particular course of action to be pursued'

(2002: 132).
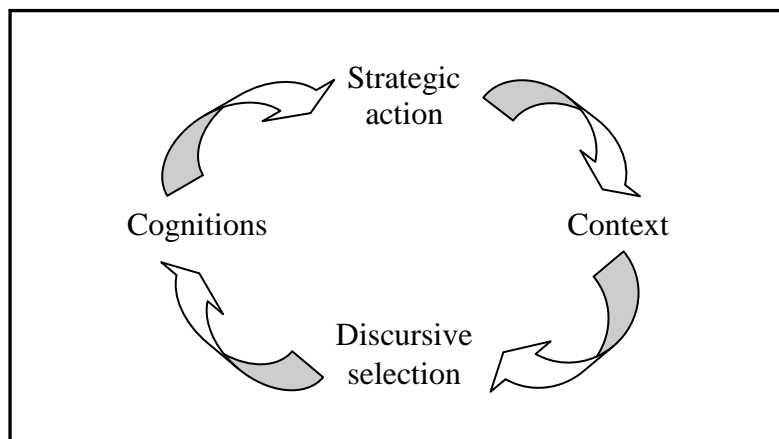
Figure 3.1 The material-ideational dialectic (Source: Hay 2002: 214)

Importantly, before this descends into a neo-rational account of the 'blind pursuit of transparent material interest' (Hay 2006: 64), it must be emphasised that actors are not understood to have perfect information, neither about the context or the consequences of each course of action. Instead it is the perception, their interpretation, of the context that is emphasised. Actors interpret the context, in so doing construct the ideas and interests that motivate their response, and then act as they think accordingly appropriate. For constructivist institutionalists, it is this relationship between the ideational and the material worlds that is of interest. How do actors' perceptions of the material world impact upon their strategic efforts to act within, and thus realise, it? And how does the ideational strategising, formulated into attempts at change, impact upon the material world? Implicit here is the role of discussion. Hay points to this whilst analysing Blyth's cases of American and Swedish trajectories of capitalism in which business actors were noted for 'setting the *discursive* parameters within which influential crisis *narratives* are likely to be *framed*' (2006: 68, emphasis added). Hay includes 'discursive selection' as a key component of the strategic-relational model (2002: 132).

It is at this point pertinent to address a contribution to new institutionalism that draws attention specifically to the role of the discursive. Vivien Schmidt posits her 'discursive institutionalism' (2006, 2008, 2010) as the forth new institutionalism, aligning her 'logic of communication' with those of consequentialism, path-dependence and appropriateness (2010: 5). Importantly, though not included in the labelling of this new institutionalism, Schmidt draws as much attention to ideas as discourse. The central premise is that both ideas (in the form of 'background ideational abilities') and discourse (in the form of 'foreground discursive abilities') are key to explaining

institutional design and change.   Schmidt pulls this together under discursive institutionalism because

> '[b]y using the term discourse, we can simultaneously indicate the ideas represented in the discourse (which may come in a variety of forms as well as content) and the interactive processes by which ideas are conveyed (which may be carried by different agents in different spheres)'
>
> (2008: 309).

By keeping ideas at the fore in this way, Schmidt's starting point is the same as Hay's, which is the incorporation of the ideational turn in explanations of institutional design/change.   On that level, there is little difference between Schmidt's discursive institutionalism and what could be described as Hay's earlier attempt towards constructivist institutionalism presented in the form of 'ideational institutionalism' (2001). At that stage of development of these new institutionalisms, the difference was a matter of emphasis, of pulling into focus those elements that were seen to have been inadequately addressed.   However, Hay goes on to replace ideational institutionalism with constructivist institutionalism to reflect the development of a distinctive ontology for his version and to draw attention to the core premise that the pre-existing institutional environment is *constructed* by the institutional actor engaged in institutional processes (2006: 57, fn. 2).

Schmidt draws attention to the distinctiveness of the discursive institutionalist approach by highlighting the role given back to agents in institutional design/change processes, thus this serves to 'unstick institutions and unfix preferences and norms' (2008: 313).

However, Schmidt goes on to advocate a multi-theoretic approach to institutional analysis stating that discursive institutionalism 'can be seen as complementary to the other three institutionalisms,' that 'the older new institutionalisms could be seen to provide background information for what one normally gets' rendering this discursive version as the institutionalism that can explain the unexpected (as in instances of institutional design/change) (2008: 314). Thus, Schmidt does not adequately address the issue of ontology, neither by fully developing a distinctive position for discursive institutionalism nor by critiquing the older new institutionalisms at the points in which they violate their own ontology (Blyth 2002b: 306).

Before potentially drowning in 'deep ontological waters' (Hay 2009: 897) and descending into what could be an unanswerable debate about the nature of man, it is suffice to state here that analysing the cores of the new institutionalism is critical to advancing the perspective. Engaging in dialogue across the schools is certainly productive, as demonstrated by the development of constructivist, discursive and ideational through the limitations of others. However, the mid-level theoretical projections that are generated from such engagement cannot simply be incorporated into a new institutionalist school without reference as to how they fit into the bedrock worldview that underlies the institutionalist position. Otherwise, we are simply generating a proliferation of institutionalisms based around pools of interest or on points of emphasis, giving rise and adding to collections of seven or more new institutionalisms as described by Peters (1999).

Hay deals specifically and directly with ontology, unearthing and developing a constructivist position to underpin this institutionalism (2006: 63-66). In so doing, and

in so labelling this institutionalism, Hay's contribution can be said to sit alongside the rational choice and normative schools as these three institutionalisms are irreconcilably divided on ontology[9] (although its advocates [myself included] would see constructivist institutionalism as having brought together intentional agents with interests and ideas into a coherent, ontologically sound whole, and thus as having advanced the perspective as a whole). Schmidt does readmit the agent, but perhaps does not go far enough in addressing that actor's autonomy or interest and would presumably leave that for rational choice institutionalists to explain (2008: 313-314). This collaborative approach exposes Schmidt's preference for an additional school, revealing the contribution of discursive institutionalism as a point of emphasis or, at most, an advance on the specific issue of institutional design/change, rather than an attempt to advance the perspective as a whole.

Therefore, it is Hay's constructivist institutionalism that is concentrated upon within this thesis. But that is not to say that Schmidt's call to attention on discourse is not significant, as indeed the recognition of the multiplicity of voice is proving popular in many pools of literature, not least because of the interpretivist/linguistic turn. Some of those pools contain contributions that deal specifically with institutions and even more specifically with the issue of institutional design/change, variously with reference to ideas, interests, the multiplicity of those and the role of dialogue. Although they are not expressly or strictly aligned with a new institutionalist school, these contributions are

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[9] Historical institutionalism here is notably omitted. This is because of its internal division along the calculus and cultural strands, which means that its theorists can be divided into the opposing rational choice and normative ontological camps (along the cleavage identified by Lowndes 2002). However, it is important to highlight, as Hay does (2006: 60-63), that there are historical institutionalists that reject this divide and promote a distinct ontology that bring the calculus and cultural together (most notably Steinmo *et al.*1992). In this case, Hay's contribution could be described as refining, rearticulating and promoting this distinct ontology (Hay 2006; Hay and Wincott 1998).

interesting for the detail that could complement constructivist institutionalism and thus they require attention.

Turning to empirical, though not empiricist, pools of research is helpful because they mirror the theoretical explorations of institutional design/change. In the subject area of international relations, theorists have posed questions about the design and development of international organisations. The second half of the twentieth century saw a significant number of international organisations become established, thus this has sparked an interest in design, especially with those theorists questioning the less obvious rationality of such a development. Indeed, Hay openly notes the role that constructivism from this neighbouring discipline of international relations has played in developing his position (2002, 2006).

Particularly interesting is the development of the European Union, which goes beyond the description of an international organisation and has generated a number of novel institutions, attracting attention from both international relations theorists and mainstream political scientists (e.g. Lindner and Rittberger 2003). This subject area has also developed an interest in the institutional design processes that have occurred with East European transition. Following the collapse of communism, these countries have had to undergo large-scale adaptation of their political and economic systems, establishing the institutions that support these. These institutions have been imported, and research on institutional design here has focussed on observing the elements required for successful institutional implementation (e.g. Offe 1996).

Another pool of interest lies in the subject area of public administration. Less explicitly concerned with institutional design though it is, work in this area considers the modernisation of established systems in which institutions need to be created or significantly adapted to fit the requirements of modern societies. Often related to the phenomenon of 'governance,' the changes observed here are significant enough to constitute institutional redesign. Looking from the empirical site outwards, this research is most closely aligned with this pool or discipline area. Indeed, the two previous chapters make explicit reference to the driving interest of governance in the regions. However, that theorists take different empirical sites for their research is relatively unimportant. What is important is the contributions these can now be demonstrated to be making towards developing and complementing constructivist institutionalism.

Blyth, as detailed earlier, has made significant steps towards constructivist institutional design with two key arguments. Firstly, he posits that the construction of a crisis instigates the process of institutional change (2002a). Interested in the widespread changes in many political economies around the world during the twentieth century, Blyth investigates the cases of Sweden and the US to find that widespread institutional change is initiated, and its disruption justified, through a constructed crisis as a tool. Further, and secondly, the changes are developed and legitimated by appeal to an idea, thus the ideational is transferred to the material construction of institutions. Lindner and Rittberger (2003) also theorize about the importance of ideas in the creation of EU institutions. They use the concept of 'polity ideas' to describe the differences between nation states' thoughts about the appropriate form and function of EU institutions.

Klijn and Koppenjan (2006) point to the importance of the political actors' acceptance of attempts at institutional design, without which the institution will not take hold and become institutionalised. They point to the layers of complexity that the actors involved add, both vertically between the levels of instruction in design and horizontally between the actors accepting and enacting the institutional designs. Lowndes (2005) pinpoints more precisely the methods that give rise to this complexity and impact upon institutional design: they engage in institutional remembering, borrowing and sharing, which positions these actors as 'institutional entrepreneurs' during moments of creativity. Offe (1996), too, points to the construction of actors into, in his terms, 'heroes' of the design process. And Wendt (2001) touches upon the momentum that can be generated from the construction of identities, which itself can impact upon the process of design.

Despite a lack of consensus on the terminology, there is an emphasis on the importance of discussion or story-telling. The political actors involved have to communicate their ideas to design an institution, as well as to sustain an institution more generally; they are founded on shared understandings between groups of people, and so are fundamentally based upon communication. Linder and Peters (1995) draw attention to the 'dialogic tradition' of institutional design, emphasising this over the 'decisional tradition' that has been dominant. To a large extent, this mirrors the move from rational assumptions in the process of design to the constructivist turn that has been central to this chapter. Significant to this turn is the work of Hajer, who illustrates the novelty of modern public policy problems and posits that institutions are designed as the by-products of policy deliberation (2003). Also, Dryzek (1996) and Skelcher *et al*. (2005) highlight the

importance of a shared 'discourse' between actors, pointing to the capacity of such a story or repeated frame of reasoning to construct and legitimise institutional processes.

The complexity brought in by the actors and their verbal constructions is crucial. It demonstrates the relationship between the ideational and the material that is an important part of the constructivist approach. Constructivism does not deny the importance of material factors, but emphasises the meaning of those material factors. So, looking closer at the complexity caused by actors, it is clear that there are actors with different resources (in terms of information, authority etc.) – these are material factors – and it has been demonstrated that these actors engage in ideational and discursive activities, all of which together impact on the process of institutional design. Importantly, these factors can be described as mutually constitutive in that they make each other real; the ideational processes realise institutional forms and functions that materially affect the actors involved, which in turn affects their capacity to engage in the ideational and material processes of institutional design.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented a thorough analysis of institutional theory, gradually moving from the broader, older contributions towards more contemporary developments that are more narrowly focussed on the issue of institutional design and change as well as the impact of intersubjectivity, which together form the central research problem of this thesis. In so doing, this chapter fully engages with debates about the ontologies that underpin the different institutionalist perspectives.

At times, the reviews and deeper analysis of the more recent institutional theoretic work may seem excessively preoccupied with ontology, particularly given that there are some high-profile scholars who advocate dialogue across the institutionalisms with much less regard for their foundational ontologies as they can prove a hindrance to advancing the perspective. I, however, align myself with Hay's openly acknowledged position that ontology is critical for analysis, not only of research data but also of the contending institutionalist positions (2002; 2009). Whilst dialogue across the camps is valuable, as such engagement exposes their relative strengths and weaknesses, a unique position then has to be developed, or otherwise the resultant forged formulations lack coherence. They become all things to all men, 'non-falsifiable' and thus lose their analytical capacity. In a similar vein, a multi-theoretic approach to empirical analysis could borrow terms across the new institutionalist perspective to explain away any empirical conundrum and this approach to theoretical analysis has no basis for judgements and therefore progress.

New institutionalism can offer more. Indeed, constructivist institutionalism offers more. By relinquishing ties to earlier positions and developing an ontological foundation that is consistent with mid-level institutionalist projections, constructivist institutionalism emphasises the *construction* of ideas and interests in processes of institutional design and change. The specifically *discursive* construction of these is developed and taken forward into the explicitly interpretivist methodological development of this thesis (in the following chapter) and the strategic-relational action that both puts together and results from these discursive constructions forms a core part to the later analysis of data (drawn out in chapter 8).

CHAPTER 4: MEANINGS, METHODS AND MATTERS ARISING

Introduction

Thus far, this thesis has presented the site of empirical exploration of this research (the regional assemblies in chapter 2) and the theoretical problematising that arose from the conceptualization of the 'real world' site in terms of the 'cutting edge' of a relevant theory base (i.e. of institutionalist theory's consideration of institutional design and change in chapter 3). This chapter brings the two together, integrating more specifically the institutional design and development of the regional assemblies and chiselling out a programme of research. This chapter sets out the research design, the specific methods used and a discussion of the difficulties and limitations of this project.

In this operationalisation of the research, I make frequent reference to the underlying ontological position at the foundation of this work. Whilst the forerunning history of the regional assemblies was presented as a factual account or, at least, in something of a neutralised light, the introductory chapter made clear that this thesis develops an interpretivist position, which comes to the fore in the analysis of institutional theory and the constructivist institutionalism arrived at. This positioning remains at the fore in this chapter. Just as it has impacted upon the direction of theoretical development, interpretivism also impacts upon the methodological development of this project. Indeed, it arguably affects this stage of development more so than the last, since there continues to be a surprising level of debate over whether and to what extent ontology affects the 'selection' or perception of theory (as recounted in the final section of the

preceding chapter), but its related epistemological stance more straightforwardly determines what data can be generated and how it can be accessed.

However, too often an epistemological position can appear to make methodological choices almost too straightforward. Whilst an interpretivist position clearly privileges qualitative, more ethnographic methods due to its focus on contextualised meanings, this does not compute backwards to mean that these methods solely or wholly fit any or all interpretivist projects. These methods cannot simply be picked once the epistemological position has been declared. There is a greater intellectual journey here. And, as such, this chapter does not fully separate out a discussion about ontology and epistemology followed by a list of methods to be used, but explains how and why – as well as how and why not – the methodological choices were made with reference to interpretivism as well as to the regional assemblies and their institutional construction processes.

4.1 The '-ology' triad to research design

From ontology, to epistemology, to methodology

As introduced in chapter 1, interpretivist ontology and epistemology go hand in hand to focus upon the meanings of the subjects of study, but these '-ologies' are distinct: ontology addresses the nature of things whilst epistemology is concerned with how things can be known. Now it is necessary to bring these to bear on methodology as the three sets of philosophical considerations together frame the project. As Jackson explains

'methodology is enacted philosophy. It is "philosophical" in that it embodies and stands upon ontological and epistemological commitments. It is "enacted" in that it is not satisfied with simply *thinking* these commitments, but endeavours to apply these ontological and epistemological commitments to concrete questions of how research is to be conducted'

(2006: 278).

Here, interpretivism's underlying ontologically constructivist component has driven the theoretical development of this project to a position that effectively states that institutions are constructed of a multiplicity of actors and their meanings, so that the processes of design and change are, too, constructed of these multiplicities. In turn, the epistemological component now focuses attention on *understanding* those meanings, so the methodology, the final part of the -ology triad, can, with reference to the ontology and epistemology, then focus attention on the processes of finding those meanings – i.e. on methods of data collection – as well as the processes of understanding those meanings – i.e. on methods of data analysis.

This issue of understanding is central to interpretivism. It sets the tone of the perspective whilst also being a topic of much sustained debate regarding the value and direction of the perspective, as will be discussed. Whilst the concept of 'understanding' is itself readily understandable, its frequency of use within the interpretivist tradition is historic, translated from the German '*verstehen*' as used by the sociologist Max Weber, who was prominent in the development of the anti-postivist current underlying interpretivism. Weber, whilst considering the *nature* of social action, argued for a

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distinction between the natural and social sciences (Little 1991: 71). In conducting social enquiry, the role of the researcher is to understand the meaning behind social action, either the meaning that was actually intended or the meaning attributed, but

> '[in] neither case is the "meaning" to be thought of as somehow objectively "correct" or "true" by some metaphysical criterion. This is the difference between the empirical sciences of actions, such as sociology and history, and any kind of *a priori* discipline, such as jurisprudence, logics, ethics, or aesthetics whose aim *is* to extract from their subject-matter its "correct" or "valid" meaning'
>
> <div align="right">(Weber, cited in Runciman 1978: 7).</div>

The meaning and significance of social action is, therefore, not something that can be scientifically extracted from an actor objectively, but is embedded in their subjectivity in relation to their situation. It is this embeddedness – this relationship between the actor's actions to the social situation – that is the feature that makes a social action specifically social. It is the role of the researcher, therefore, to capture this action in all its fullness in order to be able to understand its meaning.

The central significance attached to context and its contribution towards generating a fuller understanding of meaning is the epistemological foundation of a number of disciplines focussing on humans and their practices. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz makes a direct connection to Weber in advocating the purpose of analysis to be 'an interpretive [science] in search of meaning' focussed upon understanding the 'webs of significance' that a person has spun for themselves (1973: 5). A number of prominent ethnologists and phenomenologists, too, draw attention to the socialising impact of

context, thus requiring an interpretation of meaning in order to understand the subject of study (e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1966; Husserl 1931). The phenomenological approach, in particular, brings context to the centre with the Husserlian concept of 'lifeworld' (or '*Lebenswelt*' in the original German) which, distilled by Yanow, is 'the bedrock of beliefs against which the very ordinary, mundane moving through one's everyday world, interacting with others, takes place and through which one shapes and reaffirms one's sense of oneself and the elements of one's social world' (2006: 12).

There are a number of other theorists who have contributed to the strengthening of this perspective, developing over time a move away from the standards set by science based on an understanding that humans work differently specifically because they are engaged in a social setting that is mutually constitutive (Bourdieu, 1977; Schütz, 1967; Taylor 1971). However the aim here is not to chart these contributions, but to relate the ideas behind the perspective, the epistemology that was developed by these theorists, to the development of this research project. The point is that, whether it be labelled a 'web of significance' of a 'lifeworld,' the role of the researcher is to burrow into that context in order to understand its meanings to the actors involved. To conduct research from an interpretivist perspective is to engage in the micro level of human practices, with the humans that are practising them, 'ferreting out [their] mental framework' (Yanow, 2006: 11) and making sense of their sense-making processes.

In order to do this, the researcher must attend to language. Returning to Weber, we are referred to the 'collective concepts' from which 'to develop an intelligible terminology' because

'"the state" does not necessarily consist only or exactly of those elements which are *legally* relevant. [...] Rather, when [one] speaks of a "state," a "nation," a "limited company," a "family," an "army corps" or any similar collectivity, [s/he] means by such expressions nothing more than a specifically structured outcome of the social actions of individuals, either actually performed or constructed as possible'

(Weber cited in Runciman 1978: 17).

What Weber approaches here is, in two significant ways, related to the theoretical development of constructive institutionalism given in the previous chapter: social actions are practices – regularised into institutions – embedded with layers of other institutions that are constructed and shared through language. Other contemporaries philosophised more specifically and explicitly on language and its role in constructing the world around subjects, thereby contributing towards the interpretive stance (e.g. Winch 1958; Wittgenstien 1972). Bringing together these latter two in summary, Buckler clearly exposes the implications of this collective epistemological foundation and advises that 'without mastery of conceptual frameworks given in language, it is hard to see in what sense we could have meaningful experiences at all. Thus, language "constitutes" reality for us and investigations into language are investigations into the world as we experience it' (2002: 177-8).

Research design and data requirements

What this preceding discussion about specifically the epistemology of interpretivism now enables is the distillation of the key factors that will drive forward the research design. Interpretivist epistemology directs attention to context and to language as the two key access points to knowledge – it is through a thorough appreciation of these that

a subject matter, in this case the process of institutional design/change, can be known. It is through researching the context of and the language used in the empirical site of the 'real world' problem that we can understand the meaning of the institutional development processes for the actors involved in those institutions. This means that the next step in this programme of research, the step that operationalises the research by designing a way to physically conduct it, must first consider these data requirements of context and language together with the theoretical suppositions arrived at in the previous chapter. This is relatively easily done, given that the main argument in that previous chapter centred on the complementarity of constructivist institutionalism and interpretivism. It was demonstrated that constructivist institutionalism, working from the same ontological standpoint, draws attention to actors' discursive selections (i.e. to language) impacting upon their material reality (i.e. on context), thus it follows epistemologically that these are the key access points as in interpretivism.

Returning to Hay, we can see that this is drawn out explicitly. Hay develops Jessop's 'strategic-relational' model to map out how actors interpret the world around them and then act according to that understanding. This depiction represents how the ideational and material affect one another – how the pre-existing institutional context as interpreted by one actor is shared with the next through language, and the selection of the details shared contributes towards institutional development as it is being performed. At the same time, that selection is not necessarily or fully autonomous – it does not happen in a vacuum, but in a pre-existing institutional context, that influences an actor's discursive selection. This is the interplay between structure and agency, as represented through context and language. Hay explains that the

'dialectical understanding of the relationship between the ideational and material is logically entailed by a dialectical understanding of the relationship between structure and agency [...] For ideas, narratives, paradigms to continue to provide cognitive templates through which actors interpret the world, they must retain a certain resonance with those actors' direct and mediated experiences [...] In this sense the discursive or ideational is only ever relatively autonomous of the material. Just as it imposes a strategic selectivity, then, the context also imposes a discursive selectivity, selecting for and selecting against particular ideas, narratives and construction'

(2002: 210-212).

This being a dialectical relationship, it is impossible to determine the beginning from which to describe a strictly linear process of institutional development. However, it is possible to select *a* beginning, if the continuously cyclical nature of institutional processes is appreciated. From this, we can draw together an analytical framework to function as a heuristic device in order to navigate the fieldwork and the findings of the research. This is an attempt to artificially fix an understanding of the action of an individual in a developing institutional context, from which to widen that understanding to a collection of individuals involved in that institutional design/change process, which is the specific issue under research in this thesis.

- The (pre-existing) institutional context and the ideas about the direction of institutional design/change privilege or empower different actors to varying

degrees (according to their own perceptions) to participate in the institutional design process;

- those actors that perceive themselves to be involved strategically use their interpretations of the institutional context and the available ideas, effectively becoming institutional designers;

- these designers use their perceptions of the context and ideas to promote certain strategies over others, constructing relationships with others and sharing their discursive selections;

- and as those discursive selections become generally accepted, they transpire into material designs and effectively become institutionalised;

- finally, these new institutions affect the terrain of the next attempt at institutional design/change, affecting new interpretations of the context and ideas.
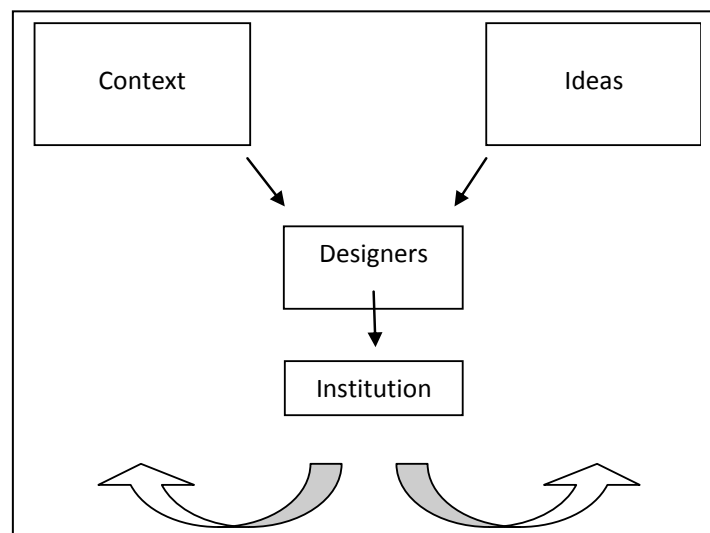
Figure 4.1 A provisional model of intersubjective institutional design

With this heuristic device in place, it is now necessary to generate data pertaining to the pre-existing institutional context and, importantly, the data need to reflect the pre-existing institutional context as it is meaningful to the actors involved. A range of meanings need to be unearthed, from the different designers or groups of designers involved. And the data need to relate the developmental aspect of the institutional process, to capture the constant dynamism that is a 'live' institution as well as the constant adaptation of it as it is being performed. In sum, this research project requires rich, qualitative, primary data, generated from the site of institutional ambiguity – i.e. directly from the English regional assemblies under investigation. In this section, I have demonstrated how the ontological position at the foundation of this research has impacted upon the epistemological position, prioritising context and language as the route to knowledge about constructivist institutional design. I have mapped out the theoretical projections about the institutional design/change process to clarify the context and the language sought, and built from this further consideration of the data requirements for this project. This will now structure the choices around the methods employed, in the following section.

4.2 Methods

Of data collection

Bridging the sometimes chasmal gap between the researcher's theoretical musings and the empirical world, there is a key research method that essentially brings to life a research project. It takes a case for further study, further than an anecdote or example, and enables a focussed and deep analysis of a research problem in the social world as it

is really experienced. As Yin, a major authority in the case study method, states, this approach allows the research to 'retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of *real-life* events' (1994: 3, emphasis added). It is unsurprising, therefore, that it is a popular method in a discipline that largely focuses on 'real world' and even 'real time' policy issues. The case study method is so firmly established in public policy studies that it can elude the researcher drawing up a list of methods, as the case is often the source of the research problem in the first instance and forms an almost unquestionable part of any logical research design. However, Flyvbjerg assists in identifying and delineating four key features of case studies:

(i)   first, drawing on Stake (2008) and Ragin and Becker (1992), the study is 'bounded' or 'cased;'

(ii)   it is 'intensive,' it involves 'in-depth' research;

(iii)   third, it enables the exploration of 'developmental factors.' demonstrating evolution in time of a phenomenon so as to contribute towards the completeness of a case;

(iv)   and finally, in a similar vein, it facilitates a focus on the environment of the unit of study, relating it to its context

(2011: 301).

These four features frame the case study approach in general, whilst also allowing for a range of more specific methods to be used in conjunction or incorporated within the study. Yin (1994, 2003) lists categories of techniques used within case studies: documentation; archival records; interviews; direct observation; participant observation;

and physical artefacts. Flyvbjerg goes further to state that the phenomenon being explored 'may be studied in a number of ways, for instance qualitatively or quantitatively, analytically or hermeneutically, or by mixed methods' (2011: 301). This demonstrates that the case study is, like others, a malleable method, and the research values underpinning this choice of method can vary. Case studies may appear to be an obvious choice for the interpretive researcher given the value attached to rich detail, but it is just as frequently used in primarily quantitative studies to triangulate results in context. What is important is the spirit in which the method is employed – the reasons for its selection based on the researcher's understanding of its purpose in terms of the data it can generate. Methods themselves are neutral tools, but a researcher's epistemological position frames the way they are used. It is part of the critical researcher's role to be transparent about the selection of methods so as not to rest on assumptions.

Flyvbjerg's clarification is helpful because it distils the neutrality of the tool. Flyvbjerg erects the structure of the case study method to extricate it away from the 'conventional wisdom' with which it is often compounded, 'wisdom' that Flyvbjerg argues contributes towards misunderstandings about the case study research (2006: 220). I can hang my selection of the case study method on the points above in that:

(i)   my study is bounded specifically to the English regional assembly;

(ii)   it is the site for more intensive/in-depth research in the form of semi-structured interviews with the actors involved (as will be detailed below);

(iii)   'developmental factors' will be of utmost importance due to the focus on institutional design and change within the case;

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(iv)   and the exploration of the whole regional assembly, as much as can be bounded, enables an appreciation of the pre-existing institutional context within which institutional development may occur.

But the ontological and epistemological discussion that has preceded this section suggests that this is not all that is expected of the case study here. I am aiming to generate rich detail, that which Geertz terms 'thick description' (1973). Indeed, with an interpretivist perspective, I adopt the case study method as one that enables an anthropological/ethnographical style of researching the regional assembly, attempting to explore as openly and as widely as possible, beyond the scope of initial ideas, with as little preconceived as possible. I can get direct access to the actual actors involved in what is being researched through this method, and capture the whole picture so as to challenge any personal prejudices or preconceptions that might affect the data. There are, therefore, assumptions here about the method. These differ from those bemoaned by Flyvbjerg, but his critical engagement with the case study method raises important issues about not just this method but of this project and its perspective as a whole.

Although it is not his stated aim, a number of Flyvbjerg's points of challenge to the standard reasons for selecting and employing the case study method chime with what would also be the interpretivist critique of that selection and employment. Flyvbjerg leans on the specificity of *social* science, stating that 'there does not and probably cannot exist predictive theory in social science' (2006: 223) and distancing it from the 'hypothetico-deductive model of explanation [...], universals and scientism' (2006: 220, 224), all while building a case against the assumptions that theoretical knowledge is more valuable than practical knowledge and that case studies are more useful for generating hypotheses rather than testing them and building theory (two of his five

misunderstandings). There are echoes of the anti-positivist sentiment of interpretivism and Flyvbjerg's recommendations to counter the misunderstandings reflect an interpretivist response. This is quite clearly demonstrated through his discussion of the misunderstanding that case studies frequently result in researchers verifying their hypotheses, when he points to the frequency with which case study researchers in fact falsify their hunches (2006: 235), where they are forced to be reflexive, as interpretivism encourages.

However, my aim here is not to regurgitate Flyvbjerg's article to justify the interpretivist approach taken to the case study research in this project. Rather, it is to raise and reflect upon Flyvbjerg's point that presents a particular challenge to this research project: generalising from a single case to contribute to knowledge. Flyvbjerg draws upon historic examples of (natural) scientific discoveries that were based on single cases to counter the general preference of the scientific community towards multiple case studies from which they can infer factual truth based on statistical significance (2006: 225-226). He uses this to demonstrate his argument that the findings of a single, paradigmatic case study can contribute more generally towards knowledge. Much as this is convincing, it does not fully alleviate concerns stemming from the particularities of this research project, in which there are three component parts to the challenge here raised:

(i) This thesis concerns a *single* entity – the English regional assembly – but takes forward two of these for further study (the West Midlands and the North West regional assemblies). Is it, therefore, one or two case studies?

(ii)   If it is two case studies, are the findings comparable and *generalisable*, pertaining to the regional assembly in general?

(iii)   Regardless of these more academic concerns about the implications of whether one or two case studies are here presented, what can be reported back to the policy world? Given that this research was supported by a CASE award with an external organisation, the umbrella body for the regional assemblies, there was a duty to produce (previously unknown) *knowledge* to what are effectively the commissioners of this research. If conducted in the interpretivist vein, what could be deemed valid as knowledge from researching these two specific cases for the assemblies in general?

These are the reflections of a researcher engaging with the philosophical foundations of research and developing interpretivist position, whilst operating in an institutional environment with its own demands, such as for justifications of the purpose/impact of the research and, particularly for the policy-world, timely facts and figures. These considerations were a constant feature of the research process, not fully resolved prior to undertaking the fieldwork nor within the full term of the project. Thus, they pose as limitations to the project and will be discussed further. But, with this in mind, it is still necessary to explain the methodological choices that were made with regards to the employment of the case study method. The reasoning presented above explains why the case study method was chosen, but not yet why specifically the West Midlands and North West assemblies were chosen.

It is, in keeping with much interpretivist positioning within this thesis, easier to say how the case studies were *not* chosen i.e. that the aim was not to single out the particular features of the assemblies, to then fix them as controlled elements, to then focus on a pre-defined part of institutional development, from which some generally applicable truth could be inferred 'all other things being equal.' This is a somewhat defensive stance, but that is almost inevitable given the anti- or post-positivist foundation of interpretivism. Without this construction against its other, the selection of the cases by the interpretivist researcher is little more than instinctive. As Flyvbjerg states, 'all that researchers can do is use their experience and intuition to assess whether they believe a given case is interesting in a paradigmatic context' and yet at the same time 'it is not possible consistently, or even frequently, to determine in advance whether a given case [...] is paradigmatic' (2006: 233). Furthermore, as Moses and Knutsen argue,

> 'as with the tendency to generalize, an author's level of attention to questions of case selection and sampling does not need to signal poor scholarship or methodological ineptitude. It is quite possible that an author's lack of attention to these concerns reflects her underlying methodological position. For most constructivists, issues of sampling and case selection are simply not methodologically relevant or interesting'
>
> (2007: 234).

Nonetheless, it is useful to explain how the decision to study further the West Midlands and North West assemblies was arrived at, as it relates to the subsequent methods of analysis. Firstly, it was decided that it was beyond the scope of a single doctoral researcher to conduct in-depth research of all eight assemblies, particularly to the depth

that the interpretivist approach required. Therefore, they were all investigated briefly (relative to the rest of the research) in order to decide which to take forward[10]. This early stage of research drew upon information about the assemblies that was openly available to the general public i.e. from the assemblies' websites and from documents such as the assemblies' annual reports. Given the specificities of the CASE studentship, however, I was able to gain 'insider' information with anecdotal 'evidence' from informal conversations with contacts from the English Regions Network (ERN, the sponsoring body). I also attended my first ERN Stakeholder Meeting, which brought together the eight assemblies' stakeholder chairpersons, within weeks of starting the project, as well as the ERN Annual Conference shortly after, from which I was able to become acquainted with individuals from different assemblies, whom I visited in the months following[11]. I reflected upon all of these meetings and conversations, within them where possible as well as straight after, in notebooks that effectively functioned as research diaries[12]. From these field notes, I compiled the following table to summarise what I was learning about the assemblies, plotting their interesting features against the feasibility of taking them forward as case studies.

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[10] This work was the basis for the regional 'snapshots' given in chapter 2.
[11] A list of these meetings is available in the appendix (a).
[12] I say effectively because these research diaries were not exclusively used for the fieldwork, as research diaries technically are, but for the whole PhD, reflecting the development of myself as a researcher through all the other events and experiences that contributed (supervisions, conferences etc.).

Region	Fact file (source: ODPM 2003: 70-77)	Features of interest	Potential difficulties
NE	Area: 8, 592 km^2 Population ≈ 2.6m. GDP per head: £10, 024 LAs: 2 counties with 18 shire districts; 10 unitary councils	- Lots of history – long and distinct - Issue of regional identity which may be interesting - Calls itself an assembly, not a *regional* assembly - MEP included, part of the 'government sector' - Stakeholders called 'ESEP' - Public info points out that it is not a quango - Appears more proactive than passive	- Its story too distinct? - Distance
NW	Area: 8, 851 km^2 Population ≈ 6.9m. GDP per head: £11, 273 LAs: 3 counties with 39 shire districts; 19 unitary councils	- See themselves as having 6 sub-regions - 3 nominations from each plus 6 from the NW SEEP group (a separate entity? → should be resilient to future change then?) make up the exec board - From the annual report 2002/3, appears that they used to have separate groupings but 'put differences behind' them and formed cohesive group – interesting to probe - Appears more proactive than passive	- Distance? (geographical spread) though the focus of the region is undeniably skewed to the south, given the strategic importance of cities like Manchester and Liverpool – itself quite interesting feature
YH	Area: 15, 400 km^2 Population ≈ 5m. GDP per head: £11, 404 LAs: 1 county with 9 shire districts; 14 unitary councils	- 60:40 ratio - Relatively organised and transparent about the way they work? - Appears more proactive than passive	- Currently already accommodating a researcher – potential difficulties
EM	Area: 15, 627 km^2 Population ≈ 4.2m. GDP per head: £12, 146 LAs: 5 counties with 36 shire districts; 4 unitary councils	- Claim to have had a review recently → proactive/reflexive? - Include MEPs - Interesting interpretation of the ratio – 'two-thirds is required to be filled by LG' - Public info states that it is not a quango - (local)	- Leading member/potential point of access presents a potential barrier rather than a support to the research

WM	Area: 13, 004 km² Population ≈ 5.3m. GDP per head: £11, 900 Las: 4 counties with 25 shire districts; 10 unitary councils	- Claim to have a long history of partnership working - Separation between economic and social & environmental partners – 'business group' and 'other stakeholder group' - Sectoral ratio 68:16:16 – privileges LG, then business? - Future appears stable, with LG having a clear dominance - close connection with WMLGA may be interesting - 'Other' stakeholder group includes parish councillors (→ why not in LG section?) - Appears more passive than proactive - (local)	- Issues arising from propinquity – access too privileged, risk of 'capture'?
SW	Area: 23, 289 km² Population ≈ 4.9m. GDP per head: £11, 782 LAs: 6 counties with 36 shire districts; 9 unitary councils	- Three regional organisations served by the same website – how separate? - Apparently officers have been exploring alternative models	- The assembly does not appear to be much of a priority? - Distance/ geographical spread/ accessibility
SE	Area: 19, 096 km² Population ≈ 8m. GDP per head: £15, 098 Las: 7 counties with 55 shire districts; 12 unitary councils	- History of SE quite distinctive – very much tied to London - Separation between economic and social & environmental partners - General opinion that SEERA likely to be one of the first to wind down following conclusions of SNR	- Its story too tied to London?
EE	Area 19, 120 km² Population ≈ 5m. GDP per head: £15, 094 Las: 6 counties with 28 shire districts; 20 unitary councils	- SEEPs known as 'community stakeholders' - Have a 'template' for stakeholder engagement and a 'position on regional governance' – appear to want to be organised and transparent	- Unstable situation with officer(s) – staff changes and lack of knowledge about who does what with stakeholders - Distance/ geographical spread/ accessibility

All of these regions had interesting points ripe for further study. Moreover, they each had interesting points that could have been relevant to this particular thesis for further study, for example the impact of the relatively strong regional identity on the construction of the North East Assembly institutions and the interpretation of the Government's guidance on membership proportions producing a 60:40 ratio of local government to stakeholder representation in Yorkshire and the Humber Assembly were both fascinating, especially from a constructivist perspective. But, looking across the board, there emerged issues that were theoretically interesting and relevant as well as empirically focussed on the stakeholders and relevant to the regional assemblies more broadly. Methodologically, this was the balance that had to be struck. These issues were the division in organisation of the stakeholders, and the stakeholders' potential impact upon the ongoing processes of institutional design. In three regions, the proportionality of the stakeholders raised critical questions: in Yorkshire and the Humber, as mentioned above, but particularly in the West Midlands and the South East, where the stakeholders were further divided by type i.e. by whether they were economic stakeholders or more closely aligned to the label of 'third sector.' And in a number of regions, notably those further north, there was significant ongoing activity regarding institutional design due to the impact of the North East referendum in 2004 and the Sub-National Review in 2007, where there was an opportunity to gather 'first hand' evidence of institutional development from actors still engaged in that process.

From this, the West Midlands and the North West regions were already appearing to be frontrunners for case study research. Yorkshire and the Humber Assembly, though, clearly had a story that spoke to both the intertwined agendas, being distinctive in its stakeholder arrangement and proactive in its organisation more generally. However, YHA was

anomalous with regards to the level of stakeholder representation and thus could not have borne much relevance to the other regions, bar starkly highlighting that the regions could have interpreted the Government guidance of 'at least 30%' to the letter rather than as 'two thirds local government' as the majority of them did. In a similar vein, the East Midlands Regional Assembly would have been an exceptionally interesting single case study in terms of constructivist institutionalism for its account of institutional development on an apparently 'blank slate' (Foley 2002), as this was palpably not the case in other regions, thus rendering EMRA anomalous. The North East and South East regions, too, were too distinct in their relationship with London, though in contrasting ways.   But from the epistemological discussion above, it is clear that studying 'anomalies' are not necessarily problematic for an interpretivist researcher, however the CASE structure of the project pulled concerns back towards the regional assembly as an entity and so away from the specifics of any single assembly exclusively. To further study more, or even all, of the assemblies would have surely generated insights that would have contributed towards more regular and thorough analytical reflection between cases, though that would have been beyond the scope of the resources available in this project.

Feasibility was an inevitable consideration in the case study selection process. Distance was an obvious issue, but there was also a related issue of geographical spread. Given the regional remit of the assemblies, there was significant potential for the in-depth case study work to have to be conducted across the whole regional area. The assemblies were strategic bodies that met relatively rarely and, even then, most assemblies rotated their meetings around the region for fairness of accessibility for their members. Therefore, the building in which an assembly was physically based served as little more than a hub for administrators and

generally lacked the symbolic resonance and pull of, for example, a town hall. Consequently, it was more than likely that I would be visiting people in their own organisational settings, or even their own homes, right across their region. This meant that, for example, the South West region, even though it bordered the region in which I was based (the West Midlands), was as difficult to pursue to full case study depth as the distant North East region.

The East of England region presented both difficulties, being both distant from the research base and geographically spread out over a wide and relatively less accessible area. But perhaps as challenging here was the staffing shift that meant there was a lack of knowledge about the stakeholders (however temporary) and, in this particular case, an amount of instability regarding the role and responsibility of stakeholder communication and connection. This issue of personnel or specific people in the regions was relevant in other cases: at that time in YHA, another research project was being conducted, which raised concerns about potential participant 'research fatigue' (Clark 2008) as well as confusion between the projects and their researchers[13]; and in EMRA, the lead stakeholder contact, who seemingly exerted particularly strong leadership, was disappointingly negative about the research[14] and thus presented a barrier to pursuing that case.

The opposite was experienced in the West Midlands region: given that the CASE partner, the ERN, was hosted by WMRA at the beginning of the project, there was a supportive attitude

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[13] On an early occasion, I travelled up to YHA for a stakeholder meeting that I learned upon arrival had been cancelled. It transpired that the other researcher had been informed and, in the process, I had been overlooked. The experience was as frustrating as it was expensive, and perhaps disproportionately affected my de-selection of the case after initial enthusiasm for exploring the 60:40 assembly membership ratio.

[14] At my first ERN stakeholder meeting, this person opined that this research was simply a 'naval-gazing' exercise and appeared affronted that the stakeholders were being 'scrutinised' against the councillors, revealing a level of hostility that could have been time-consuming to overcome and too resource-intensive for a relatively small project.

towards the research. Indeed, organisational and staffing changes during the project meant that WMRA effectively became the CASE partner during the mid- to late phase of the PhD. There was some nervousness about this – whether it could be seen as an unfairly privileged level of access and whether this might have entailed some obligation towards WMRA with potential for some conflict of interest if the findings were not agreeable – but I manoeuvred the CASE work into the difficult position and decided that the ease of accessibility was something to be taken advantage of rather than worry about since it had not been unethically gained. In a similar way, the selection of the North West region was not without its concerns, but they were overcome: this region covered an expansive area, a reason that other regions had been discounted, but the natural geography of the area meant that human settlement was concentrated in pockets that were relatively easily accessible, either in the south of the region or in cities with good transportation links (i.e. Preston, Lancaster and Carlisle). This in itself was part of the ongoing institutional development that made the region interesting to study from the early stages of scoping the regions.

As has been made clear in chapter 2 with regards to the regional 'snapshots' and above with the table of observations, an amount of research had already been conducted to inform the case study selection process. This drew, in the main, upon publicly available information. Any insider information gained at that stage was, at best, on the peripheries of 'insider,' being the result of early and informal contact, and it was generally anecdotal. It was certainly useful, however it was the preliminary stage of much more in-depth work. The case study method, as explained above, bounded the site within which to conduct in-depth primary research with the actors directly involved in the processes being researched. And the key way to access the data required for this research was to interview those actors. Like case studies,

interviewing is a well-established and widely used method in social sciences, particularly in those disciplines that are outward-facing and have a 'real time' dimension, because they can, for example, relay information from people implementing policy back to those simultaneously revising policy. This method's unique capacity to capture qualitative data literally 'straight from the horse's mouth' is a clear reason for its popularity, which is reflected by the wealth of textbook guidance available, categorising variously the different types of interview and advising on step-by-step interviewing technique (e.g. Gubrium and Holstein 2002; Kvale 1996; Rubin and Rubin 1995).

That there are different types of interview (e.g. survey interviews, life histories, unstructured interviews) demonstrates that, just as with case studies, the purpose behind the method is paramount. This serves as a reminder of the argument that runs through this methodological discussion: it is the way a method is employed that is significant, more so than the method itself. How the interviews were conducted is shaped by and therefore reflects the ontological and epistemological positions that underlie the project for which the method is being employed. An interview can be conducted in a highly structured manner, virtually a spoken survey, where neat, plain truths or verifications are sought. But this is not what is required in an interpretivist project where more general exploration of meanings of a problem or phenomenon as well as the multiplicity of meanings from different actors are sought. The interview method is appropriate because it allows access to 'people's understanding of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world' (Kvale 1996: 105), but it is specifically the in-depth interview that is semi-structured or even unstructured where the interpretivist researcher has the 'freedom for probes and follow-up questions as opposed to

the structured interviews one might find in a survey or some other study that prioritizes reliability-as-uniformity over flexible, detail exploration' (Soss 2006: 135).

Flexibility is the key characteristic of the less structured interview technique. It is both this method's strength as well as its potentially limiting feature. Experiential knowledge from practised scholars can advise on how to approach the interviewing process, for example Rubin and Rubin (1995) categorise three types of questioning – main, probe and follow-up – that provide a coherent order to sub-sections of the interview, alongside a wealth of other suggestions that serve to heighten awareness for the new researcher. But specifically the flexibility required in an interpretive approach means that the probing follow-up questions can take centre stage. Schaffer invites us to ask questions of elaboration, such as:

- Can you explain?
- Can you elaborate?
- Please say more.
- Why do you say that?
- How so?
- Really?

(2006: 154).

Wagenaar (2004) even implies a level of feigned naivety for eliciting data from interview respondents. As a consequence of this approach, expert advice can only guide the process to an extent and the in-depth interview can be, as Soss describes, 'as unpredictable as any other conversation' (2006: 135). Soss paints a colourful picture of the possibilities – the interview may, he says, 'veer off into topics irrelevant to the research; it may get emotionally difficult

for one person or both; it may get tense or boring or develop a running joke; it may breeze along or stumble into an uncomfortable impasse' (2006: 135).

It is clear, then, that there is a good degree of intuition or responsiveness involved in the in-depth interview scenario. This could be seen as a limiting factor, because the unique development of each interview would preclude comparison across transcripts, returning to the question raised above that niggles away at the interpretivist researcher still in the early stages of development: what can really be learned here with this approach? But the skill to be learned here is the ability to strike a balance between allowing for the breadth of data to be unearthed whilst also controlling it through the line and style of questioning. The lack of rigidity here, or the lack of strict repeatability of the method and reproducibility of the data, is not, as with the case studies above, seen as an indication of a lack of scholarship. Rather, the freedom allowed to the respondent (as well as to the interviewer interacting to some degree with that respondent) enables a mechanism of 'check and balance' in the research. It encourages reflexivity in the researcher to challenge any preconceptions born of theory, preliminary and documentary analysis, as well as of other interview data. And this brings greater transparency to the concurrency of developments stemming from data collection and analysis as well as revisions to the theoretical framework of the project. Soss promotes this as the method's advantage, arguing that

> 'in-depth interviewing offers flexibility in the interview itself and shifting standpoints over time. It is centred on discursive and dialectical conversations with interviewees. But more broadly, it is an evolving dialogue between fieldwork and framework, mediated by concrete activities of transcription, memo

writing, purposive reading of literatures, and the like. It entails simultaneous data

collection and analysis, but it remains incomplete without more systematic

analysis after exiting the field'

<div align="right">(2006: 137).</div>

This was certainly true of the interviewing process in this project. There was considerable

movement back and forth between what are typically understood to be discrete stages of the

research process – between the theoretically planning and physically undertaking the research

– as well as across the two regional assembly cases. I found that the difficulty was less about

how to question interviewees (for which, as noted above, there is a fair amount of helpful

literature available) but more about what to question them on. This should have been given

by the theory work undertaken prior to conducting the research, which to some extent it was,

but the theoretical framework for the project was by no means fully worked out prior to the

early stage at which the fieldwork began. To complicate matters further, I was – and still am

– contending with the question of to what extent any theoretical projections *should have* been

worked out in advance if aligned to the interpretive, more exploratory stance, that aims to

work from the ground up. I found that my interviewing skills developed as the project

progressed, that I could keep my interjections brief but probing, and yet the progression of the

project necessitated more directed questioning of the issues and events that had come to the

fore in previous interviews, lest the interviews and project be pulled in too many different

directions. Thus, despite the apparent lack of formal systemacity in the interpretive interview

approach, there is a great level of skill required. A typical interview guide can be found in the

appendix (b).

I practised this over 40 interviews with actors in the West Midlands and North West regional assemblies, 21 in the former and 19 in the latter. The regional assembly stakeholder members made up the majority of those interviewed, given the early focus on those actors almost exclusively. The decisions of who to interview then were relatively straightforward – I needed to speak with those assembly members involved in the institutional development of the assembly, thus the assembly membership was my pool from which to pick and, whilst in the initial stages I aimed to interview quite generally across the assembly after prioritising the stakeholder members, I then aimed for those that had been involved for longer stretches of time (which I judged from annual reports and other interviewees' data and advice). Whilst it could have been equally enlightening to speak to newer members of the assemblies, to gain perspectives that were closer to their first impressions of being involved and potentially having had histories recently relayed to them, the wider context (i.e. in relation to the publication and consequences of the 2007 Sub-National Review) meant that the assembly situations had been too precarious to invite new members into, so I had to concentrate on those already actively involved.

On five occasions it was relevant to speak with non-assembly members, but this was because they were former members that had been involved in institutional development, rather than to satisfy any aim to gain a perspective from the outside. This project was specifically about internal institutional design and change, to gain an understanding of how different (types of) actors came together to develop the practices that made up the regional assembly, rather than looking at the development of the body as a whole against other regional organisations such as the development agencies. Of those actors on the inside, I found the Councillor component of the assembly membership particularly difficult to access and not particularly useful when I

did, being keen to focus on the idea of regionalism more generally rather than the specifics of internal development, though this was noted for being quite telling in itself. Partly due to this frustration but mostly due to revelations in the data, I spread my net to assembly officers beyond those that had already come to be my lead contact for that region, which proved critical (as discussed in the following chapters). I began with the ambitious aim of interviewing all the stakeholders, given the relatively small numbers involved in these relatively small organisations, but I revised this to include the range of assembly actors and stopped when the returns from the interviews ceased adding any further dimension to the body of data collected and when I judged that I had spent enough time attempting to reach those I had not yet had the opportunity to interview.

I spent eighteen months on the fieldwork, conducting interviews during the period from February 2008 to August 2009 (though the time was not spent exclusively on this task – as discussed previously and further, there were no discrete stages of the project). All bar twelve of them were conducted face-to-face, which was not a feasibility issue – I made myself fully available during this period in order to conduct as many of these interviews as possible face-to-face, hence the relatively lengthy timeframe in which they occurred – but on these occasions, the interviewees simply did not want to be interviewed in person (perhaps as a way of keeping their contribution brief) and they could not be persuaded otherwise (though there was minimal attempt at persuasion *per se*, to respect the interviewees' preferences). Interviewees took place in a number of settings – from regional assembly premises, other organisational settings (personal offices, staffrooms, meeting rooms) and frequently in the interviewee's home. Though they averaged to just under an hour, the interviews varied considerably in length, from one early on taking nearly two full hours to another lasting only

approximately an eighth of that time (over the telephone). Whilst the content of this latter extreme example was not, and could not have been, useful, I was given the impression that it was quite a coup to have secured any of this interviewee's time at all, which itself fed into the data analysis and reflection in this case[15].

The interviews also varied in quality (by which I mean the usefulness of the data generated) though, to my surprise, this did not necessarily correlate with the length of the interview nor with whether the interview was conducted face-to-face or not. Whilst I believed – and still believe – that the probability for a better interview is greater if conducted in person, to be better able to judge and respond to body language as well as to demonstrate how much I appreciated the interviewee's perspective and their time, I did manage to gain useful perspectives over the telephone. From this I learned that it is quite difficult to predict how an interview will run and that the safest avenue to pursue is to allow the interviewee to lead on setting the conditions for the interview. Getting a reluctant potential respondent to agree to be interviewed is challenging, but having to coax them at every turn simply made the process and invariably the data (if any) almost useless. Nevertheless, whether face-to-face or on the telephone, all bar three of the interviews were digitally recorded; of these three, the first – indeed, my very first – was not recorded due to equipment failure and two others because the participants withheld consent.

Consent to record was sought and obtained verbally at the start of each interview, though respondents were informed that I would be seeking this consent when the interview was

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[15] Specifically, it was one of the moments that encouraged me to question the more harmonious stories I had been told in the North West region and it enabled me to understand better the frustration felt by many as the alternative stories were unearthed.

arranged. At this stage, interviewees were also informed about the subject of the questioning, though to only quite a general extent – i.e. that I was seeking their knowledge and perspective of how the regional assembly had developed – so as not to structure their thinking too much in advance nor restrict myself from pursuing issues that may have been raised by interviews conducted in the interim. And they were advised that their responses would be anonymized so that any quotations taken from their transcript would not be attributable to them. Verification or at least a chance to look over the transcript was not offered and was not once sought. Indeed, there was a generally permissive attitude and my predetermined introduction concerning data issues were general waived through, perhaps because the subject of the questioning was generally seen, by all parties involved, to not pose any real threat to anyone concerned. At the moment where concerns were raised, the interviewees invariably flagged the issues and gave the more sensitive information 'off the record.'

Upon reflection, though, I probably took too informal an approach to ethical considerations in this project, attending less to risk assessment for the interviewee and focussing more on aspects relating to data protection, which I seek to rectify in future research. However, in this project, the data were anonymized by simply categorising the audio files according to regional assembly and membership section (with the membership sections themselves constructed according to the particulars of the case), then assigning the interviewee a number based on the chronological order of interviews, so the first public sector member (i.e. either councillor or officer) interviewed in the West Midlands was referred to as *WMRA_PS01* and the second stakeholder interviewed in the North West was referred to as *NWRA_SEEP02*, for example. All the interviews were transcribed and given a reference accordingly.

Throughout the following chapters, any data from the transcripts are only referred to by this code so as to respect the agreements made with the interviewees. Through this, only their assembly section can be known as this was the only information that was deemed relevant, as against the specific organisation from which they were from or any biographical information as this would have rendered the interviewee identifiable given the small numbers and low turnover of the individuals involved in the assembly. For example, if I had stated that *WMRA_OSG10* was an Asian male, he would have been identifiable as there was only one person of that profile and, more importantly, it simply would not have been relevant. Equally, if I had stated that *NWRA_SEEP13* represented the Trades Union Congress, they would have been identifiable as their name against their organisation was publicly available information and this specific representational link was less relevant than the given link to the SEEP group[16]. Extending this to the local government section makes the point even clearer: 'white male' would have added little and specifying the council would have been as good as naming them. A coded list of the interviews, detailing the interview dates and lengths as well as notes on whether they were conducted over the telephone and/or recorded, can be found in the appendix (c).

Of data analysis

I inevitably began reviewing the data as I was transcribing and, as soon as the transcriptions were ready, I attempted some early analysis using the qualitative data analysis computer software programme, NVivo. This was my first post-training use of the computerised tool, which has clearly become the standard means of analysis for qualitative researchers. However, I soon felt that I was breaking up the data too much and learning little from the

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[16] These two examples can be given because interviews *WMRA_OSG10* and *NWRA_SEEP13* do not exist.

nodes that I generated or even the collections of them that developed. I, therefore, returned to a more manual approach, physically cutting up larger sections of data and piling them together where there were affinities in opinions and form, rather than the specific detail of the content, which began to appear as anecdotal evidence to support the opinion proffered. Thus, whilst Nvivo was helpful for data storage and management, I needed a way to analyse whole chunks of the data before drawing conclusions that related directly to the analytical framework set out above.

This reaffirmed the position stated above, that qualitative research and interpretive research are not the same thing; Nvivo may well be the key analytical tool for more straightforward qualitative researcher, but an interpretive analysis requires more meaning to be drawn from the data. I, therefore, explored a number of concepts to serve as an analytical toolkit, returning first to the theorist whose conceptual work led to the problematisation of the assemblies as site of 'institutional ambiguity' in the first instance. Maarten Hajer's work (1993, 2003, 2006) can be pieced together and have its implications drawn out to project a scene in which there opens a fissure in a battle for hegemony between discourses – that is the institutional void or site of institutional ambiguity – where actors produce and reproduce discourses, with their corresponding institutions, through or with some reference to pre-existing institutions (whilst, given the ambiguity, allowing for a degree of creativity or space for the ideational).

In developing this framework, Hajer introduces a number of other concepts: 'discourse coalitions' to delineate groups of people; and 'story lines' to specify the discursive construction being generated. This is quite a collection of terms. And there is a degree of

confusion that arises from Hajer's seemingly frequent conflation of terms. In his key piece on discourse coalitions, which uses the conceptualization of and response to acid rain in Britain as a case study, Hajer appears to refer to ecomodernism as both a discourse and a story line interchangeably (1993, in particular pg. 61). Perhaps ecomodernism is intentionally both a discourse and a story line, but earlier Hajer states that the story line is an entity 'in which elements of the various *discourses* are combined into a more or less coherent whole' (1993: 47, emphasis added). Thus it is difficult to comprehend how the two terms relate, and so their analytic value is lost.

In a similar way, the terms 'discourse' and 'discourse coalition' are also used interchangeably. This is more readily understandable than the synonymy above, given that they closely correspond. Hajer defines a discourse coalition quite simply as 'a group of actors who share a social construct' (1993: 45). This 'social construct' that the actors share is effectively the discourse that they are collected around (1993: 47), so the association is such that the terms could be used interchangeable. Hajer details very little else about the coalition group, such as how actors might act within and between groups or even how they come into being. Hence the reference to the discourse coalitions adds little more than discourse but, despite this lack of analytical precision, the concept of a group and group positions is important. Unfortunately, however, further confusion arises with the introduction of the term 'frame' which is effectively another label for the social construct that actors in any one group share, and so this, too, appears to be used synonymously with discourse and discourse coalition.

The concept of the 'frame' is arguably superfluous to need within Hajer's framework. The idea of *framing* may be useful, since this is what different discourse coalitions *do* to situations

and/or problems, which effectively separates them into their different groups. But this refers to a process, one that can be relatively neutrally depicted, rather than to the concept of the 'frame' *per se*, which is generally accompanied by an amount of theoretical baggage. Frame analysis deals most explicitly with the notion of subject positions – that different sets of people might have different worldviews and from their perspectives (or frames) they engage in a process of sense-making (or framing) of situations. Furthermore, the key advocates of frame analysis in the discipline of public policy, Martin Rein and Donald Schön, highlight the idea that there are 'multiple social realities created by conflicting frames' and so 'the participants disagree both with one another and also about the nature of their disagreements' (1993: 145). Rein and Schön state that they use frame analysis to 'deal with policy controversies in the absence of an agreed-upon basis for resolving them' (1993: 145), which echoes Hajer's institutional void or site of ambiguity. And examples of frame research have explored epistemological shifts in the academy as consequences of framing processes (e.g. Brandwein, 2006; Rein and Schön, 1993: 148), thus revealing ambitious levels or scale of inference and abstraction, beyond the scope of this thesis.

However, the aim here is not to adopt wholesale a package of analysis, not only because the analytical framework for this project has already been drawn from the theory of constructivist institutionalism, but also because those packages of analysis are developed out of and bring with them their own theoretical backgrounds. The aim here is to adopt and employ a set of concepts that help navigate the data and speak to the theoretical framework, just as Blyth (2002) does with 'crisis' and Bevir and Rhodes do with 'tradition' (2002). Recognising and acknowledging the previous use of terms, as well as some of the previous haziness or overlap between them, is the first step in attempting to co-ordinate the meanings and potential

application or these terms to this research. Indeed, this is an opportunity to alleviate some of the restrictiveness that can be felt through wholesale adoption of theory and method packages as well as the restriction in theoretical and/or methodological progress that is born of simply adding yet another case study example to an established block of work. Clarifying relationships between terms and mapping out that understanding allows a degree of creativity in the process of building a conceptual machinery and research design.

To this aim, then, the notion of frames can be quite useful to this research because frames delineate groups partly by the *nature* of their disagreements, as mentioned above. Thus, there is something of an epistemic quality about frames, as they have been used by Brandwein (2006) and Rein and Schön (1993). The frames represent the bounded worldviews of actors and mark out what can be known about issues. Actors may be able to sympathise with others beyond their frames, but this would still be through their own lenses, so they would be interpretations of interpretations. In this sense, the actors under analysis are no different from the researcher, aside from scale, subject or situation. In effect, the frames represent the ontology of the actors involved in this rule-making process; they represent how the world is for the actors, which simultaneously involves the positioning of the self, which also simultaneously involves positioning others. Relating specifically to this project, then, this concept enables an exploration of the different groups of actors – the councillors and the stakeholders – and their meanings relating to their situations, their understandings of each other and thus any reasoning behind any attempts at institutional design or change.

The concept of frames locates something more fixed *from which* institutional design and/or change is fashioned and, thus, the idea of frames better captures this fixity of position, from

which the negotiation in the processes of institutional design/change is framed, but I also require a concept that involves or represents movement to reflect any institutional development. Bevir and Rhodes suggest 'we account for actions, practices and institutions by telling a story' (2002: 134). Maynard-Moody and Musheno would agree, having argued that '[S]tories are told deliberately to communicate meaning and points of view' and that stories 'describe events and exist within a historical moment' (2006: 320). Indeed, even Hajer points to the concepts of stories, as mentioned above. Taking frames and stories could usefully enable an exploration into, first, the separate group positions in the assemblies and then the perspectives on institutional development from those viewpoints.

The frames, to a large extent, are a given in the case of the regional assemblies, but the identification of a story requires an appreciation of the elements it contains to make it quite a specific format. Essentially, a story needs a plot – there has to be a story to tell. This is its distinctive feature. But there are two points to further elaborate from this. Firstly, a good plot has a drama at the heart of it. This is not necessarily true, in that a story can be fairly straightforward and simply describe a process or event, but a good story, one that is worthy of repetition and becomes something that is shared, contains a dramatic hook. This hook may usually be at the start of the story to capture the audience but it may also be in the middle as a hook from which to hang, connect or make sense of the other parts of the story, and equally the element of drama could be in the finale, perhaps more normally in the form of a punch-line or a moral lesson.

Secondly, and as already hinted at above as well as already implicit in the meaning of 'plot', stories are distinguished by their specific format composed of beginning, middle and end.

There is a sequential pattern to a story, or a standard and familiar rhythm. A story may not be told in that order, but it does contain those parts. A story could, for example, be told 'backwards' (if beginning to middle to end is taken as the normal, forward direction) but it would still eventually cover the initial contextualisation probably given in a beginning and it would certainly reach what is effectively the 'main event' that is typically given in the middle of a story. It is bringing these elements together that makes a cohesive whole, that gives a narrative a structure and a point, and that therefore gives a story a persuasive quality. This persuasive quality is of central significance. Although discreet, the story is an argumentative form. Stories bring together information and (opinioned) explanations into a cohesive, and thus logical and convincing, package so as to be understandable and digestible for others.

In relating these points back to a constructivist institutionalist analysis of institutional design/change, an amount of academic literature can be drawn upon. Firstly, recall Mark Blyth's work (section 3.2) which highlights the element of drama in, specifically, the process of institutional design/change. Whilst the wider concept of story is not employed, Blyth argues that crises are constructed effectively as a first stage to institutional change. The crisis is the dramatic impetus that lays the foundation for institutional change. Thus it is persuasive and, even more discreetly but perceptibly, it is a beginning of a process, for which there will be a middle and an end. Thomas Kaplan makes a case for the persuasive quality of the beginning-middle-end sequencing, arguing that stories in this way 'make sense of complex situations occurring within an environment of conflicting values' (1993: 775).

In, for example, an institutional design/change process (and, in particular, in an ambiguous environment with multiple actors), then, stories are the (mutually constitutive) process and

product of actors' sense-making; stories help actors navigate the process and render it meaningful, whilst also justifying and thus enabling institutional change along the trajectory portrayed in the story. To relate this much more specifically to the process of institutional design/change, a set of notions can be employed to mirror beginning-middle-end: complaint, justification and aspiration. This set of terms provide a heuristic device that corresponds to change, effectively hypothesising that in an effort to instigate and implement institutional design/change, an actor or a group of actors would complain about an element of their current situation, aspire to another and justify a movement from the former to the latter in the process of arguing for and pushing through that institutional change. Of course, these would still represent parts of a story, and so there would be drama and contextual detailing, as well as a degree of floridity. Indeed, this is what would make it a story that was persuasive in a discreet, subconscious way, rather than simply being an analytical case put forward for institutional design/change.

4.3 Limitations, complexity and ongoing debates

The previous section has set out the methods used in this research within a critical appraisal of why and how their employment makes sense to this interpretivist project. As well as discussing the advantages of these methods in justifying their selection, their limitations have also been raised with reference to the underlying ontological and epistemological position to bring out the methodological concerns. This is now discussed further, in order to be transparent about the difficulties and limitations of the position adopted and the project as a whole. The central issue here is the uneasiness experienced in the balancing of the

philosophical work that is critical to a doctorate against the 'real time,' policy-relevant work required by the collaborative component of the studentship. The introductory chapter gives a flavour of the complexity that stemmed from the empirical setting of this particular CASE partnership. This complexity, though, was not a limitation; there were advantages gained, such as of privileged access (even if my link to the ERN inferred a position that could potentially be misconstrued), and there were lessons learned, such as of experiencing an alternative policy research career route. Overall, any obstacles were not insurmountable, but the CASE work added a dimension to the methodological considerations in that it induced what felt like a constant conflict, with the research pulling in two different directions.

The (very sparse) literature available on the CASE projects notes the dilemmas experienced by students simultaneously managing academic and non-academic aims (Bell and Read 1998, Macmillan and Scott 2003). This is not, or not only, about the pressure of additional workload, but of agendas that are not necessarily harmonious. The non-academic work may have a commercial or a political interest, some element that may compromise the neutrality of the academic work. As an interpretivist, certainly this latter point does not present particular difficulties, since interpretivism brings to the fore the impossibility of being entirely neutral due to a researcher's own 'positionality' (returned to below). But the difficulty lies in the external party's invariable desire for solid, objective knowledge. Here, I could bemoan the marketisation of higher education and mourn some 'golden age' of academic freedom and artistry where 'impact' was not a concern, as well as quietly grumble about a positivist researcher's ability to, in their minds at least, meet that standard of objective knowledge, but actually this defensiveness reveals a deeper anxiety about the purpose of academic, especially interpretivist and especially public policy, research. How can my understanding of the

understandings of those actors engaged in the West Midlands and North West RAs impact upon policy and practice relating to the regional assemblies and their stakeholders in general?

This line of questioning stems from the issues raised above concerning generalisability and the case study method. As I attempt an interpretivist analysis, generating context-specific understandings from case studies, how can I use my findings to contribute towards the CASE work of this project? In future research more generally, how can interpretivist work deliver the aim of 'impact' that is seemingly now a priority in British higher education? This is a discernible concern in shades of interpretivists, though rarely addressed in those terms – it refers back to an age-old epistemological battle, perhaps *the* central dividing point, of understanding 'versus' explanation. Yanow summarises that

> '[E]xplanation (*erklaren* in German) was posited to be the method of the natural and physical sciences, understood to entail a description of concepts or objects or processes in terms of their antecedent causes, thereby leading to the discovery of universal, predictive laws....By contrast, understanding (*verstehen*), posited as the method of the human sciences, was seen as entailing making clear people's interpretations of their own and others' experiences, leading to the discovery of context-specific meaning'
>
> (2006: 10).

Whilst this appears as a neat division, Yanow adds that '[*V*]*erstehen*, then, concerns human subjectivity and intersubjectivity as both subjects of *and explanations for* human action' (2006: 10), making the point that explanations are not absent in interpretivism but are held

within the understandings of meaning generated from the research, thus need not (indeed, should not be as they cannot be) be abstracted out and away from the findings to speak of phenomena more generally.

However, Bevir and Rhodes, stimulating debate with their particular brand of interpretivist political analysis go further, stating that 'we can still explain social action: we can do so by pointing to the conditional and volitional links between beliefs, desires, intentions and actions' (2002: 134). They point to stories that account for institutions – 'about how they came to be as they are and [...] and about how they are preserved' – and they steadfastly state that this *is* explanation, that the narratives generated through conducting interpretive research 'are thus to political studies what theories are to the natural sciences' (2002: 134). The crucial but controversial (between interpretivists, at least) point in their perspective is the narrative's link to *objective* knowledge – Bevir and Rhodes, building on Bevir's earlier work (1999), employ what they call 'an anthropological concept of objectivity based on criteria of comparison' (2002: 139). They believe it is possible to 'judge one narrative better than another because it best meets such criteria as: accuracy, comprehensiveness, consistency and opening new avenues of enquiry. Objectivity arises from criticising and comparing rival webs of interpretation about agreed facts' (2002: 142). They employ the concept of 'tradition' to collect narratives that provide a perspective on a phenomenon. But they then add that

> 'the content of any tradition will vary with what we want to explain. We will
> identify traditions according to our purposes, selecting one from the many because
> it best explains the actions and beliefs of the individual we are studying. [...]

> [S]cholars construct traditions to answer the questions that interest them. We judge the usefulness of such a construction by the evidence marshalled to show the links between the ideas over time and the ability to explain how beliefs change'

> (2002: 148).

This grossly summarises Bevir and Rhodes' extensive body of developmental work towards their position, but they offer it within a textbook chapter that aims to set out the diversity within the interpretivist perspective. What it (perhaps inadvertently) demonstrates is the persistent hold of one idea that is inescapable in interpretivism: while Bevir and Rhodes admit the researcher's selection of elements (as above), they return the researcher to the centre of the work. It is the researcher's interpretation that is offered as research findings. Rather than some objective reality, the researcher can only present their interpretation of the interpretation they have generated from the subjects of their research. This is the 'double hermeneutic.' Marsh and Furlong explain this most simply – 'the world is interpreted by the actors (one hermeneutic level) and their interpretation is interpreted by the observer (a second hermeneutic level)' (2002: 19). Jackson spells out what the double hermeneutic means – that the researcher is 'never simply revealing the world "the way that is really is"' (2006: 267) and thus 'a thorny methodological problem remains' (2006: 266).

The consequences of this are that the data are necessarily affected by the researcher, as exemplified by Bevir and Rhodes' construction of traditions as well as by, within this project, my sliding scale of interview questioning from the more general to the more specific over the data collection period and my construction of the story structure in the data analysis. Post-

positivist perspectives (i.e. feminist and critical positions alongside interpretivism, e.g. Grasswick 2011, Sultana 2007) bring attention to the researcher's positionality – their relationship to what is being researched and the conditions of their subjectivity, such as age, ethnicity and gender – in a way that forever scuppers the myth of the objectively derived fact. All researchers bring an angle to their research in the social sciences, whether they recognise it or not. The interpretivist researcher, then, can but be aware, transparent and reflexive about this. My own positionality is brought to the fore from the outset, in my selection of and application to this CASE studentship focussed on stakeholders that previous research had found to be generally of a profile similar to my own (Aulakh *et al*. 2005) and in my constant search for conspiracy born of the critical 'anti-establishment' element of my political leaning.

This issue is presented here because it enables me to be transparent about the difficulties and potential limitations of this project, as this section sets out to do, but it also enables me to fix a position in relation to the interpretive work with case studies as well as with the CASE partnership. The two case studies become a strategy by which to ensure reflexivity. Working with the two cases enables a tracking back and forth (Bevir and Rhodes 2002, Jackson 2006), which in turn enables a critical analysis that attempts to ensure that I am not simply seeing what I want to see from the data. This is set out over the following chapters.

My strategy for the CASE work, however, was to separate it to some extent from the academic research (or certainly the more philosophical considerations) and then to tune in to the purpose of the ERN's agenda, access the local knowledge there available and re-present or rearticulate this alongside previous academic work that functioned as evidence. This was the predetermined approach for my second policy paper produced for the ERN, which is attached

in the appendix (d) to demonstrate my attempt at doing this. It is perhaps the most successful because it came closest to achieving neutrality. The first paper (on 'The Roles and Contribution of Stakeholders') was developed in the thick of the SNR and thus simply advocatory on behalf of the stakeholders for their continued inclusion. And the final piece of research (which did not develop into a paper due to its timing) was undertaken in the SNR aftermath following organisational changes that saw WMRA become the CASE partner or, more precisely, the West Midlands Local Government Association, given the imminent disbandment of the assembly, and thus the intended research aim effectively advocated on behalf of the local government position to streamline and distance the stakeholders. Upon reflection, the attempt to separate the CASE work out proved a hindrance and left the research susceptible to capture by others' objectives, but to have presented even the early findings on institutional development including stakeholders would have been pointless to the policy-world where the agenda had long since moved on in 'real time.'

Conclusion

The methodological considerations presented in this chapter show a journey of striking balances. On the one hand, it is the methodological section of a project that brings to the fore the oft-neglected philosophy of (social) science that is at the core of academic research. And on the other, there is an imperative to move beyond philosophical musings to physically conduct a programme of research. Perhaps some would see the return to philosophical considerations an unnecessary preoccupation, but it is the foundation of research because it addresses what can be known, relating back further to what is (or not). If it is understood, as it is under interpretivist, that the collective meaning-making that enacts an institution cannot

be solidly, fixedly or physically known, then a method used to capture and measure it as such is pointless. To summarise the argument in this chapter, it is not what method is used, but the way that it is used that is important. So, researchers across the spectrum of epistemological positions can employ case studies as a method, but how this method is used – what happens within the case study, what can be drawn away from the study in terms of conclusion – depends on that position. The way a method is used depends on what it is being used for, what the purpose of it is, what it can tell the researcher, which is all determined by the ontological/epistemological position upon which the research is founded.

These questions are perhaps particularly difficult for the interpretivist researcher engaged in outward-facing, purpose-driven research that is typical in applied social sciences. Taking a 'purist' interpretive approach to the project would have entailed a more ethnographic, anthropological study that would not have generated any level of applicability. In this way, the CASE component of this project presented something of a competing agenda, in that it required output that had impact and applicability to the regional assemblies in general. But it also enabled a thorough consideration of these questions that need not have been so problematic for a researcher engaged in a wholly interpretive project and environment. I have, therefore, taken as critical a stance towards the interpretivist position that I have declared myself aligned to from the outset, in order to grapple with some enduring issues for the developing researcher. And so the research programme designed is a transparent settlement that constructs a theoretical framework and admits an increasing degree of control in the data collection process as the analysis takes shape, but employs interpretive conceptual tools relatively loosely to navigate the data and encourage constant critical reflexivity through the case studies that follow.

CHAPTER 5: THE WEST MIDLANDS REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

Introduction

This chapter presents the primary research undertaken with actors engaged in the rule-making processes of the West Midlands Regional Assembly, in the institutional design and development of WMRA. Beginning with a broad understanding of the West Midlands region, the positions of the groups of actors involved in these processes are then specified and understood. In the first section, I give a general background of the region in order not to privilege context as an explanatory factor nor to impart an assumption that actors were not creating new institutions (and were only modifying old ones), but to broadly situate the actors involved. The West Midlands region has a history (as, indeed, the other regions have) that is known to the most of the actors involved, even if not explicitly stated and only implicitly understood. Indeed, this may not be personal knowledge or memory but may be inherent in a collective such as at organisation-, group- or sector-level.

The information given aims to be as neutral as possible – to provide the undeniable 'facts' or the parts of the background story that can broadly be agreed upon by all those involved – and as brief as possible, so as to simply introduce factors that may later be drawn upon by those actors while expressing their frames. It is these frames that are key. As has been explicated and emphasised throughout the thesis thus far, it is specifically the actors' *perceptions* of their contexts as they are used in institutional processes that is of interest. In this chapter I use information gathered from a range of sources, though I concentrate primarily and heavily on

the data generated through semi-structured interviews with the people involved in institutional development in order to construct the group frames. These roughly collect together and delineate the actors into their representative blocs – to local government, business and other stakeholders, in the following two sections. These frames are then further explored in the final section of this chapter to explore attempts at institutional creation and change.

5.1 The West Midlands region

The 'heart of England,'[17] the West Midlands region of the UK, is home and namesake to the first regional assembly under analysis in this thesis. As the regional tourist board's promotional label suggests, the West Midlands is in the centre of the country. Much of the landscape is rural countryside, made up of the counties of Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire, which roughly encircle a central urban area. This, the West Midlands conurbation, was an area famous for its early and heavy industrialisation, the pollution from which gave the 'Black Country' its name and identity. The Black Country lies to the north and west of Birmingham, England's second city and the region's first. These two together with a number of smaller urban areas (Coventry, Solihull, Stoke-on-Trent) make up the West Midlands conurbation, which has historically been the 'heartland of British manufacturing' (Coulson 1999: 82) facilitated by a network of national transport links (canal, rail and road). The following figure presents a map of the region, with information about population density (of the region's approximately 5.3 million people [Ayres *et al.* 2002: 63]) that serves to demonstrate the urban pattern here described.

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[17] Commonly cited, but taken from the tourist board: http://www.visitheartofengland.com/Default.aspx

West Midlands population density: by local or unitary authority, 2009
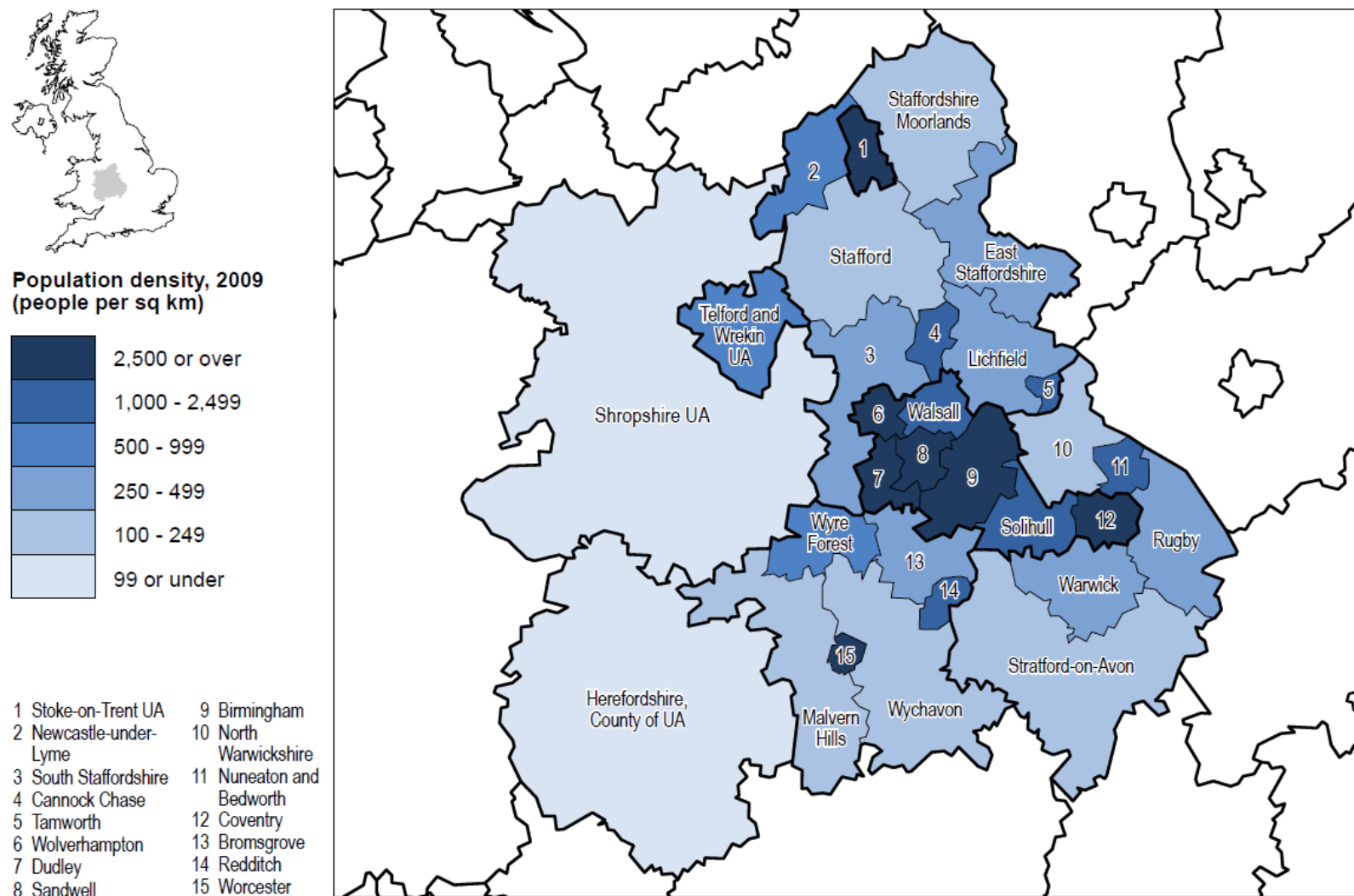
Population density, 2009 (people per sq km)

- 2,500 or over
- 1,000 - 2,499
- 500 - 999
- 250 - 499
- 100 - 249
- 99 or under

1 Stoke-on-Trent UA
2 Newcastle-under-Lyme
3 South Staffordshire
4 Cannock Chase
5 Tamworth
6 Wolverhampton
7 Dudley
8 Sandwell
9 Birmingham
10 North Warwickshire
11 Nuneaton and Bedworth
12 Coventry
13 Bromsgrove
14 Redditch
15 Worcester

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Figure 5.1 The West Midlands region, showing urban settlement (Source: ONS 2011b)

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The relatively simple and undisputed geography of the region is often recognised as a key explanatory factor in what is described as a long-standing tradition of collaborative working here (e.g. Ayres *et al.* 2002; Coulson 1999). The region's principal city, Birmingham, has no competitor to its status and the region's administrative boundaries are equally obvious and entrenched. Any tension tends to be focused on the rural-urban rivalry in the region, or rather on the greater attention the WM conurbation appears to receive over the rural hinterland in region-wide matters (a point revealed in interview data, below), though the careful management of its surroundings is arguably as strong an impetus for collaborative working as the region's driving economic hub. For example, inter-authority relationships began to develop in the immediate post-war period to channel population overspill into towns rather than the 'green belt' surrounding the WM conurbation (Mawson and Skelcher 1980) and, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a renewed need to mediate the growing urban-rural disparities caused by a shift from secondary to tertiary industry and its subsequent effect on employment (and hence general population) patterns (Ayres *et al.* 2002).

This gives some insight into the changing economic circumstances of the West Midlands region in relatively recent history. As described earlier in this thesis, this story is typical of the national picture in that such changes raised enough concern over the increasingly noticeable disparities between and within regions so as to elicit a reaction from central Government in the form of Regional Economic Planning Boards (REPBs) and corresponding REP Councils. In the West Midlands, there was an analogous local response, arguably in part to counter any excessive centralism in regional planning work, which thus saw the establishment of the West Midlands Planning Authorities Conference (WMPAC) in 1968 (Painter 1972; Mawson and Skelcher 1980). By 1981, WMPAC had met its demise and was

replaced by the West Midlands Forum of County Councils, which included the recently established West Midlands Metropolitan County Council following the local government reorganisation of 1974, and later included the region's district councils, becoming the WM Forum of Local Authorities (both versions referred to as WMRF) (Ayres *et al*. 2002).

Other initiatives were then developed, namely the West Midlands Regional Economic Consortium (WMREC) and the West Midlands Industrial Development Association (WMIDA). This brings a number of points to light. Firstly, that regional economic stakeholders were part of and encouraged to participate in these organisations: representatives from the regional Confederation of British Industry (CBI), Trade Union Congress (TUC) and Chambers of Commerce were part of WMREC. Individuals from such organisations had been members of the WM Economic Planning Council before WMREC, though these were appointed by central Government, rather than having been called to action locally (Lindley 1982). For WMREC, it was the Forum that took the lead on stakeholder engagement, and this was reflected in the organisational set-up with WMRF's Director becoming Executive Director of WMREC, too (BERR 2009). Also, these WM initiatives, from WMPAC through to WMREC, were supported by a locally-resourced team of officers. This core, the West Midlands Regional Study (WMRS), provided a foundation to regional work through reporting research and developing strategy (Ayers *et al*. 2002).

Clearly, the local authorities in this region had developed a practice of collaborating with each other as well as with stakeholders. And these moves were locally led, since the Conservative Government in control during the 1980s was particularly and openly negative about regional strategic planning (Hall 2007: 22; Wannop 1995: 19). As such, the metropolitan county

councils that had been introduced by the previous Labour Government were abolished in 1986, and the regionalist agenda had followed Labour into opposition, where it was developed and resurfaced in the late 1990s. In the West Midlands, though the conurbation's county council was one of those dismantled, the nascent regional structures that had become established organically continued to develop (WMRF and WMREC) and regional work here persevered to a considerable extent.

It is from this point that the primary research of this thesis becomes significant. It is the period of, or second wave of, regionalism in the late 1990s with its establishment of the regional development agencies and assemblies that is of concern here, indeed even more specifically the latter bodies. There is, of course, a significant amount of literature on this period, on the assemblies in general and on the prospect of them being a route or step towards directly elected regional government but there is, it must be acknowledged, an amount of research on specifically the West Midlands region in this period. The work here tends to be region-wide, exploring the legacy of metropolitan governance or different regional organisations[18] and their relationships (e.g. Norris 2001; Whitehead 2003), or policy-focused (e.g. Ayres and Pearce 2004 on transport). This thesis, however, requires research focused not on the region as a whole but closer to one component part and further inside that part, so not on the regional organisations nor the regional assembly but on the rule-making inside the assembly. This thesis takes advantage of this formative period of RA-building as an opportunity to explore how rules are made between partners. Setting the scene with an organisational chart (in the following figure), the primary data provide the detail of the set-up.

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[18] I.e. mainly the West Midlands Regional Development Agency (WMRDA, called Advantage West Midlands (AWM)), the Government Office West Midlands (GOWM, part of the network of offices set up for the government departments' presence in the region) and the West Midlands Regional Assembly (WMRA).

West Midlands Business Council *(secretariat for business group members)*

West Midlands Local Government Association *(secretariat for local government members)*

Regional Action West Midlands *(secretariat for other stakeholder group members)*

West Midlands Regional Assembly

Scrutiny Group

Regional Planning Executive

Regional Housing Executive

Transport Partnership

Environment Partnership

Health Partnership

European and International Partnership

Equality and Diversity Partnership

Figure 5.2 WMRA organisational chart (Source: author's primary research)

5.2 Local government's association: natural home and host

The local government section or 'house' (as the groupings are commonly referred to in the West Midlands) of the regional assembly, perhaps more than any other, has to be understood with direct and frequent reference to its temporal and geographical context. As the inclusion of the preceding section of this chapter serves to indicate, the development of the regional assembly is inextricably linked to the (ongoing changes) in local government in the decades before. To a large extent this connection is obvious, however it need not have been. Looking at the regionalist project in isolation, there is nothing necessarily to link regional assembly members to local government councillors; if the projected end goal of directly elected regional assemblies were to have materialised, it was merely supposed that some (perhaps the younger, more careerist) local councillors would have put themselves up for election to assembly seats. The detail of this was never finalised because the aim was always not to prescribe the assemblies, but to allow for them as each region wished.

Specifically in the West Midlands, the desire for directly elected status was never advocated by more than a handful of devotees , thus the West Midlands was on 'track 1' of the regionalism project, i.e. with no plans for neither directly elected status nor even a referendum on the issue (Ayres and Pearce 2004: 232). It is in these circumstances that the construction of the regional assembly was quickly taken on board by local government in the very early stages of development. It was widely accepted (within this section) that '...as there was no other particularly strong regional organisation at the time in the West Midlands, it really did fall to the LGA to get things going' (WMRA_PS02) and that

'the LGA was probably the only organisation that could have done this, other than the Government Office, but I don't think they were keen to do it, although they were involved obviously in the process on behalf of government, so the LGA, I think, was a natural body to do the consultations and to actually provide the home for the Assembly'

(WMRA_PS03).

As the latter quotation makes clear, local government was seen as the only and obvious choice from which to conduct the business of recruiting other participants to the newly capacitated regional policy-making process. It was perceived and described as an established unit, both by itself and others, and perpetuated that view. The term 'natural' was a repeated descriptor in these interviews, clearly as an attempt to justify the local government's prominent position, for example 'local government was acknowledged as the key area of interest; it was considered natural that local government would be the primary interest group in the new arrangement' (WMRA_PS03). As one respondent explained,

'it was the natural home, because we had very quickly established a coherent voice into central government, but I have to say that central government itself chose to liaise with local authorities in the main, as there was a very obvious democratic link back to the population'

(WMRA_PS06),

and as another justified,

'the LGA was the host, I think is the right way of describing it, the host organisation for the regional assembly, which obviously didn't have any

government funding in the first instance, so obviously any support that was

provided in terms of secretariat and costs had to be through the LGA'

<div align="right">(WMRA_PS03).</div>

From this series of extracts a number of things are of note. Firstly, the local government section's link to democracy became an obvious theme and a repeated justification in these interviews, and something that was also brought up by other (stakeholder) interviewees, although frequently with critical reflection that pointed out the tenuity of the link (which will be further detailed in the sections below). Secondly, it is by now clear that participants used interchangeably references to local government with the LGA – the local government association. The LGA was a relatively young body, having been set up over the two years preceding the set up of the regional assembly, but its establishment symbolically formalised years of collaboration that had already been taking place between the individual councils. And, arguably, it was an evolutionary product of wider-scale local government working that had occurred in the region under the remit of the West Midlands County Council before its abolition as well as in the guise of the West Midlands Regional Economic Consortium.

Local government, therefore, positioned itself as the lead in constructing the regional assembly, with a kind of parental authority: '...it was the LGA that actually bank rolled the Assembly, because there was no government funding at all, so it was very much seen as almost a sub set of the regional LGA' (WMRA_PS03). Indeed, funding aside, it was simply understood as a duty: recounting it as general history, a respondent said that 'one of the first major jobs of the regional LGA was to steer the process of creating the assembly' (WMRA_PS03); and another described how 'the LGA constructed this thing...because it was

our role – this government gave us the job. It didn't dictate how we should do it. They said come together in your own way' (WMRA_PS04). This latter quotation clearly demonstrates the lack of time spent questioning who would undertake the role of constructing the assembly, which was considered obvious in relation to the question of how this would be done.

The 'how' question was less straightforward. And this directs us back to the third point of note revealed in the early set of quotations given above: an interviewee attributed the almost automatic or unconscious acceptability of the local government lead to the fact that it had '*quickly established* a *coherent* voice' (WMRA_PS06, emphasis here added), thereby indicating that this position not only had to be forged but also that it was not naturally coherent at the outset. As the LGA established itself as an umbrella body for the local councils in the regional area, the diversity of local government came to the fore. It had to manage this diversity in constructing workable governance structures, and this process was reflected in and transferred across to deliberation over the nascent regional assembly. Thus, local government had to be reconceptualized as the constituency from which representatives had to be drawn, which brought up issues of representative*ness*, parity and weighted voting.

One interviewee prompted a reminder of the party political dimension of the project:

> 'You've also got to remember, we brought into that process, as local government,
> our own stresses and strains, because you had a direct political position on some
> of these things: Labour, for instance, incredibly enthusiastic; the Conservatives,
> initially quite hostile; and the Lib Dems critical but supportive'

> (WMRA_PS06).

This is perhaps an obvious potential point of contention, bearing in mind the lack of direct vote to the assembly, and highlights the settlements that had to be arranged:

'We said that they should send delegates based upon or representatives based upon the political strengths, so you know, Labour might have 8 and Conservative 6 and the Liberal Democrats 2, so you didn't take... – there was a tradition in the past of the governing party taking everything, but we said, no, this is, what we want is consensus all the way through and that's the way it operated'

(WMRA_PS04).

There were yet more balances to be achieved, relating to population size as well as council type given the existence of two tiers of local government in parts of the region, as the following interview extract explains:

'There is a perception of the West Midlands from those outside that the West Midlands is Birmingham-plus and, obviously, the region is much more diverse than that both in terms of rural and urban mix, but its context was to create a coherent voice representing, in a sense, the diversity of, say, Birmingham city with over a million population and right at the other end of the scale, Bridgnorth District Council, with a population of around 34,000, which again, put in context, is less people than Birmingham employs and obviously is a much more rural based agenda'

(WMRA_PS06).

Bringing all these dimensions together with the physical, numerical considerations of the regional assembly, the difficulties rising from this key issue of balance that local government faced can be appreciated:

'Okay, if we're setting the assembly up and 70% of the members are going to be local government – well, what does that mean? We have, had 38 local authorities at the time, some of them are tiny, and then we've got the largest local authority in Europe in Birmingham. So, when the LGA was set up, it had to find some sort of voting structure that accommodated big Birmingham and tiny Bridgnorth, which it did through proportional voting-, weighted voting, as they call it and that work that was done then, to set up the voting and the governance for the LGA just, sort of, transferred into the assembly, if you like. Through a bit of, sort of, jiggery pokery, we got the 38 local authorities to become, what was it, I think it was something like-, I don't think they actually got 100 on the assembly, I think we were round about 70 odd with 70% of those numbers made up of local government. There was some clever template established for how local government was able to be represented in the assembly'

(WMRA_PS02).

However despite constructing a fairly sophisticated voting system, the local government section was keen to stress that it rarely had need of it, that issues came to a vote as a last resort and that it is actually 'not necessary, but the politicians want the comfort of having a system in place...interestingly enough, the politics of the region – I've seen it swing from absolutely Labour dominated to now Conservative dominated – and there's never really been political fall-outs at all' (WMRA_PS02). It was a common observation of councillors that 'when they

work on regional levels, they manage to put their politics aside' (WMRA_PS02). Instead, 'it's us against the world or London or the South East, or whatever, you know – there's a unity around the West Midlands issues that brings them together and party politics just don't seem to count' (WMRA_PS02). And this sentiment was repeated: that 'the idea was to give a coherent voice, both towards London...and also into Europe' (WMRA_PS06); and that 'your first and foremost priority is the good of your region, and that's what it's about' (WMRA_PS04).

Following this, the next major issue or task the local government section faced was to separate as much as possible the identities of the LGA and the regional assembly. The fact that the LGA financed the regional assembly in the early stages is a point that is regularly mentioned, as some of the data already presented above serve to demonstrate, but it is important to note that these bodies also shared accommodation and staff, therefore making the two virtually indistinguishable. Thus, there ensued what was described as a 'philosophical discussion' (WMRA_PS03) about whether and to what extent to separate the assembly from the LGA, which related back to and, for some, revived considerations about the purpose and the end-point of the regionalism project. Given that in the West Midlands there were but a few, a 'core group' (WMRA_PS03), of councillors that advocated a separate, formalised governmental body for the region, a 'co-ordinated overlap model' (WMRA_PS03) won out.

What is of greater import here, however, is not the end-point but rather the observation that the WM *secretariat* acted as the 'engine room' (WMRA_PS06) for this and the above consultative processes. Interview data highlight the significant role of staff alongside the 'core group' councillors in the deciphering the detail of what transpired from discussions, which

effectively contributed towards institutional design. Particularly in relation to the allocation of numbers of seats, the relative haziness of recollections from most peoples' perspectives (for example, the 'jiggery pokery' referred to above that led to 'some clever template' [WMRA_PS02]) indicates that this was seen as something of a technocratic issue, which was largely left to certain, albeit the more senior, professionals to realise. Specific individuals were regularly named and credited for recruiting representatives and arranging their seating allocations, for example one was described as having 'a very friendly, open, Cockney barrow boy style about him' (WMRA_PS02), and was

> 'able to have all sorts of conversations in corridors to get people on board and help them to get over any difficulties they might have in terms of being part of the assembly, bringing them on and making them see the real importance of the assembly. He was a real charmer, which was very useful for the LGA at that point in time...very, very useful'
>
> (WMRA_PS02).

The engineering theme stretched into the organisation of stakeholders which were to sit alongside local government. Or, as one interviewee corrected, they 'had to earn that kind of trust that we were the brokers of something, rather than the engineers' (WMRA_PS06). Whether they were engineers or brokers adds little to the main point here, that the local government respondents inadvertently reported playing a significant role in the construction of the other sections of the regional assembly's composition when asked to describe those other sections from their perspective. There is a notable repetition of the phrase 'the right kind of people' when describing the consultation process, or what was effectively a recruitment drive. For example, one interviewee brought up governmental agencies:

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'the Highways Agency was miffed it was never involved or never invited to be involved, but it just couldn't be, and the Environmental Agency as well. They saw themselves as being experts on environmental issues and were very peeved really that the NGO environmental groups were involved'

(WMRA_PS02).

Explaining the choice, the same interviewee said 'they weren't the right organisation, they were already connected,' and such organisations were channelled into the thematic partnerships that later developed.

In a similar vein, as part of that consultation process, the LGA helped to position the social and environmental partners, broadly the 'third sector,' or the other stakeholder group (OSG) as it was known in the West Midlands. Summarising the situation, one interviewee described how

'getting the third sector to come together was, in itself, quite a task, because again, they were a very disparate group, but again, I think one of the strengths of the Assembly was that it actually was one of the drivers that actually brought them together and helped to create that concept of the third sector, whereas prior to that, there'd been lots of little organisations that were, sort of, competing with one another'

(WMRA_PS04).

Those key 'engineers' 'asked local government to provide us with all the organisations they do business with' and generated 'a list of usual suspects,' then they 'sat down as local government' to undertake the 'massive project' involving 'many hours of painstaking

analysis' (WMRA_PS06). The local government house (or, rather, those specific individuals) 'had to ask some difficult questions about who was marginalised in terms of a voice in regional activity' because 'what we didn't want to do was to set right into a process of backsides on...or of seats of boards' (WMRA_PS06).

One interviewee's reflection on the sector and the process of organising it provides an insight into the difficulties faced:

> 'My analysis is it's not a sector, it's a whole disparate group of people, some involved in single issue matters and some covering a much broader range. Then you have areas like the police services, because they're not part of the local government function; you have some obvious candidates like public health, which does have a connectivity in some areas with local government; you have a very strange range of education...so there are a whole series of groups, but people like parish councils – do they belong in the local government strategy? They certainly didn't belong to the West Mids LGA, because ours was based on local authority boundaries, but they are part of a community interest...and so there are a whole group of organisations going back to this great big organisation known as the voluntary sector...'
>
> (WMRA_PS06).

Thus, local government seemed to play the role of a (sometimes exasperated) parent to the OSG. It perceived itself as nurturing the sector, coaxing it into being, and in charge by default rather than purposefully exerting its dominance. Indeed, it was keen to assert that 'the key, for us, was to emphasise that we were trying to build an organisation not from the top

down, but from the bottom up' (WMRA_PS06). Indeed, they 'wanted to challenge some old concepts and so it was a painstaking process of finding how...who were the players' (WMRA_PS06). But within these statements there is a degree of irony, particularly given that local government also asserted, with increasing regularity throughout the life (and the death) of the regional assembly, that the sector 'requires structural change...[and] also requires a mindset change' (WMRA_PS06), thereby reaffirming its authority.

In comparison, local government saw the business stakeholder group as more established, better organised and, implicitly, more effective. One interviewee attributed this, in part, to the relatively long-standing relationship between local government and business in the region:

'I think it's always been, there was a history in this region, I'm just trying to think...When [there was] a Regional Forum of Local Authorities, which was one of the bodies that was in existence before the LGA and Assemblies were created, they used to have a body called the Regional Economic Consortium, which I think, you know, if you look at it, was a very, although much more limited, it was a very early version of the Regional Chamber, because it was obviously to do with the Forum of Local Authorities, it met with the Director of Government Office, the TUC regional body and business interest, so there was a, kind of, history of business being involved in some regional policy discussions. There were very concerned with, mainly concerned with obviously transport and economic planning and so forth, so I think business has always had in the West Midlands, well not always, but for quite a long time, business has had a, kind of, regional role, involvement, which in the Assembly, if you transfer that into the Assembly,

business interests wouldn't see themselves as part of a wider other stakeholder group'

Other interviewees' accounts from the local government frame concurred with this, although the infrequency of this story, particularly given the industrial dominance in the history of the region, is of note. As is the perceptible hesitancy with which this extract is delivered. The final clause of the quotation provides a clue to the reticence: the involvement of business is being positioned against the other stakeholder group, revealing the relative strength of the business group, drawn from a longer history of collaborative working (which perhaps became a source of embarrassment during an interview that asked about both sets of stakeholder groups and their involvement).

A point of evidence the local government section appeared to give more eagerly concerned the business section's relatively recent history, surrounding the development of the Regional Development Agency and its business engagement (or lack thereof). As explained:

'...whilst the RDAs have always been presented as the business organisations in the region, to get onto them you had to be appointed. You couldn't just nominate yourself or [have] somebody nominate you. So, in actual fact, the business organisations didn't feel properly part of AWM but they felt that they could get into the assembly and yield some influence there'

(WMRA_PS02).

This highlights local government's perception of the business group's attitude – that business organised itself to become a significant player in the regional policy-making process, regrouped and strengthened after an initial snub by the RDA. And, in making such points, comparisons with the OSG continued:

> 'The business community were always reasonably well co-ordinated in arguing for their seats on the assembly. They were, you know, almost pitching in at the very early stages to make sure they got a voice, whereas the other stakeholders, we had to round them up a bit and you, know, persuade some of them of the virtues of the assembly and their role in taking part'

> (WMRA_PS02).

The local government section's comparisons of the business group and the OSG positions extended into an appraisal of their resource differential; or rather the relative weakness of the OSG was implicated by an understanding of the business group advantage. It was recognised that the business section was able to raise its own funds through members' subscriptions, in addition to the financial support it received from AWM (whereas, by contrast, whilst the OSG received support from WMRA, it could not supplement this with subscriptions from its sector). The business sector also benefitted from the relative luxury of time, with local government noting that 'the representatives that came through into the [West Midlands Business] Council...tended to be retired businessmen, who did have a bit more time to offer' (WMRA_PS02), again in contrast to the OSG's already stretched members.

<u>5.3 The business stakeholders...and the others</u>

Turning directly to the stakeholders, the business section agreed that it had a relative advantage. Indeed, it was instrumental in promoting this view of its position and concealing, or at least downplaying, its weaknesses. Although only rarely mentioned in passing, the business section recognised (and 'recognised' because initially observed in non-business interviews) that 'actually making sure [we] had enough people to fill our seats was [our] biggest issue' (WMRA_BG05). Quizzed on the matter, respondents pointed out, for example, that 'it's very difficult for businesses to turn up to a monthly meeting that lasts all day during the day and they've got a business to operate, you know, who's going to look after the shop?' (WMRA_BG04). Pressed further, one interviewee revealed the implications of this on the business group composition:

> '...they've always got other things to do...they're only doing it out of a sense of social commitment, no financial benefit, and when they're not here [i.e. their place of work], they're not making money for their business...so you get retired people who would play that role...but active business people, which is what we desperately need, they don't function well in that arena'
>
> (WMRA_BG05).

Probing the matter, it became clearer that there was an underlying, hushed opinion that the RDA board was the more coveted position for the 'cream of the crop' of the business community to be in. As one business interviewee tried to explain, business 'thought the RDA was going to be far more powerful and influential' and a few loaded but evasive sentences later that same interviewee admitted:

'I mean, the mission at one point was to get somebody, one of us from [organisation's name]... onto the first board of the RDA. We got very close, but we came down to 13, and they needed 12, and they had to get the balance, so...it was between me and a politician, and the politician was also a business person, so they appointed him, rather than me'

(WMRA_BG05).

The points in this and the above quotation are rarely made explicit, but they are fundamental in understanding the position of the business group because it is from these early losses that business built its defence.

As the business group developed its position, it emphasised its worth and its democratic credentials initially *against* the RDA, for example:

'Now the Government says, well, you know, AWM is the business led organisation. Well, ummm, yes. Yes, it's true that the board of Advantage West Midlands are people that are business people by and large, but they're always taken on as individuals – they never seem to take on business organisation representatives. I think there's a reason for that and it's probably in the way that their constitution is drafted or whatever...'

(WMRA_BG04).

The frustration is clear from this almost childish argumentation, in which the interviewee seemingly brushes aside the common knowledge that the RDAs were intended to be populated by individual business representatives (rather than business organisation representatives) with 'or whatever.' And the relative hostility continues when the RDA's

funding of the business group's secretariat organisation, the West Midlands Business Council, comes under question:

'...with the fact that [some] saw the Business Council as 80% funded by AWM – it must be AWM's poodle, it's not democratic, it's not this, that and the other. Now, I would say it's actually as democratic as any business organisation can be that brings together any forum for a lot of groups, because every member on the board of the Business Council is elected by their members that are part of it. It is true that 80% of the funding comes from Advantage West Midlands, but if you look back at the consultations and the submission from the Business Council, they pull no punches where AWM is. If they're criticising them, they criticise them'

(WMRA_BG04).

The same respondent reiterates only moments later that '...there is an element of democracy there, in as much as the representatives that are sent are chosen by the organisations that they represent. There's no shoe-ins, there's no automatics' (WMRA_BG04). Here, the focus has shifted from the business group's standing with regards to the development agency to the business group's standing with regards to the regional assembly. Another interviewee, in a similar tone to that above, highlights the opinion that the business group was even more democratic than the local government section due to its stronger link back to its constituency:

'local authority people are only there to govern the people – they're not there to tell us what to think and if business, who are employing all these people, are saying this is our views on this issue and we've taken the trouble to consult, which

is more than they have, they don't consult, they sit there with their prejudices

from their different political streams, whereas we were consultants'

<div align="right">(WMRA_BG05).</div>

The business section developed its position, promoting its strengths and presenting itself as playing an essential part of the regional policy-making structure. Whilst listing organisations involved in the Business Council, one stakeholder used the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors to give a tangible example of the value of such engagement in decision-making processes relating specifically to the planning aspect of the regional assembly's work, describing it as:

> '...really useful when you're responding to things like [...] the Spatial Strategy,
> because so much of what those organisations do are highly connected with
> housing issues, which makes the Business Council very strong because they can
> pull on that expertise. We can draw out things to do with the house building
> figures when we're been lobbying against those and supporting many of our
> Councils in their stance too, because we've got connections to the ceramics
> industry, the aggregates industries and things like that [...] I mean, they know how
> much you can dig out of the ground and where you can get your bricks from...'

<div align="right">(WMRA_BG04).</div>

Further emphasising the value of this engagement by relating it specifically to what became a fairly controversial issue in the West Midlands, the interviewee added:

> 'The big, sort of, fly in everybody's ointment on the policy with the housing
> numbers is that we've never ever built the numbers per year, even in the big house

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building years of the fifties and sixties, that the Government want us to build now

and the aggregates industries are just not geared up. They've actually – brick

factories across the UK are actually closing because of the down-turn in the

construction industry at the moment. So when it picks up again and they want to

suddenly start rebuilding all these houses again, there's going to be a shortage of

bricks that's going to push prices up. They're going to have to import them and,

you know – it's these sorts of policies that just haven't been considered and the

Business Council is very good for bringing in those trade expertise'

(WMRA_BG04).

The data from the business section are full of, if not such detailed and demonstrative

examples, regular assertions of the benefit of business inclusion. And what is also apparent,

in the quotation presented above as well as in others, is the frequency of references to the

Business Council, rather than to the business group or business section or house of the

Assembly. Identifying themselves in this way effectively allowed the business stakeholders

to be a collective before reaching the assembly, rather than being brought together due to their

relative affinity within the assembly. In this way business presented itself, whether

consciously or not, as a cohesive whole.

This was perhaps not too difficult given the common understanding or assumption that all

business would have a generally capitalist agenda. Yet, these stakeholders were keen to point

out the diversity within their sector in the region:

'If you look at Shropshire, Hereford and Worcestershire, it's mostly rural

businesses, not entirely, but predominantly. If look at Warwickshire and

Coventry, I would say there's a significantly high proportion of professional services, the creatives, the marketing people, the business consultants, the IT specialists and things like that and then for Staffs and West Mids, then it's manufacturing'

(WMRA_BG04).

Alongside points like this, there are remarks in the data about the different scales of business, and the potential differences in perspective that this can cause, for example this interviewee opined 'as a general rule, I tend to say that what actually works for small business usually works for big business [...]. It doesn't go the other way round' (WMRA_BG04). Thus, business seemed to want to emphasise the variety of positions within this section.

These internal differences are perhaps exaggerated, particularly compared to the other houses of the regional assembly composition. But it is through highlighting its diversity that business built a stronger case for its inclusion and its value. The business group accentuated its potential difficulties (i.e. as could have arisen from their differences) and then praised itself for having overcome them, for having learned to be more effective by speaking with a unified voice in the regional process and structure despite the internal differences. The business data is littered with comments about the coming together of these stakeholders and their becoming organised, and they are explicit about this point, for example one respondent stated simply: 'we would have pre-meetings and we made sure people were briefed; we'd understand what our position was and we would then be far more effective in our performance at the Regional Assembly' (WMRA_BG05). And organising under or as the Business Council was a significant factor in creating that unity, as is made clear by the following quotation:

'I think we do find some obvious areas of common ground. We will never agree 100% on the finer details. I think that, you know, would be understandable – you could never get any group of people, no matter what they were doing, to agree 100% of the time, but [that's] what the Business Council does – it looks at those broader areas'

(WMRA_BG01).

Therefore, what developed was a position that came to be described as 'a business-type view – a very pragmatic one' (WMRA_BG01).

Indeed, there were instances in the data from the business section which demonstrated that some of these stakeholders perceived business to have a greater influence in assembly proceedings than the local government section. Comparative reflections often began with a fairly hostile view of local government, predictably attempting to deflect or counter arguments regarding democracy, for example one business member gave a flurried and incensed complaint about how 'the local authority people tend not to...because they say, where's our electorate, where's our, you know, they've been elected, we haven't, we're unelected people trying to influence policy...' (WMRA_BG05). And, in a similar tone, the same interviewee implied that business undoubtedly occupied the privileged position in their collective hierarchy, with '...well, business won't turn up unless it thinks it's going to get some influence. Why would you do that? You'd rather play golf' (WMRA_BG05).

This view, however, did gradually become more moderated, even within a single stream of response, such as in the following extract:

'We were far more effective than local government because we focussed. So I think we were really quite effective, because local authority were not as organised as us. We gained a huge amount of respect from the local authority by being prepared to engage, because previously businesses only really sniped at local authorities. Business is really good at complaining but it's not so good about stepping up and trying to help and actually, I mean, local authorities are desperate to have involvement from business people, so we gained a huge amount of respect from them...'

(WMRA_BG05).

Mellowing yet further and arriving at a stance that became the typical business opinion of the regional assembly over the years, the same interviewee added 'councillors are prepared to listen to business people. [...] Now we're in dialogue, instead of fighting each other through the newspapers...' (WMRA_BG05). Though there remains a slight bias, overall the position is one of mutual respect. Or rather, business believed that the local government section viewed business with mutual respect. There is, unconsciously, a degree of ambivalence here, because business felt triumphant for having persuaded local government of its value (thereby holding its own position in higher regard), and yet that triumph felt in having earned such respect effectively means that business at the same time privileged the local government position over its own.

With regards to its relationship with the other stakeholder group, the business section's perspective is much more straightforward. The perhaps surprising point of interest here is the relative kinship business felt towards the OSG. A number of business stakeholders drew

attention to the social or community aspects of their work. For example, one interviewee described how they perceived themselves to be

'almost the bridging gap between social community and the big hard-nosed, big multi-national corporate because, you know, a small business is at the heart very often of a community. If you don't have a shop that sells your milk and your eggs and your bread, you know, those places end up being very soulless. You need pubs, you need your local tradesmen, not least because they often provide jobs for people as well, but again... It's like the post offices – if you haven't actually got a post office in a village or in a particular urban area, the soul goes out of it very often, you've got no focal point, no centre and you've got no practical way of getting a level of services to happen in the community'

(WMRA_BG04).

It was this kind of sentiment that was behind such passing comments as 'there's never a conflict with me with the third sector – they would see me as a friend, absolutely would' (WMRA_BG05) and 'I had very good links with the third sector because, you know, they actually see me as part of them' (WMRA_BG02).

This empathy, however, did invariably turn into frustration and distanced the two groups when business drew comparisons and contrasted the different stakeholders' engagement in assembly business. The following respondent, for example, begins with some degree of understanding, reflecting that

'it's very hard to know what the third sector is [...] because they would not allow anybody really in the third sector to speak on their behalf, because they've got too

many voices, whereas business were prepare to accept, in a business type sense, that we would distil all the points of view and focus on the key issues'

<div align="right">(WMRA_BG05),</div>

but this interviewee then concluded that business people 'don't have the time for all the fluffy stuff' (WMRA_BG05). The following quotation explains the position more fully:

'Regional Action West Midlands at the time had one or two strong players, but they would constantly say we can't give a view because our membership isn't as one on these things. I think the idea was right for them, but... [...] They're not as organised as business, it's not their way of doing things, they're far more consensual. Whereas there are times [...] where we had to make it clear − this is what matters to us, so we'll play on your agenda, as long as you'll support us on ours and, as long as you're clear, then you have a chance of getting something. You can't just say we'd like peace and light for everybody. What we want to say is, we want our top transport priorities focussed into your plans please and if not, we want to understand why, because if our transport priorities aren't your transport priorities, durr, what's going on here...? [...] But you have to be clear what you're going in to do for them and be clear what areas you can influence on and focus on most. If you go across the whole, you just get ignored. They'll listen to you and then they move onto the next. You get a bit in the minutes, but you won't change anything and I've learnt that and business is good at that'

<div align="right">(WMRA_BG05).</div>

Two key points about the OSG position have been here revealed, and indeed have already been touched upon briefly or at least implied in other data given earlier from the local

government and business section perspectives. The first point is that the OSG house was especially diverse. Despite claims from the local government and business sections about their own, often overlooked, internal diversity, this was generally coupled with some, if subdued, recognition that the OSG section faced a much more complex and potentially problematic issue around diversity. Secondly, and arising from the first point, the OSG did not speak with one voice (and whether they would not or could not is a matter of perspective). These two issues are inextricably linked and dominate the OSG frame.

To a large extent, the OSG house was bound to have to tackle the issue of how its individual members would come together and behave in the assembly, just as the other sections had to. But it was also bound to face a greater challenge in bringing together the range of actors involved, because it was, as one stakeholder described, 'a sort of rag bag...when you've taken out local government and business, then you've got rather an assorted rag bag of, you know, health, environment, faith groups, third sector...' (WMRA_OSG09). Even their labels reveal the difficulties involved: despite their internal differences, the other sections could still be united under their respective labels of 'local government' and 'business,' whereas the rest came under the ambiguous label of merely the '*other* stakeholder group.' And this was noted, for example one interviewee revealed that they were 'a bit, kind of, pissed off, really with the idea that the other stakeholders group is a, kind of, odds and sods group, basically. I mean, it almost works in terms of acronyms of odds and sods group. I think I called it that once in a speech' (WMRA_OSG07). But evidently there was understanding of the difficulty of naming the group:

> 'it did sound as if you, you know...it's a bit like the third sector, isn't it? If somebody defines your, yes, other stakeholders, well it doesn't mean anything,

does it? It doesn't tell anybody what you are, but then I don't know – it's not a

particularly good term, but how would you describe that group of organisations?'

<div align="right">(WMRA_OSG09).</div>

Coupled with the internal diversity that arose from the range of interests that had to be

accommodated in the OSG house, there was also a duty towards the equalities agenda. This

was not treated as an entirely separate issue or interest for which representative seats could be

allocated (partly because of what was reported as a lack of organisations that had a regional

remit around equality) but rather the OSG attempted to field people into positions that would

at the same time satisfy requirements around balance. A respondent involved in the very

early stages of the assembly recognised that what was emerging was a 'chamber group that

was 95% white male' and also that there was 'a danger about tokenism here' but hesitantly

admitted that 'we, as a steering group for the development of a regional infrastructure, were

approached...to say...well, could we nominate a representative and there was...a, sort of, hint

about their concern about imbalance of in terms of gender and ethnicity and so on'

(WMRA_OSG08). Such a statement implies that the OSG were forced to take on this duty,

but it was also a responsibility *felt* by many members of this house. One stakeholder, in

claiming to be a 'committed equality campaigner,' added that

'lots of the people on the OSG have a similar commitment as well. I think part of

that comes from the fact of being clear about the need to make our voices heard

and if you're in the position of trying to make your voice heard, then I think you,

kind of, understand about how groups that are marginalised need to make their

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voice heard. I think that gives you a bit more of a feel around equality as well and the need to push'

This starts to depict the OSG identity and position that developed. The OSG saw itself as championing the needs of the marginalised, of making multiple voices heard and of channelling this multiplicity of views into assembly business. Initially, there was an amount of in-fighting regarding the allocation and weighting of the OSG seats but, as one interviewee reported, 'that debate was virtually stopped in its tracks because in a sense it became futile. I mean, you were [...] comparing oranges with bananas and it was silly nonsense' (WMRA_OSG08). The analogy is perhaps a little obscure, but the sense of frustration and exasperation is clear. And this seemed to incite a moment of reflection after which the OSG became firmer in purpose and adopted its strategy of concentrating on creating avenues for the whole range of stakeholder voices. Granted, these two points are not necessarily connected – indeed, the battles over seating arrangements and numbers remains in the memory of but a few interviewees (partly through the natural loss of former members and partly through natural decay of the memory, but perhaps also partly through some degree of forced erosion of an uncomfortable story) – but there is a chronology between them, arguably demonstrating the maturation of the OSG perspective.

Regardless of how it evolved, the OSG position, once established, was unequivocal and unswerving: they

'worked with local government to try and get as inclusive an Assembly as possible and to encourage them to use us to enable voices to come through that

would not find their way through the political process, so gender, ethnicity, disability, you know [...] [It] was one of the things that we contributed to the Assembly, was that we never set out to try and we couldn't set out to try and articulate *a* voice. A lot of the time what we were doing was articulating the need for those voices to come through'

(WMRA_OSG09).

The point was repeatedly made, that the aim was not to arrive at a single voice but to present several. In the words of another:

'all the way through the life of the OSG, it was important to say that OSG did not take a collective view on housing or whatever. The reason was because it was made up of a very disparate range of dimensions of civil society. [...] It would have been, not only inappropriate, but actually impossible to have reached the same view for all the different constituencies'

(WMRA_OSG08).

And such a statement of the OSG position was regularly followed by what clearly became a favourite example for describing the difficulty of marrying various OSG opinions, using specifically the environmental groups and the trade unions, for instance:

'It's part of our core value – accountability – if we're just there to represent our own individual thoughts, then we've got some real problems. It does raise some difficult issues sometimes, because the OSG rarely tried to have a collective view on very much, because if you think about the fact that there are some environmental groups on there... I mean, let's pick something like, there could be

a proposal to have a new runway at Coventry or Birmingham airport. Now, the trade union movement within OSG might sympathise with some of the environmental issues around that, but it brings jobs [...] and many of our members are going to be looking to support that, but that wouldn't necessarily go down very well with the environmental groups, so it is very rare [...] to try and have a collective OSG view on very much at all'

(WMRA_OSG07).

5.3 Relationships framed, and institutional change?

The frequency of the claims against reaching a unified position perhaps belied the OSG's confidence. It revealed that the OSG was aware that being able to speak with one voice was, if not more powerful, certainly preferred by its local government and business counterparts. But, as one stakeholder confessed, they 'took a strategic decision that that was worth it for us, because it assisted in terms of influence. Not power – the OSG didn't have power, it had influence' (WMRA_OSG08). The OSG took what, it discerned, was probably perceived as a weakness and articulated it as the OSG's contribution. It became defiant about its position, defending its role as broker of relationships between the assembly's component parts and the wider sector and adding value by adding voices to the regional policy-making structure and process. And it felt that its value was recognised, that it had challenged the popular conception of the sector from 'a load of sandaled, Liberal do-gooders to community organisations who would engage in serious decision-making' (WMRA_OSG09).

Furthermore, the OSG linked this lack of united voice to democracy: it celebrated the fact that its voice was not whipped like the political one would be. From the OSG perspective, 'that's what a perfect democracy is like – it's a whole range of views' (WMRA_OSG08). It was 'more pluralistic' and 'look[ed] at the way they do things in a more critical way' (WMRA_OSG09). Like the business stakeholders, the OSG built a defence around its democratic credentials. It faced similar challenges from the local government house early on, but took a different, perhaps more mature, approach in its response. Rather than competing on the same standards, the other stakeholders discussed changing concepts of democracy. For example, the following extract succinctly captures the OSG attitude and its recognition of the wider significance of this debate arising from assembly business:

'local government had always been suspicious of [the] non-elected – it's one of the tensions that the third sector has always had to deal with – our legitimacy is often challenged. [...] I still think there is a very special legitimacy that comes from being directly elected, but I also think that directly elected politicians underplay the role that participatory democracy can play, you know, enhancing and complimenting the representation [...] and that actually one of the reasons why our democracy is in trouble at the moment is because that connection between collective organisations that are non-party political is not working properly'

(WMRA_OSG09).

The OSG inadvertently acknowledged that their otherness, or more specifically the way they tried to re-present this rather than to forge unity, entailed a loss of power, as is demonstrated in the following extract:

'We're pretty vociferous. You can imagine. We don't get ignored. I mean, they can take their decisions, if they wish, you know, local government could boss the decision on anything if they wanted to, but generally, because of the way that it's all set up and the way that it operates, they don't ignore us. I genuinely think that partnership in this region is more than just the, kind of, buzz word'

(WMRA_OSG07).

Evidently the stakeholder speaking is attempting to promote the OSG position, but then reveals that local government retains power. More explicitly linking this belief with the lack of single voice and also exposing an underlying attitude about all-things-government, one interviewee said 'they weren't going to get that ever... I mean, central government has all sorts of, you know, one's consulted to death, but at the end of the day, they reach a view which isn't going to meet everybody's agreement, because they have to make the decision' (WMRA_OSG08). The OSG even developed a strategic response to this, mentioning a number of times that these stakeholders could always resort to public enquiries over the more important and controversial matters. This outlook seemingly surrenders any power the other stakeholders could have had within the assembly and demotes them to in-house consultees. But, overall, these data lay bare the OSG's understanding of the context it was operating in, as well as the degree of ambivalence in its conception of its own power.

Accordingly, when these stakeholders' perceptions of the local government section were specifically explored, responses commonly included the word 'dominant.' These responses were often expressed with anger and/or frustration, but the tone was almost always moderated by the conclusion. The following extract exemplifies such a response:

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'I think it's entirely disproportionate how many numbers local government have got. I've got no problem with them having the majority view because that's the way that it's set up – it's about bringing local government together with other partners, then fine, but [...] it's one thing being local government led, to being local government dominated. [...] I think you can have your Chair and your leadership and all of that coming from local government around the assembly and building in the fact that the rest of us can't out-vote them – I haven't got a problem in terms of doing that, but having such a domination of the room, I'm not sure that's entirely necessary. I have to say, it doesn't stop us and the Business Council from saying our piece. It doesn't stop us at all and, actually, when you look at how many times there's really a vote at the Assembly, it's very rare...'

(WMRA_OSG07).

This extract also hints at the OSG's perception of and relationship with the business stakeholders: there is a, perhaps surprising, degree of camaraderie and kinship. It is not expressed quite as keenly as the business group's sympathies, but there were instances in this section's data stating that the OSG and business did 'talk to each other and were pretty much on the same wavelength' (WMRA_OSG07), for example. In addition, the OSG were more likely to be defensive (in a supportive way) than critical of the business position, repeating stories such as:

'the AWM is business led and business dominated – that's a legitimate voice for business – they're individuals who are coming forward and who have gone through, admittedly, a rigorous appointment process, but they're individuals.

> They don't represent a constituency, and people on the Business Council represent
>
> a constituency, as I represent a constituency on OSG'

<div align="right">(WMRA_OSG07).</div>

If critical comparisons were drawn, they more often recognised that business was in a better position for being 'a bit slicker' (WMRA_OSG08) and that local government were 'very wary of pissing business off [...] – more concerned about pissing business off than they would about pissing OSG off' (WMRA_OSG07).

Evidently, what is raised from constructing these frames, particularly with regards to the critical element in them that demonstrates the relationships or hierarchies between the actors, is a question around the potential for institutional change and the source of its instigation. It is noteworthy, firstly, that there was institutional change. There were changes in the rules regarding stakeholder organisation and representation. Moreover, there were *successes* in attempts at stakeholder rule change *from the stakeholders' perspectives*. This is significant because the data presented in the frames, certainly from the OSG perspective, show that the local government section dominated proceedings, thereby implying a lack of capacity for the others to act or respond to what was effectively set by local government. That said, these successes, yet again, do need to be understood in context.

There are two relatively straightforward instances of change, specifically of two separate stakeholder organisations moving from the other stakeholder group to the business group. The first of these was so uncontroversial that only the stakeholder concerned mentioned it, and even then told the story in a fairly subdued manner:

'They placed, in the sort of the analysis of who went where, the [stakeholder organisation] in the third sector, which was my first challenge, to get it moved from that sector into business. Although we do have affinity with the third sector, we are a business and a very large business. So, my first job was to get it moved, so I started off in the third sector and while I made noises about getting us moved across, we actually got a place, an extra place for the [stakeholder] as part of the third sector, partly because of the gender balance. So we put a woman forward who represented the [stakeholder] in third sector as a holding position and then subsequently, I got us transferred into business'

(WMRA_BG05).

Likewise, the other transfer was also straightforward, in the sense that it was simply a move from the OSG to business without much debate or resistance. However, in this instance there is a degree of mystery regarding the initiation, and thus regarding the benefactor as well as the beneficiary, of the move. From the OSG perspective, it was reported that

'there was a point at which, where the [stakeholder], which had been in the other stakeholders' group, decided to move across to the Business Council or business sector. It wasn't an issue or a particular problem, other than they hadn't actually done their homework with the business sector, who didn't know they'd made the decision and that took quite a lot of sorting out, though we were, kind of, sympathetic friends I think, rather than anything else'

(WMRA_OSG08).

This quotation demonstrates that the OSG took a back seat in the process. This is not wholly unpredictable given the range of interests that it had to accommodate, but a stakeholder in such a position as to be able to move to the business section was presumably a potential asset to the OSG. Surprisingly, it seems as if the OSG did not even think to question the move. Nor did local government – the LG group also adopted the role of bystander, although this is perhaps more understandable given the specific stakes involved. The data from local government corroborates the OSG's story, for example one public sector interviewee recalled:

> 'interestingly, the [stakeholder], I think, they were originally part of the other stakeholder group but I don't think they were comfortable with being part of that [...] and they argued that they had a, you know, critical role in the economy, they had good links with businesses around, sort of, R&D stuff, so they were quite happily and readily adopted by the Business Council. They're a member of the Business Council now'
>
> (WMRA_PS02).

Evidently there are discrepancies about how the stakeholder in question was received by the business section, but generally the story is the same – it is generally understood by the majority of assembly members that this stakeholder instigated and pursued the move. The story becomes interesting, however, when the actual stakeholder responds to questions about the move:

> 'to start with, I was a member of the other stakeholders group, but for reasons that are, kind of, a bit unfathomable, the business group did a deal with the other stakeholders group, I think because they thought that I was closer to their interests than the other stakeholders and so they were quite interested in having the

[stakeholder] representative as part of their group and because it was well known

that there were, you know, lots of other people queuing up-, well, lots of other

stakeholders, so there'd be no difficulty in finding a substitute and that transfer

happened'

(WMRA_BG02).

Quizzed more specifically on the details, this stakeholder confirmed that

'it happened with my knowledge, but it happened in response to an approach from

the Business Group [...] An approach was made to the Vice Chairman from the

other stakeholders group to see whether they would be willing to the exchange

taking place. Well, it ended up as being in everyone's interest, because the

Business Group wanted the [stakeholder] and the other stakeholders group were

always under pressure to take other people'

(WMRA_BG02).

Thus it appears that all the actors involved distanced themselves from this move. This could,

of course, simply be due to its relative insignificance in the history of regional development

but it is interesting that it is not hailed by the business section as an example of their force for

change, of their strategic capacities, in short of their power.

In contrast, the other stakeholder group was enthusiastic in highlighting, or indeed

accentuating, its attempts at change. For example, one stakeholder turned almost boisterous

whilst reporting a dispute over the chairperson position of the scrutiny panel shortly following

the publication of the Sub-National Review:

'local government seemed to think that they should take over scrutiny straight away and hadn't bothered to tell me about it, so we were there at the annual meeting of the assembly, taking nominations and my nomination had gone in and somebody had just decided to ignore my nomination for Chair of scrutiny and just nominated the local government person, so I kicked up a fuss about it in the middle of the meeting and made it clear that no discussions had taken place with me and the Chair [of the Assembly] was really embarrassed and I made sure everybody was embarrassed, particularly the person who did it. So, they dropped that idea and decided in the end that I would be a good Chair of scrutiny'

(WMRA_OSG07).

Whilst the local government section was presumably making changes seen as eventually necessary, this stakeholder believed the move was much more conspiratorial. The story continued with allegations against specific people (therefore will not be reproduced here) and heightened emotions demonstrated through phrases such as 'I just had to stamp my foot' and 'I was being stitched up,' which contribute to an understanding of this stakeholder's level of effort in making riposting changes or, rather, in blocking an attempt at rule change from local government (WMRA_OSG07).

This was perhaps a minor event, even from the perspective of OSG. Certainly when asked about issues surrounding design and change, many more interviewees promoted the establishment of the Equality and Diversity Strategic Partnership of the assembly as their major success story. As has been evidenced above through the explication of the OSG frame, these stakeholders already had a clear interest in equality and diversity. And taking this

through to the scrutiny function of the assembly, which was in any case dominated by the stakeholders rather than local government, a piece of work was undertaken to explore issues around equality and diversity. One stakeholder that was particularly vocal on the subject proudly added that this work was 'across the piece, so it wasn't only a scrutiny of the RDA but it was a scrutiny of local government, business, OSG, loads of different players, around equality and diversity' (WMRA_OSG04). And, in a similar vein, another OSG member opined that their 'commitment wasn't just talking about it within OSG, it was actually trying to hold to account and get other partners within the region to do something around equality and diversity and so we've continued to play an active and, I think, leading role in it' (WMRA_OSG07). The outcome of these efforts was the establishment of the specialised strategic partnership.

The pride and the ownership of this move is perhaps better appreciated when it is understood against an earlier, failed attempt at something similar. An OSG member revealed that

'prior to that, in sort of, 2002, 2003, there had been the development of a Social Inclusion Forum for the Assembly, which we were, kind of, leading players in. It never worked. Part of that was it wasn't given any priority by the Assembly, either in terms of in principle or actually in terms of resources. There were no resources, so there was a little bit of somebody's time for a few hours a week and that became completely impossible'

(WMRA_OSG08).

But this also reveals that the assembly, which here either refers to the whole bloc that was everything but the OSG or to the local government forces more particularly, retained the

ability to control developments and to impede any such unwanted changes. Indeed, a later revelation from the same interviewee brings the OSG's capacities into question yet further – the stakeholder wondered aloud

> 'in fact the Equality and Diversity Strategic Partnership was from a secondment... I don't know whether [they are] there now but there was, I think, there was a secondment, I think from the Home Office, for two or three years, I can't even remember [their] name... a secondment to the Assembly with a particular responsibility to resource the operation of the Equality and Diversity Strategic Partnership'

> (WMRA_OSG08).

It is debatable, then, whether the OSG instigated this development or whether the Equality and Diversity Partnership came into being due to other forces. Indeed, it is debatable whether this is even decipherable at all. What is apparent, however, is that the OSG perceived it and claimed it as their opus and, unsurprisingly, there is little mention of this development from other perspectives, thus little data available with which to better understand the dynamics of this situation. It is as if the OSG were allowed this glory and seized it, thereby enabling this story of an OSG success within the boundaries of what was possible to be collectively projected and accepted. It was not corrected or reigned in, and instead became a West Midlands Regional Assembly truth, however minor.

Conclusion

This chapter has progressed from a general context of the West Midlands region and a general history of the West Midlands Regional Assembly to a more specific one, or rather to more specific *ones*, specified according to the groups of actors involved in the assembly. This is because what is important to this thesis is not (or is less) the general but the *perceived* context, not the textbook history but the meanings and related stories of the insiders, or perhaps would-be protagonists, in the story of regional development. I have detailed those personalised (or, rather, group) contexts and I illustrated, or indeed built, the local government, business and other stakeholder frames. These frames were made up of the actors' perceptions of themselves, which was partly revealed through an understanding of the issues they faced, as well as of the other groups of actors.

As set out in the theory and methods chapters, it is from the frames that the processes of institutional design and change are to be explored. The frames go some way to dictate the changes made. Or rather, they serve to illustrate the mental maps of the actors, to represent their judgements of their landscape, and to point to the options perceived as available for design/change. Thus they serve as a background to an analysis of institutional change, or indeed non-change, as they uncover the perceived needs and wants of the groups of actors, which in turn, and with the frames in concert, generate an understanding of the degree of effort put towards instigating change (or, indeed, allowing and accepting non-change).

CHAPTER 6: REFLECTIONS AND REVISION

<u>Introduction</u>

In this relatively short chapter, I map out my process of reflection, questioning and revising my approach to enable an alternative reading of the data. Whereas the previous chapter concentrated on the groups of actors and their discursive delineation through frames, this chapter will now take a wider perspective of the assembly as a whole. Here, I break from the confines of the frames to consider institutional change in its entirety, hence to consider the meaning behind the lack of change or of the stakeholders' apparent acquiescence towards the maintenance of the status quo. From this wider perspective, the overall story of the West Midlands Regional Assembly's development is one of stasis, much aided by the stakeholders' lack of attempts at change, which in turn was partly dictated by their understanding of the context they were working in. Thus their (perceptions of their) context affected their conduct, which affected their context, in the sense that they effectively allowed that status quo to be or, indeed, actively maintained it.

The first section of this chapter considers three instances in which the stakeholders do not challenge institutional developments that could be seen, by the critical researcher, to leave them at a disadvantage. Firstly, I probe the inclusion of town and parish councils in the OSG, rather than in the local government section, because they are effectively taking up the precious few seats available to the stakeholders. Secondly, I question the interpretation of central government guidance regarding sector proportions for the lack of challenge. And

finally, I explore the share of seats between the stakeholders – between the business and the others – on the grounds that it effectively privileged the business component. The second section of the chapter forces a reconsideration of the critical reflex, showing it to be rather more conspiratorial, given the wealth of data that pointed towards the overwhelming sense of consensus rather than collusion.

6.1 Collusion in the West Midlands Regional Assembly

In response to questions about the position of the town and parish councils in the assembly's houses, one interviewee reported

'there's a widespread ambivalence about whether parish councils are part of local government or not. I mean, yes they are, in one sense, but they're not in another sense and I don't think anybody chose to have that debate at regional level. There was a, kind of, willingness to ensure that they had a seat via the other stakeholders group and they were satisfied that they got there'

(WMRA_BG02).

This is delivered in the tone of an objective observer, yet the source is a stakeholder – one that moved from the OSG to the business group, so someone in a position to initiate such a debate, rather than simply playing party to a general willingness and the town and parish councils' strategic effort to be involved somewhere in the structure. Another stakeholder was even nonchalant about the issue, indeed only just acknowledging it as an issue – 'parish councils [are] also on there, strangely, although there's an argument that says that they should be in

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with local government, but for some reason it's historic – it's never been explained to me, they're just part of the other stakeholders group' (WMRA_OSG07).

Questions attempting to gain an understanding from these stakeholders as to why the town and parish councils were part of the OSG section rather than the local government section did not elicit a more enlightening response, for example

'I think it's because they're not members of the West Midlands Local Government Association, for whatever reason. I don't know why they're not members, but if they're not members of that and that's the constituent body, then they need to go somewhere else. They're not a business, so that means they come to us, I suppose'

(WMRA_OSG07).

This passivity was apparently widespread, as many failed to grasp the critical point of this questioning, though I did have to be discreet. Responses were often unembellished one-liners, such as 'because local government were never going to accept them' and 'because they were like rats in a sack with local government' (WMRA_OSG08). Apparently no further explanation was necessary. The local government response was equally short, but that was because the foundation of their position on the town and parish councils was accordingly straightforward, for example one local government interviewee said it was 'because grown up local government didn't want them. As simple as that. They'd only be amateurs as far as proper local government [was] concerned' (WMRA_PS02).

Eventually, a clue emerged from the OSG section. One stakeholder stated that 'if the town and parish council people want to play an active role, then that's great as far as I'm concerned' (WMRA_OSG07). This reveals something of a strategic mindset. Given the deal the OSG were dealt, in that these members did not believe they could change very much, they had to learn to strategise within their perceived context. And welcoming the town and parish councils into the OSG may well have been a part of that. Of course, this may well be simply a story the stakeholders told themselves in order to make their lack of power more bearable (or, indeed, just this stakeholder). Unfortunately, there is not enough data on this point, or any similar example, to turn the supposition into a fair judgement, if such an issue could be conclusive at all. Indeed, it is most likely that both are 'true,' but what is undeniable is the dominance of local government.

It could be argued that the local government section was bound to be the dominant element of the regional assembly composition, simply because of the balance of numbers given by central government. Now, it is important to recall that these proportions were suggested in central government *guidance*, thus not strictly enforceable law, and was worded in such a way as to set a minimum allocation for stakeholders of 30%. The regional assemblies, therefore, were able to opt for higher proportions of stakeholders and were free to determine their stakeholders as their regional circumstances required. Commenting on the proportions in the guidance from a local government perspective, one interviewee said

> 'it wasn't taken as law, I don't think it was taken as law, but it was taken as most guidance is taken, that this is a suggested right balance, that there should be at least 30% non-local government representation on the Chamber Assembly. Now, nobody questioned whether the 30% was too high, but I think there was a general

feeling that it certainly shouldn't be any higher, but there wasn't a massive debate about it, it was, you know, government advice tends to be, you know, taken as fairly, sort of, influential. You only object if it's really completely unacceptable and 70:30, I think, was accepted as, you know, if there is to be a body that is a partnership of interests, business, local government and other social economic interest groups, then 70:30 was an acceptable balance to local government'

(WMRA_PS03).

The quotation above possesses some recognition that the proportions could have been adjusted, whereas in the stakeholders' sections there is much less knowledge about this. 'It was handed down to us from Government, I think, really' (WMRA_OSG4) is a line that typifies the response from most stakeholders when asked about the proportions, or slightly more exacting attempts included 'the Enabling Bill into the establishment of the chambers required local government to have a 66% stake, two thirds per cent stake, in the process' (WMRA_OSG08). Sometimes the local government perspective on the difficulties it faced in organising its share was parroted as some sort of excuse for the local government size, for example a business respondent pre-emptively batted away the issue of its own minority position to concentrate on the lack of majority power of local government as assembly work actually transpired with –

'you see 70%, they're not a, they're not some kind of amorphous mass out there that all agree with each other. They absolutely do not and if you watch the way local authorities can disagree with each other, particularly if there are political differences, you know, between Labour and Tory, or even between rural and

urban, their agendas are different, so they could not guarantee they would have 70% of the votes, they just didn't move like that'

Just as the quotation above demonstrates how the issue was quickly turned away from the actual numbers and towards the realities of power (or lack of, in this instance), the following quotation turns the issue of the proportions in yet another direction:

'the two thirds local government was set out in the Enabling legislation, they couldn't vary it, so there was always going to be two thirds. The issue was about what the size of the total assembly would be. You know, would it be 30 or would it be 200 or would it be 100 or whatever, so in a sense there was an agreement that local government would take two thirds because that was a given really. So the only question was, well, how do you divvy the other third of seats, while it was an agreement which wasn't terribly difficult because OSG had developed one and took half of those remaining seats and then the Business Forum, which became the Business Council, took the other half'

Obviously, the stakeholders can take their responses in different directions as they wish, particularly under a semi-structured interviewing technique, but what is interesting is that regardless of the direction taken, the starting point is not questioned; rather than having an understanding that the stakeholders were allowed at least 30% of assembly seats, the stakeholders invariably spoke of local government's 70% or two thirds share.

Only two interviewees stated that they might, given the opportunity, adjust the proportions. One seemed to reach such a conclusion within the interview:

> 'actually, no. No, I'd revise all of that actually, because the more I think about it, there's actually no reason at all why it shouldn't be a third, a third, a third. There is no reason why. [...] Especially given the consensus way that we actually operate. It would never happen, because the local government would never, kind of, wear that, because it would actually give the majority to somebody other than-, to groupings other than local government, if you did that, so two thirds would belong outside the local government'

> (WMRA_OSG07).

Another apparently had already given the matter some consideration –

> 'whatever size was chosen for the assembly, I would have argued for, would want to see, a different kind of balance between local government and the rest. I mean, I'm happy to see local government have 50%, though an ideal might be a further third, but 50% and 25% business, 25% other stakeholders and then, against that background, a style of doing business which was rather different'

> (WMRA_BG02).

This interviewee claimed to have had 'major reservations about the predominance of local government in the Regional Assembly' but also that 'it became clear that it was not open to question' (WMRA_BG02). The point was repeated with 'well, those that had done the detailed design, essentially local government, were not prepared to discuss the balance between the groupings' and 'there was quite a lot of discontent, but it wasn't a subject for discussion,' thus revealing the constraint and frustration that was felt.

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Perhaps more malleable would have been the proportions between the stakeholders i.e. some negotiation of the division between the business stakeholders and the rest, particularly given that business could relatively easily act as a single interest whereas the OSG had quite a range of interests to accommodate and also that most of the other regional assemblies operated with a single stakeholder group (referred to collectively as the social, economic and environmental partners, or SEEP). For obvious reasons, the business stakeholders in the West Midlands did not question their relative advantage, with one stating simply 'I didn't question it because I thought it was appropriate' (WMRA_BG05). Interestingly, one interviewee from the local government section recalled that 'there was, early on, there was probably the odd discussion about whether the balance between business and other stakeholders was right, you know, whether the business had enough places,' adding that 'it just seemed to be natural, yes, that business interests would want their own defined group' (WMRA_PS03), as if this was reason enough to grant them their own group. Thus, business had a clear, and supported, dominance over the other stakeholders.

However, with greater reflection, the local government section did put forward a plausibly thought through story about having, or indeed maintaining, a division between the business and other stakeholders:

> 'what we set out to do was make sure that we had some form of proportionality of representation and obviously, I say obviously, from local government's point of view, that would be the dominant partner, but I hate that terminology, but that's the terminology that others used of us and my guess is that it's a leap too far too early to lump everybody into, I mean, the danger of, I think, some other regions is

what you create is a ruling group and an opposition group and our intention was to

try and blur groupings as much as possible'

(WMRA_PS06).

Thus the point was to create a more collaborative style of working, to move away from the adversarial style of politics that was seen to dominate British politics. The members of this section recognised that they were 'not doing Labour-Tory politics here' but were 'trying to blur that process of tight groupings and creating an outward voice that said this is the voice of a very wide range of people, rather than organisations, to central government' (WMRA_PS06).

The OSG position on this point mimicked that of local government. In passing, it commented that there was a division between business and themselves because business would have wanted to retain their specific voice and therefore would have wanted a separate group, and the OSG also sympathetically parroted that the business group was more diverse than it appeared and therefore did not necessarily have an easy advantage. Thus, the OSG seemingly acquiesced to the business position that was supported by local government. They pointed out, however, that they co-operated with the business group on occasions when the need arose (describing how they would meet ahead of main assembly meetings, though without specific examples) and they also added their specifically OSG spin on the matter by suggesting that their voice would be subsumed by business interests if all the stakeholders were in one group together.

In the main, though, the OSG emphasised the point that the assembly and its rules regarding member composition and organisation were designed (or being designed) to encourage and

reflect a more consensual style of working. For example, one member of the OSG described how

> 'the formal Assembly meetings were three, four a year and I think we had a role in making sure that they weren't modelled on local government, you know, we tried to model them on other things. They were more participative and a lot of time was spent really brokering the opportunities [for] the stakeholders to contribute, but we used to meet, you know, a week before the main Assembly, a week or so before, when the papers had come out and we'd talk through the agenda'
>
> (WMRA_OSG09).

What this quotation inadvertently reveals, however, is the practice of a traditionally local government practice – that of pre-meetings.

The local government section claimed not to have such pre-meetings, linking this to a different kind of working specifically for assembly business, for example one member stated 'we didn't have [political party] Group meetings ahead of our Chamber meetings because we'd, we took the view that we were going there representing the region, not representing particular strands of policy' (WMRA_PS04). But that interviewee later revealed that councillors met 'not for anything ideologically, I mean, but when they did actually, I think they did have, from time to time, they did meet with each other to discuss mutually interesting things, but again, we discouraged in those early days, any sort of suggestion of groupings' (WMRA_PS04) and another conceded that they met 'not in the early days. I think, as time went on, I think in recent years, there has been more breaking down of that degree of consensus' (WMRA_PS05).

The group-meetings themselves are not an issue. The point is that, despite efforts to avoid such, assembly proceedings became like local government. It was reported that as time went on, a local government culture took hold:

> 'There were discussions-, there have been discussions from time to time, about the style of business, you know, style of working, inside an assembly meeting, though I am not conscious that that has happened for a long time and the examples I can think of the assembly adopting a different style and working in a more discursive way, go back to the early days of the assembly, rather than now, which suggests to me that the assembly has settled into a way of working which has, in a sense, gone unchallenged, as so many organisations have done'

(WMRA_BG02).

This particularly reflective stakeholder did point out that this was not by 'malicious decision, but simply because that was the way in which people were used to doing business' and adding that 'it was more the actors involved, though for the most part, staff that had been involved are the people who've handed local government back, I would say. Again, I'm not suggesting a malicious conspiracy, but, you know, an intuitive collusion' (WMRA_BG02).

6.2 Collusion or consensus?

Overall, then, the data from the West Midlands Regional Assembly clearly point to the predominance of local government control and a prevalent local government culture, as well as acquiescence to this by the business and other stakeholders, perhaps as some mark of gratitude for having some influence in the regional policy-making process or simply so as not

to risk losing that influence. This, on the surface of it, sounds negative. It is presented as a criticism of the structural system, as a suppressed complaint that has been revealed, and accordingly plays into, indeed, plays *up* the idea of 'collusion.' But it must be recognised and acknowledged that it is *presented* as such.

It has become evident over the data collection and analysis processes that the researcher's (i.e. my) role is essential to the project, not just in its direction and execution, as is obvious to a large extent and reflected upon earlier, but also in the assumptions made about the responses given and their critical meaning. My role as an interpretive interviewer requires that I lead the responses as little as possible, only asking broad questions about broad topics, thus effectively guiding a monologue. And whilst I have tried and trained myself to stay loyal to that technique, it is undeniable that I am looking for certain things. Herein lies the fundamental and inevitable 'problem' with the more interpretive, deductive approach: there is a theory-dependence of observation i.e. a researcher, even ones without explicitly worked-out theory, brings to its research processes embedded assumptions. The interpretive philosophy, at least, allows for this 'human error' (though it does not label it as such), since it recognises that what is reported as findings are interpretations of interpretations (labelled the hermeneutic circle, detailed earlier), thereby admitting a degree of personality into the process. Herein also lies the advantage of this specific research design: simultaneously undertaking another case study enabled comparisons that questioned afresh at each iteration the assumptions that may have been impacting upon the analysis of the data.

This was specifically the reasoning behind adopting another conceptual tool for data analysis. It was clear that the concept of frames served as a tool from which to hang the data relating to

actors positions, but the developmental journey required a format that incorporated, or at least allowed for, some degree of dynamism in these case studies of institutional design and change. At the same time, the dual analysis served as a critical reflex, forcing me to address the data that did not fit in the discursive form that I assumed would be present in each case. In this case, I was looking for the interviewee's context and conduct, based on their sense of self and others, on their position and their relationships. I was obviously looking for the data to say something, moreover to show something different or revealing about the actors' relative positions; I was almost hunting for conspiracy. And in that process my positionality comes to the fore – my interpretation of the data is based on my identity as a researcher (itself an institutionalised notion), hence my desire to critically analyse as well as my general profile (in terms of race, gender etc.), which, as acknowledged earlier, is aligned closer to the stakeholder group (Aulakh *et al*. 2005). This serves, however subconsciously, to skew favour towards the OSG, perhaps promoting the opinion that the stakeholders would have been stronger in a single group and privileging the idea that there is collusion.

It must be recalled that the interviewee who offered the term 'collusion' did so with a caveat of understanding: the assembly did not end up mimicking local government by malicious design. Indeed, the interviewee's very point is that there was no conspiracy towards collusion, which, given that it was volunteered, inadvertently admits that such a conclusion could be easily reached, but this stakeholder ultimately disagrees that that was the case. The overall message from the stakeholders was that they did feel empowered, that they did gain voice and that they were able to contribute. They may not have been able to make drastic changes, but it is questionable whether they wanted to make such changes. 'We fought on the things that we thought were worthwhile' (WMRA_BG05) is a sound bite that typifies views

about institutional change from the stakeholders. These stakeholders could be regarded not as pacifists accepting their lot, but as strategists picking their battles.

It could be argued further that these stakeholders were part of the collusion, rather than being colluded against. A business stakeholder involved from the outset recalled that Birmingham had a 'fixer' who organised

'one of these, sort of, smoke-filled room things that everybody denies takes place, but clearly they do. [...] People were invited to the meeting and you wouldn't know why you were invited, except you got round a table and you knew all the names – you might have read them in the Birmingham Post or whatever – it was a very, sort of, close group. [...] I could probably have figured out why the others were there as well, but it's not an open invitation'

(WMRA_BG05).

The OSG relating their start-up is not quite as dramatic, but it similarly echoes some degree of elitism:

'It was [named individual] and I, because we'd done some work on, I think it was New Deal for Communities or something like that, or Welfare to Work, whatever it was, in the Black Country, so we put our heads together and identified –, we selected a group of about ten people who reflected different communities but our judgement was that they would not be parochial and we'd both had conversations with different players...'

(WMRA_OSG08).

This offers a different perspective to the more technical and democratic officer-led process of consultation and recruitment given earlier. The interviewee quickly added that there were also 'major consultations' and that the selection 'was actually tested very heavily over two years' (WMRA_OSG08) but that the initial stages of stakeholder engagement might have worked in this more closed way is, to a large extent, unsurprising and understandable, and it demonstrates that there were a chosen few with scope for the 'usual suspects' to come to the fore.

There is, then, an amount of ambivalence. From the stakeholders' perspective there is evidence of disappointment with the local government dominance alongside understanding and acquiescence. From the local government house, too, there is a degree of discomfort in focussing on their controlling share of seats and attention is directed away from the idea of control towards the idea of consensus. Indeed, consensus is a running theme. The term itself has been used a number of times in the data already presented above, and furthermore the wider idea is even more obvious – participants talk of a more collaborative, consensual style of working, that is a shared aspiration if not something fully and consistently implemented. They regularly promoted the idea that there was never a need to vote, that the numerical system had been designed as simply a safeguard and that the focus for everyone was the good of the region. One meandering quotation from a key local government official sums up a number of common sentiments:

> 'Yes, there were changes. I mean, if you set an organisation up from scratch and
> you try to embed that in granite, it would be a mistake and so the organisation had
> to evolve and had to develop and it did do and one of the things that made that
> easier was the trust started to generate itself, because people had work to do. I

mean, one of the great things about the backsides-on-seats debate is no-one's actually got any work to do and the end game is to get the representation. Once you have work to do around the process of securing a deal for the West Midlands, then you have to adapt the structure and people evolved...'

(WMRA_OSG06).

Overall, then, the same data are presented to represent two different sides of the same shared story. There is at once collusion and consensus. Both 'truths' are simultaneously true and are both undercurrents to each other's story, or are both the same story framed differently at different times. In the case of the West Midlands, the separate group frames have been explored and, in the process of exploring institutional design and change from these frames, it has emerged that there is a story that is shared across the groups, and this justifies not change but non-change. Or perhaps, more specifically, it justifies the maintenance of a gradual pace of evolution towards consensual working, or perhaps it tells a story of an attempt to instigate consensual working and an eventual shift, or return, to a local government culture. It could be argued, too, that the consensus story is one constructed to contain differences between the groups or to blur divisions, itself an act of creating consensus.

Conclusion

What now begins to emerge is the concurrent theoretical and methodological development that occurred over the course of the fieldwork phase of the project. Continuous reflection enabled me to both question my assumptions and my selection of the data and to use the

initial findings and analysis of the (following) North West case study to think about what was happening beyond the group level and to look at the wider story of the assembly. As the preceding chapters set out, this project aimed to explore *intersubjective* institutional design and so I needed to pay greater attention to what was shared between the groups of designers, looking to what was constructed together, which was this story of consensus that was or became the foundation for the assembly institutions – the representational divisions and their proportionality – to be perpetuated as they were. This brought the concept of stories into the research design, acknowledging the need to relate the two concepts together, even if in simulated stages, if these were to function as tools for analysis.

This chapter is transparent about the research process because it reflects the discovery of the subjects' processes of moving from separately grouped positions to an intersubjective perspective on institutional design. The different groups were differently able to affect the institutional development process, though this was due to their own understandings and subsequent strategising about the wider design process. Specifically, the local government actors took the lead in organising the representational links of the stakeholders (both in terms of the separation and the proportions of the stakeholder groups, and even with the development of the secretariat for the 'other' stakeholders). And the stakeholders generally saw this as fitting or not worth fighting for risk of losing the gains that had been made. Thus, a collective story of consensus came to support the institutional design of an assembly that numerically maintained the representational strength of the inherited hierarchies (i.e. both with local government 'in charge' as well as the business stakeholders relatively 'better off' than the disparate collection of others that remained), though there, of course, was never a need to resort to activate this relative weighting through voting, since consensus was

paramount and prevalent. Probing issues of imbalance revealed some disquiet, which further pointed to the strategising on the part of those relatively weaker members. Thus, the construction and selection of ideas and elements of the context by the designers demonstrated the interplay between structure and agency, as held by the theory of constructivist institutionalism, in this instance of institutional design/change or, indeed, of adoption and perpetuation of power balances from previous partnership working.

CHAPTER 7: THE NORTH WEST REGIONAL ASSEMBLY

Introduction

In this chapter I set out the second of the two case studies that constitute the empirical component of this research project. I focus on the process of institutional design and, perhaps more accurately here, on the institutional change that is demonstrated in the course of the North West Regional Assembly's development. Actors here changed the rule of councillor representation from being based on the region's local authority areas to being based on its five sub-regions. This chapter sets the scene of the region, relates the stories that form the discursive part of the institutional reconstruction process, and finally presents an analysis of those stories.

The first section of this chapter provides a general background of the North West, to contextualise the development of regional apparatus in this region. I aim to convey the character of the region – its relatively fragmented geography and its party-political history, building up its identity and distinctiveness. Following this, this first section goes on to detail the recent history of regional development – the North West regional assembly's 'pre-history.' This refreshes the general development in the regions from the establishment of the Regional Economic Planning Boards and Councils (REPBs and REPCs) in the 1960s up to the establishment of the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 that, returning to this specific case, launched the NWRA. The final part of this section presents an overview of the NWRA's lifespan. It charts the evolution of this organisation – the internal or structural

changes, events in local government that contributed to these changes, and central government's policy and guidance en route – over the approximate ten-year period that this executive body in the region was known as the NWRA. This aims to be a 'factual' account, which may seem dissonant with the ontological foundations of this thesis, but it should be understood as the parts of the story that can be agreed upon and that can be evidenced. Where there are conflicting claims and chronological haziness, these, too, are reported in a neutral manner.

The overview of NWRA's history given in the first section provides a point of departure for the first stage of analysis presented in section two. In this section I scrutinise and synthesise the primary data from interviews to communicate the stories that run throughout the collective general account. It is necessary to separate this from the factual account given in the first section because this looks specifically at the discursive constructions of the actors involved i.e. what these actors tell themselves, each other and outsiders about the NWRA's development in the process of and contributing towards that development. The points that are referred to in short-hand by the interviewees, that are common knowledge for them, can be understood and could become common knowledge, or at least something of a shared understanding, for the reader if the general factual overview is given before the stories are drawn out. Therefore, the stories of institutional reconstruction, that build up towards and justify councillor representation on a sub-regional basis, are drawn out and presented separately in this second section.

The third section presents a shift in direction of the analysis. I take the stories of institutional reconstruction and break them down into the component parts set out in the research design

on story analysis to build a beginning-middle-end patter relevant to institutional design/change, i.e. I examine the stories for constructions of complaint, aspiration and justification in an effort to uncover the ideational and material elements that are central to the theory of constructivist institutionalism explored in this thesis.

7.1 The busy background of the NWRA development

Taking up the story of the North West region's particular trajectory of regional development from the national overview given in the chapter 2, perhaps the watershed of recent development is marked by the 1972 creation of two large metropolitan county councils: Greater Manchester and Merseyside. This, and the North West's local government history more generally, is a crucial element in the general understanding of the region's development. These two metropolitan county council areas, or rather the subsequent lack of them (see below), continuously impacts upon the stories towards institutional (re)construction at the regional level.

During the 1980s, Lancashire County Council stood at the vanguard of institutional and organisational development (Burch and Holliday 1993). It set up an office in Brussels, Belgium, in order to respond to the growing imperative of European Union funding. The two metropolitan county councils also grew in significance, but eventually wielded too much power in the perspective of central government and were abolished in 1986. Immediately following this, however, the local authorities of Greater Manchester collectively established a local government association – the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) –

co-terminus with the former metropolitan county council area, thereby consolidating the continuing influence of the Greater Manchester sub-region.

At this time – the late 1980s – the business community were also responding to European Union developments, by recognising the strength to be gained in organising a collective and lobbying as an interest group. Accordingly, the North West Business Leadership Team (BLT) was set up in 1988. And by 1992, the BLT and the forty-six local authorities in the North West region came together to form the North West Regional Association (which changed its name to the North West Partnership in 1995).

The legislation that paved the way for the establishment of regional assemblies was enthusiastically welcomed in the North West. Indeed, it was seen as having almost originated here because of the Labour Party's keen observation of partnership working in the region as it prepared its position on regionalism whilst in opposition. Labour leader John Smith and regional enthusiast John Prescott regularly visited the region, attending and addressing meetings and conferences in the mid-1990s. And, as one interviewee boasted 'one of our Business Leadership Team, who was working with John Prescott, then played a very major role in writing the Regional Development Agencies Act' (NWRA_SEEP02).

But, despite their relatively advanced start, actors in the North West did not and could not simply rebrand the North West Partnership that was in operation as the new North West Regional Assembly. Indeed, interviewees were divided in whether they viewed the NW Partnership as a predecessor to the NWRA or not. The guidance that quickly followed the RDA Act 1998 made stipulations about the composition of the new bodies – bringing in the

70:30 local government to stakeholder representation ratio – so in this and other ways, actors had to formalise what had until then been a relatively informal set of collaborative working arrangements.

There followed a period of reflection and rearrangement. Over the next few years, local authorities came together at the regional level to an unprecedented degree. This region, unlike others, had previously not been able to form a region-wide local government association, mainly due to the long-standing friction between the cities of Liverpool and Manchester, as well as the relatively fragmented nature of the region (with Cumbria and Merseyside having only been subsumed into what became the North West region as it is known today a few years earlier) (Pearce and Ayres, 2007: 702; Sandford, 2002: 51). But on the 26th September 2001 Liverpool and Manchester signed a Joint City Concordat, and by 2002 local government actors had agreed a format for the NWRA resembling a region-wide LGA in that it was comprised of a representative from each of the 46 local authorities in the region, as well as 10 other local government representatives co-opted to achieve political balance in the assembly.

Alongside these local government representatives sat the social, economic and environmental partners. Taking together the 70:30 local government to partner ratio with the agreed 56 local government representatives, these partners now filled 24 assembly seats, bringing the total membership to 80 actors. However, this stakeholder component also suffered some friction. Despite allowing for 24 partners, interviewees recalled the participation of only 6 or 7 representatives that held all 24 votes due to the 70:30 weighting. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly who these 6 or 7 active stakeholders were. Interviewees' recollections of this period

are hazy; they lack detail and sequences are often mixed. But it is clear that a number of high profile business partners – the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) and the Institute of Directors (IoD) – all left the assembly together in March 2002 allegedly due to disputes about the way the assembly was being run. And the remaining actors worked to expand the stakeholder group to the optimal 24, which was almost complete by mid-2003, as evidenced by the NWRA Annual Report 2002 – 2003 which lists 22 stakeholder members representing 13 organisations.

The year 2002 was an important year for the NWRA and, indeed, the regional assembly project in general. The Labour Government, having concentrated on the devolution processes to the Celtic nations and London during its first term, now entered its second term and turned its attention to 'double devolution' to the (other) eight English regions. In May 2002, the Government published the White Paper Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions, which set out more officially than ever before its intentions for the regional assemblies and, importantly and as its title suggests, it allowed for regions to choose whether or not they wanted to formalize their regional bodies into directly elected units of government. This 111-page long document detailed issues such as the democratic ideal behind the regional assemblies, their proposed functions and funding, and also the implementation process that would include a review of local government (two-tier) structures.

There followed a 'soundings exercise' between December 2002 and May 2003, which was designed to establish which of the regions were likely to move in favour of directly elected status. And May 2003 also saw the publication of the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Act that provided for the referenda and local government reviews. By June 2003 it was

openly known that the North West region would hold a referendum about the NWRA's directly elected status as well as any related local government changes in autumn 2004.

The NWRA's annual report for the year 2002 – 2003 presents a scene of relatively stability, having overcome the period of turbulence with the stakeholders as mentioned above. In the report, the then leader concentrates on this progress, stating that

> 'the high point of the past year has seen the Assembly's relationships with our stakeholders come of age, particularly with our Economic and Social Partners. During the past year we have put behind us what were, in reality, limited disagreements with some business organisations and instead put in place a new era of co-operation which has led to both a massive expansion of stakeholder activity and their full involvement and influence of the growing regional agenda'

> (NWRA 2003: 4).

The report goes on to detail the NWRA's work and achievements over the year through the directorates and the 'key priority groups' (KPGs) that had gradually developed. It presents a staff structure and it also provides some information on the NWRA's executive board (through a list of KPG chairs) and its accounts, which taken all together demonstrates how the assembly was maturing as an organisation. However, there is also evidence of the significant problems with in the local government sector of the assembly's membership. Lancashire County Council's three assembly seats are all listed as vacant. Each of the seats reserved for

Ellesmere Port and Neston Borough Council, Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council and Salford City Council are also vacant, as well as three of the local government co-opted seats.

Lancashire County Council had historically been a fervent supporter of the regionalism, demonstrated by its early venture into Europe and its frontline position in the development of the North West Regional Association detailed above, but the particular course steered by the Labour Party in its development of the regional agenda to the ultimate directly elected position would have, it became clear, necessarily entailed the fragmentation of this large county council. In early 2003, Lancashire County Council formally resigned from the assembly, but it cited as its reason the misuse of funds; it claimed that local authorities' subscription fees were being used to promote the idea of a directly elected assembly and that it was opposed to this in principle, that this was 'crossing the line between "informing" the public and "campaigning" for a political objective' (Tomaney *et al*. 2003: 14). A small number of other councils, too, either threatened to or actually did resign, or simply did not send representatives.

Between August 2003 and May 2004, the much feared local government review was conducted by the Boundary Committee. The results of this proposed a variety of options based around retaining a two tier system of local government or abolishing the Cheshire and Lancashire county councils to make way for a number of single tier authorities instead. Meanwhile, 2004 could be described as a landmark year for central government developments in relation to the regional assemblies. In May 2004, the Government published the Compulsory Planning and Purchases Act, which granted the regional assembly planning powers and designated them the Regional Planning Boards (RPBs). Two months later, the

draft Regional Assemblies Bill was ready, but in that same month, the Government announced the postponement of the planned referendum in the North West (as well as Yorkshire and the Humber, the third and final region selected for referendum). Some claim that this was a response to a perceptible strengthening of the '"no" campaign' in the region, but the official Government line cited concerns over the postal voting system that had recently (- a month previously, in June 2004) experienced problems during the European Parliament elections (Pearce and Ayres 2007).

On the 5th November 2004, voters in the North East region returned a resounding 'no' vote to the proposal of a directly elected regional assembly. The regionalist project subsequently stalled and central government appeared to turn its attention away from the regional assemblies (and towards the forthcoming general election). But, having closely witnessed this event in their neighbouring region, actors in the North West rather than turning away from the assembly, which technically had no reason not to continue, entered another period of reflection and rearrangement.

Little tangible happened over the next year, apart from the negotiation of ideas between actors in the region and the exploration of interests between tiers of government and the region. One not insignificant but rather mysterious event marked 2005 in the North West: the then chief executive officer left the assembly. It was relayed through the interview data that this officer was suspended on full pay pending an inquiry into their use of funds, although this was neither confirmed nor denied by the assembly. But some interviewees suggest this officer was encouraged to resign due to their inability to manage co-operation between assembly members. The year 2006, too, was marked by an abrupt departure, this time by Trafford

Metropolitan Borough Council. This local council had recently turned into a Conservative majority and, as an onlooker (a local authority colleague) reflected '[it was] a new administration, with a young, ambitious leader looking to toe the party line... Basically, there was no specific reason...but it was big picture politics' (NWRA_LG06).

However, in the meantime, Lancashire County Council returned to the NWRA. And by the end of the assembly year 2005 – 2006, the annual report presented a new executive board structure based on the North West region's five sub-regions – Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Merseyside. Three councillors from each of these regions and six social, economic and environmental partners now made up the executive board. The full assembly i.e. members from each of the local authorities and the wider stakeholder group remained in place, although as a lower tier, and actors were in the process of working out procedures to mitigate against any disconnect between the two tiers (certainly with regard to the stakeholders, who were continuously trying to develop their mechanisms of communication, or accountability, between groups and layers) when the Government published the Sub-National Review in July 2007. As is now famous in this thesis, the SNR called for the discontinuation of the regional assemblies in their (then) current form and function. Thus, during the following consultation process that was framed in terms favouring more streamlined collaborative working arrangements in the regions, the NWRA effectively dropped the lower (full assembly) tier and rebranded the executive board as the new regional executive body (or 'Leaders' Board,' by its technical title). This, known as '4NW' (said 'For North West'), held its inaugural meeting on the 15th July 2008, effectively rendering the NWRA officially defunct.

The following table (7.1) summarises the events in the region, while the figure following that (7.2) goes some way to demonstrate the complexity of local government relations in the region, as it shows how the population in the region was and is concentrated in and around the large cities in the south of the region, giving these relative weight in the local government balances of power, despite the relatively small size of the individual units of local government (as at 2009). Figure 7.1 below, however, shows the sub-regions that were predominant in this region's story.
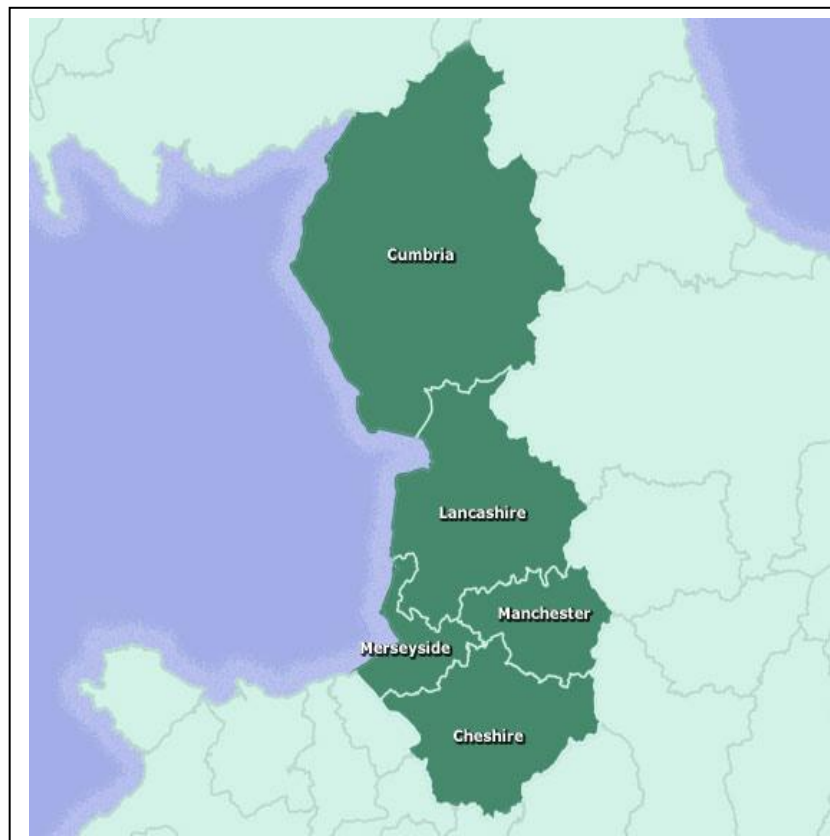

Figure 7.1 The North West's sub-regions (Source: NWRA website)

Table 7.1 The changing North West region

Phase: Time period	Government output	General structure of RA	RA events	Other events
I: 1998 – 2002	Regional Development Agencies Act (Nov) 1998 Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions (White Paper) (May 2002)	The NWRA receives designated status as the region's 'chamber'. Working arrangements are fairly informal. All of the region's 46 local authorities are involved. The NWRA's stakeholder component expands from 6/7 to 22.	• Sep '01 Liverpool and Manchester sign a Joint City Concordat • Mar '02 The 'walk-out'	June 2001 UK general election; the Labour Party wins a second term 2002 Manchester hosts the Commonwealth Games
II: 2002 – 2005	Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Act (May) 2003 Compulsory Planning and Purchases Act (May) 2004 Regional Assemblies Bill (July 2004)	The structure is formalised: 56 local government seats (all 46 local authorities and 10 co-opted from local government for political party balance) and 24 social, economic and environmental votes. Total membership is 80, although not all seats are filled.	• Dec '02 – May '03 Soundings exercise; NW to hold referendum • Mar '03 Lancashire CC resigns • Aug '03 – May '04 Local government review by the Boundary Committee • Jul '04 NW referendum postponed • Nov '04 NE referendum "no' vote'	June 2004 European Parliament elections (regional; postal) May 2005 UK general election; the Labour Party wins a third term

III: 2005 – 2008		An Executive Board with three local government representatives from each of the five sub-regions, plus six SEEPs forms an upper tier to the full assembly. The KPGs are then streamlined.	• Mar '05 NWRA Chief Executive officer leaves • Mar '06 Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council resigns • (indefinite) Lancashire County Council returns	
	Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration (part of HM Treasury's Comprehensive Spending Review) (July 2007) Prosperous Places: Taking Forward the Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration (consultation document) (March 08)	The full assembly becomes defunct, the Executive Board becomes the region's "Leaders' Forum" and the NWRA is discontinued.	• Mar '08 – Jun '08 SNR consultation process • Jul '08 '4NW' launched	2008 Liverpool is European Capital of Culture
(2009)	Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act (Nov) 2009			(Apr' 09 Manchester selected as a 'City-Region' pilot

North West population density: by local or unitary authority, 2009

Population density, 2009 (people per sq km)

- 2,500 or over
- 1,000 - 2,499
- 500 - 999
- 250 - 499
- 100 - 249
- 99 or under

1 Barrow-in-Furness
2 Blackpool UA
3 Preston
4 South Ribble
5 Blackburn with Darwen UA
6 Hyndburn
7 Rossendale
8 West Lancashire
9 Sefton
10 Liverpool
11 Knowsley
12 St. Helens
13 Bolton
14 Bury
15 Rochdale
16 Salford
17 Trafford
18 Manchester
19 Oldham
20 Tameside
21 Stockport
22 Warrington UA

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Figure 7.2 The North West region, showing population concentration (Source: ONS 2001a)

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7.2 Stories supporting institutional development

Having gained an overview of the general development of the North West region and its assembly from the previous section, attention can now be focussed on the issue of institutional design/change. This does not mean that the account given above will now be translated into academic prose in constructivist institutionalist terms because, as explained in previous chapters, the new institutionalist understanding of 'institution' does not translate to, in this case, the regional assembly as a whole or as an entity (like it may have done under the 'old' paradigm of institutionalism, but would here be distinguished as an organisation rather than an institution). It refers to a rule – a regulated pattern of behaviour that helps to realise and maintain the assembly. In the case of the NWRA, whilst there are examples of actors altering the assembly structure (for example most clearly with the creation of the Executive Board), this research is explicitly and primarily concerned with the clear example of institutional design/change that underpinned that organisational change, of how the pattern of representation was modified from the wider assembly to that executive board.

In the NWRA, actors took the rule regarding councillor representation that was based on the standard principle of 'one man, one vote' – which would have been translated into the regional context as 'one council, one vote' – and changed this so that three councillors would represent a *sub*-region. Likewise, the councillors' stakeholder counterparts had to be streamlined from the wider SEEP group to fit with the executive board. There is little information available about how this was decided upon – the account above indicates a whirlwind of activity in the assembly year 2005-6 but there remains numerous unanswered questions about how this change happened. It is this process of institutional design/change

that will now be focussed upon, by drawing out interviewees' stories that helped to realise that institutional design/change.

The North West 'was always' five sub-regions

In order to create a rule which stipulated that councillors must represent the North West on a sub-regional basis, the sub-regions themselves had to be created, or rather, they had to be reconstructed or remembered. Thus, interviewees, whilst reporting on the rule change, told a story about the pre-existence of the five sub-regions. And it is always specifically a pre-existence i.e. it is always told in a reverse order. The (crudely distilled) forwards plot of this story would be set in a scene of five sub-regions, which (one day) attempted to work together on a region-wide basis and, having then experienced problems, returned to the more than adequate, indeed better, sub-regional pattern of collaborative working. But the story is never told in this order – the sub-regions are not mentioned at the outset but referred back to as if it is common knowledge or generally accepted that they were always there.

This story appeals to the past which, although not quite looked upon as some 'golden age' of sub-national government, was constructed as comfortably familiar. The notion of the sub-region was perceptibly, to those involved, a rehashing of the former metropolitan county councils of Greater Manchester and Merseyside (which had been abolished in 1986) and also a confirmation to those county councils still intact – particularly the audibly fearful Lancashire County Council – that they would in effect remain so. Indeed, the 'sub-region' label can be understood as a new term that is effectively synonymous with the county – many councillor respondents used the two interchangeably. Maintaining that the North West had

always been five sub-regions in this way allowed the process of institutional development to be more palatable than introducing some threatening, additional layer of bureaucracy.

Interviewees lean on the point that the chair of the board had always (or at least as long as there was a chair with the board in its former, pre-executive guise) rotated around the five sub-regions. And, to assert the relatively long-standing tendency towards sub-regional identification, they recall that attempts to organise any local government association were more successful along county lines than for the wider region, even as the NWRA started to take shape:

> 'There were attempts to set one up and in fact, the Assembly tried to, sort of, act as a midwife and set up a North West local government association and we got to the point really of having someone to Chair it and we appointed a lead authority and there were a number of things that were set up on that basis, but there never seemed to be any impetus behind it'

(NWRA_LG05).

Another councillor admitted 'I was Chair of it [the NWLGA] for 12 months and I don't think we ever met' (NWRA_LG06).

Whilst interviewees (particularly councillors) direct attention to these sub-regional LGAs, it quickly becomes clear that it is only the Greater Manchester sub-region's association – the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) – that has a significant impact. Merseyside's attempt to form a local government association did not take hold like it did in Greater Manchester, however Merseyside is still said to identify at the sub-regional level due

to its particularly poor socio-economic circumstances during the 1980s and 90s that led to it having its own (regional) Government Office until 1998 (Dimitriou and Thompson 2007). Indeed, Merseyside, as well as Cumbria, had only relatively recently been forged into the North West region. The Cumbrian sub-region has historically and culturally had greater links further northwards and eastwards. And, finally, the sub-regions of Cheshire and Lancashire had long clung to their status and identity as large counties.

These features all play a significant part in commentators' views that the North West is one of England's most fragmented regions (Dimitriou and Thompson 2007; Pearce & Ayres 2007), and thus into the notion that it has 'always been' an area of five sub-regions. Hence, if the development of a sense of regional identity had been hampered by the predominance of the city (and county) identities (Dimitriou and Thompson 2007), this move to rally around the sub-regions helped to move towards a regional identity by appealing to, or at least not threatening, the identities that were already present whilst simultaneously appealing to, or rather promoting, something unique to the North West.

The sub-regions story also appeared to solve the problems that the NWRA had been suffering, namely the rather intertwined issues of party politics and localism here. The hindrance to region-wide collaborative working caused by party politics and localism was the central complaint in this story. The assembly arena had thus far been used by a number of politicians to play out national party political battles over the point and principle of regional assemblies in general, and many councillors, needing to be seen to be working on behalf of their locality for the sake of renewing votes, were struggling to 'make the leap' in representing the region.

One interviewee observed how some 'politicians used to come for a button fight – to have a nice political row and to go home and forget about it' (NWRA_LG02).

A stakeholder involved in the meetings described how the assembly

> 'went through a whole period and intensified as the question of moving towards democratically elected regional government came up the political agenda – those that were opposed to that utilised the existing assembly as a means of kind of pursuing that agenda. So, I mean, we had some fairly, kind of, not uncomfortable, but I mean really unproductive sort of meetings where we were kind of, you know-, one of the Conservatives would turn up [...] and you know, it was just constantly a kind of a-, anything on the agenda, no matter how distant from the question of the future of regional government, it was always the occasion for a speech, you know, attacking regional government. I have to say, they always used to go when the BBC cameras left, like, so there was always this kind of, you know, the fairly sterile politics of it around the time of the-, particularly at the height when we were in the regional government debates'
>
> (NWRA_SEEP03).

True to the adversarial nature of British politics, the Conservative councillors probably took this approach because of the dominance of Labour Party representatives at the regional level. The institutional development of representation on a sub-regional executive board format was constructed as the solution:

'The reasons why the Executive Board is different: it's sub-regionally based – the sub-regions decide their own membership and that takes the politics away instantly because people are thinking geographically rather than party politically. You all of a sudden build a position of trust with politicians that aren't Labour led, because they all of a sudden are in a forum that listens to them so you don't have that suspicion'

(NWRA_LG02).

This interviewee was heavily involved in this process of institutional reconstruction and talked about the attempt to steer councillors' thinking away from re-election locally towards re-election (sub-)regionally, thus towards thinking almost regionally more generally:

'...the opportunity to spend lots – in our region it was £1.3 billion of regional funding allocation on local authorities' projects for transport… Great! But how do you build regional consensus around that? Well, you certainly don't do it in a party political way. So how do you take party politics out of it? You base it geographically, you get politicians thinking about what they care about as much as, more than even, you know, the prospects for re-election. If you're a politician and you can say because of your involvement in this Executive Board, you know, the collective view of the Executive Board has delivered your transport project [...] you can say through your involvement you steered through a major infrastructure investment which is going to affect your area positively, the prospect of getting re-elected is quite high, and that's what politicians care about most. But what they care about next most is their locality because the media lives

in locality rather than in region. And what they care about next most is then the party politics. So if you can tap into their locality interest and their own personal political interest in getting re-elected and having a say over large sums of money – [that's] a regional function that was meaningful'

<div align="right">(NWRA_LG02).</div>

Developing an 'effective' and 'efficient' streamlined NWRA

Running concurrently with the story that looked back to move forward is a story of how actors faced frontwards, attempting to construct a way of working that would be effective and efficient. This story concentrates on the benefits of streamlining the assembly towards the executive board, thus it aspires towards that end. In doing so, it constructs the (then) current assembly as in a state of chaos, riddled by walkouts and threats of more.

With regards to the local government component, the first big blow came from Lancashire County Council:

'Lancashire left, biggest authority, well, one of the biggest authorities in the region […] Now, they left with something specific […] – they left because they saw that we were promoting directly elected regional government, right, which they vehemently disagreed with because it meant the demise of Lancashire because a prerequisite of directly elected regional government was single tier local government, as it was in Wales and Scotland. So they left, they came back in and I was the person stood at the door to greet [named individual]'

<div align="right">(NWRA_LG06).</div>

This excerpt from the transcript of a local authority colleague of the NWRA member in question demonstrates, particularly in the last sentence, the brevity of the Lancashire's episode but it also, therefore, points to the precariousness of the times.

Besides Lancashire County Council, there were threats of yet more walkouts:

'What happened – and you go back now to the 2005 general election – Michael Howard, the then leader of the Tories said, when we get elected, we will abolish Regional Assemblies, because they've took power from local authorities. Trafford, being a new administration, with a leader that's extremely politically ambitious, a friend of mine, as it happens, said, right, it's a waste of money and we're going to leave. Now, the theory was that a lot of other Tory authorities would do the same. They never did, right? So, it was a touch of, you know, we'll lead the charge'

(NWRA_LG06).

There was as much, if not more, volatility with regards to the assembly stakeholders, too:

'The NWRA had run into a period where it was not-, it wasn't running its affairs very well. It was trying to do too much. It was driven, I think, by a desire to show that the regional development agency didn't hold all the strings and that the, you know, the assembly needed to have a say on all sorts of different, you know, pretty well the whole gamut of everything that was going on in the region. As a result, it didn't really do anything very well and it lost its credibility. Its meetings

were badly run, very contentious and people from groups like the CBI and the Institute of Directors and the Federation of Small Businesses, those sort of organisations which had been part of the assembly, just walked away. They actually walked out of a meeting and they tried to suggest that we should walk out as well'

(NWRA_SEEP02).

A particularly dramatic account was given by an interviewee who described the stakeholder group as a 'small cabal' led by a particular individual (who the interviewee referred to by name). The following extract gives a flavour of the chaos constructed around the issue:

'Our SEEP group was totally dysfunctional […]. They were essentially a group of about 6 or 7 people, who carried 24 votes with them, around with them in their pockets. They had pulled the drawbridge, they'd closed themselves off, they were totally undemocratic and unrepresentative, and they left out vast swathes of what was coming to be the work of the assembly. And in a sense it wasn't their fault because they'd been led to this place because basically all that we had wanted from the SEEP group was to say that we had a SEEP group, to tick that box and to carry on with the important business, which was to get ourselves to a place where we could put ourselves in the running for elected status'

(NWRA_LG02).

It is from this basis that the executive board structure could quite easily be promoted. Interviewees highlighted the efficiency and effectiveness of the executive board structure by comparing and contrasting the added value of participation in this than the assembly in its previous guise. For example, one interviewee emphasised the apolitical or technocratic nature of this streamlined format, describing it as 'only a decision-making body' and adding

'we don't present papers to them for information. We present papers to the advisory groups for information and then they form advice to present advice to the Executive Board for decision. The Executive Board is made up of local authority leaders, of leaders of political groups from local authorities. So it's got that kind of high-level representation, which is important because it's, you know, if you're forcing all the decision-making element to them, you have to have people who are used to making decisions'

(NWRA_LG02).

These interview extracts demonstrate that in the process of institutional reconstruction there is much promotion of this new operating procedure as a way of giving councillors the opportunity to have a greater impact through sub-regional working and so to gain much more from their participation. But the novelty of it is somewhat played down; this effective and efficient executive board model is presented as the logical or obvious choice:

'It all mitigates towards this model. Well, how do you do that? You get it regionally based. Sub-regionally based with 80 members? Well, no, that's ridiculous. So you whittle it down. So, what do you replace? What was the

problem? The old Policy Group was a forum of bedlam, a mass of arguments – it really was a group which people walked out of on a regular basis. You replace that with a board. You give that board decision making powers, because you can't have people at higher, you know, you bring on people at higher level – it's just not rocket science'

(NWRA_LG02).

The crisis of the 'North East "no" vote'

As chapter 2 details, the referendum in the North East region on the issue of directly elected status for the assemblies was a significant event for regionalism generally. In the North West, it was critical. Interviewees recollect a preoccupation in the North West with potentially gaining directly elected status and so hastily designing a structure towards that aim. Following the referendum in the North East region, in which the idea failed to gain public support, the referendum planned in the North West was postponed indefinitely and assembly actors faced an uncertain situation. This became an appropriate time for a shake-up. The North East referendum became the hook to hang (or sometimes to blame) change. The '"no" vote' was constructed into a crisis to which the NWRA had to respond. This crisis preface, and the tempo in which it was told, galvanised the necessity of a pre-emptive strike – the North West had to seize this opportunity.

The NWRA actors had to be strategic with their choices – they had to use their insider knowledge and they had to discern and appeal to the central government mood at the time so as to ensure that a their proposals would be accepted. Thus, the NWRA echoed the buzzwords of 'impact,' 'effective' and, most significantly, 'streamlined,' and reflected these

in the development of the executive board structure. Changing the way that councillors performed their function of representing the region (i.e. with fewer representatives, justified by the new sub-regional format) was a necessary part of creating an innovative, streamlined assembly. Here, an interviewee describes the perception of necessity:

'If we'd have been a Regional Assembly directly elected, I wish, right, we would have had statutory powers. We would have been there, we would have been, you know, a reality, where we were almost an abstract reality, if that's not bad grammar, because we were there, you know, voluntarily, kind of recognised by government, you know and once we weren't going to have directly elected regional government anywhere, it became kind of, it had to be smaller, it had to be fit for purpose, you know, it had to be more focussed and the obvious way to do that was to be more sub-regional'

(NWRA_LG06).

One interviewee describes

'one set of arguments-, I mean the point at which we were creating this new executive board was, this was the answer to the question of, what on earth do we do now the North East referendum has gone down. What's plan B? It was clear that government opposition, social partners, you know, the kind of the assembly in the format it was at the time of the North East referendum wasn't sustainable. […] There was a sense of policy draft nationally. I mean, the argument was that, unless we get our act together, one of two things will happen: either the whole

project just collapses and there isn't a regional voice and we're back to this, kind of, we'll lose out because other regions will be better organised, or that central government will come up with some kind of plan B. It might not be what we want. […] So the argument was, if we can come up with a set of propositions that says, we've brought together in a streamlined and effective way, you know, a body that reflects all the key interests in the region that can take decisions on behalf of the region, that can respond to things like the regional funding allocations exercise in a mature and blah de blah de blah. That's a potential model because we know the government is still looking for a plan B. This is it'

(NWRA_SEEP03).

This extended excerpt includes a number of elements from the other stories and so demonstrates how they cut across each other. This story constructs the North East '"no" vote' as a crisis, as a reason to revise some of the aspects of regional working that had, quite simply, not been working. It connects to and draws upon the other stories by complaining about the previous chaos with regards to local authority and stakeholder walkouts and threats (as in the 'streamline' story) as well as by pointing to the logic of working on a sub-regional basis (as in the story of the sub-regions, presented first above). It justifies the move by referring to the wider national context, specifically the North East and central government. Actors in the North West faced, and perhaps resented or feared, having a central government model eventually and suddenly imposed upon them. Therefore, they took the lead in revising their institutional arrangements.

This move is given a positive spin. It is not just reactionary. It is logical and pragmatic. Indeed, it is not just logical and pragmatic but it is something to aspire towards for the good of the NWRA. As one interviewee put it

> 'what we're putting in place is something that's pragmatic, that's been shown to work, that's adaptable to most of the foreseeable changes to the new regional landscape and it ensures that the people out there know that there's a plan and that their jobs are safe, and that it should be a smooth transition'
>
> (NWRA_LG02).

This quotation demonstrates the instinct for survival that is drawn out in the story. The North East '"no" vote' story, in this sense, presents the overall picture. Indeed, it points to the overall picture of the national scene. The story effectively unites the actors involved in the assembly together behind the common cause of the North West, aspiring to create something for the North West that would endure through the period of uncertainty. In so doing, there were relatively clear undertones of the tensions between the central-local/regional (or, here, sub-regional) relations, pointing to the different group positions involved in this process of institutional design/change.

7.3 The Stories Reframed

The previous section filters out and presents the main events, the main stories in the overall history of institutional development, across the North West data. In doing so, what is also

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revealed is the difficulty in putting these together. Stories are more or less naturally present in the data but can be given in varying degrees of cohesiveness, sometimes choppily fragmented over a transcript and sometimes given in large chunks. The analytical toolkit employed to detect and arrange the stories – that conceptual framework of complaint, justification and aspiration – is helpful, but it becomes obvious that the data need to be placed into those categories. As an overall pattern, they are present, but they are broken up and confused by parts of each other. The original narratives are a medley of cross-cutting stories and, whilst they can be distilled into separate streams, their degree of artificiality comes to the fore.

It becomes obvious that the stories could not stand alone and, intuitively, it seems that something is missing. Given that the stories charted are those told in and for the process of institutional design/change, it follows that they are necessarily success stories towards that end. They tell the implicitly agreed version of events that help to justify the decisions made in the process. Thus, they can be understood to be the 'public relations' versions – those that tell the 'good bits' and gloss over the grievances and disagreements. But these reveal themselves during the process of data collection: as the researcher learns more from each successive interview, the questions posed are reframed to probe further into some of the more controversial parts of the stories. This represents the process of building rigour into the analysis – the constant critical reflection affords attention to the ambivalence detected in building the stories. There is more than stories overlapping and intertwining with each other – there are instances of hesitance and evidence of conflict, though these are quickly brushed over.

In a sense, this is not surprising because, as stated above, the stories are designed – they are constructed, they are discursively selected – and their sharing is effectively implemented as a way of quietening and/or overcoming conflict for the process of institutional design/change. But for rigorous analysis, this has to be brought into the research process. To this end, it is necessary for an additional part to the analysis. And for this, the concept of frames again, or more precisely the process of reframing anew, becomes useful. Whilst there is an agreed version of events, there are also moments of tension represented in the data as instances when interviewees seemingly drift in and out of shallow and deep focus. Here they are reframing stories, telling (or, indeed, not telling) the stories from a different angle, almost as if convincing themselves of the argument or the plot they are giving. What is uncovered in the process of probing this reframing is the original frame or group perspective/position (as those explored in the West Midlands case study) from which the story is told. It effectively undoes the stories to an extent at the fragile seams and thus demonstrates how the story was woven together by the actors.

This brings the two parts of the analysis together – the frames and the stories – with the process of reframing being the mechanism that demonstrates their link. This act of reframing also demonstrates, more widely to the thesis, what actors discursively do to overcome differences and tensions in processes of institutional design/change. They share stories that reframe their original positions and, in the process, they design and change together institutions in sites where there is ambiguity over pre-existing institutions. This section takes the stories presented in the previous section and reanalyses the data from a different angle in an attempt to unearth the original group positions. It must be noted, however, that this is not an attempt to distil the 'truth' – it is not assumed that the versions presented here are the 'real'

stories that have been smothered in some conspiratorial act. Instead, the analytical process of reframing the stories enables an appreciation of how these resultant intersubjective products (the shared assembly stories) might have been discursively selected and put together in the first or earlier instance.

The NWRA or Greater AGMA?

The first story, in building up the idea of the sub-regions, draws on the pre-existing guises of those sub-regions in the form of the (then) current as well as the former county council areas. The former Greater Manchester and Merseyside metropolitan county councils as well as the undeniably distinct and vast areas of Cheshire, Cumbria and Lancashire are discursively constructed as having always existed as fairly separate sub-regions. The relative strength and autonomy of the Greater Manchester and Lancashire sub-regions, in particular, are recognised as is the successful longevity of the Greater Manchester sub-region's local government association – the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA). It is noted in the second story that Lancashire County Council was not insignificantly disruptive to the regional assembly project, but Greater Manchester via AGMA is generally portrayed as a constructive lead.

However, probing this 'constructive lead' further, it appears that AGMA was viewed by some as almost in full control of the institutional design/change of the NWRA, hence the description of the NWRA as a 'greater AGMA' at times. Within one interview, the power of AGMA is gradually revealed, beginning with the statement that 'AGMA is massively powerful…it's not as united as it used to be, simply because Labour's lost councils, but it's still massively powerful' and developing into a seemingly neutral though nervous report that

'they've been likened to gangsters and the mafia and all the rest of it, but they are all powerful and they're also, even now, with different parties taking control of certain things, they're still very powerful' (NWRA_LG06). Finally, a specific individual is named in the transcript as someone with whom the interviewee dealt with 'quite extensively to do with the reorganisation and it was very much the model that [named individual] wanted and developed through AGMA and then through to the region' (NWRA_LG06).

This demonstrates how AGMA was viewed as having played a significant role in the development of the particular sub-regional model of the NWRA that transpired. However, some went further and to suggest that the whole sub-regional, streamlining and executive board effort was almost entirely driven by AGMA's lead. The following interviewee condenses the whole process from the wider NWRA to the current 'Leaders' Board' structure via AGMA:

'The Regional Assembly was, in effect, telescoped into what is now the For North West, but it was set up with a Regional Assembly meeting, say, once a year, but with an Executive, North West Regional Executive that was very much affirming the sub-regional structure of the North West, so that a board was set up with equal numbers from each of the five sub-regions, but with voting power, not accorded to Councils, but according to each sub-region, so obviously AGMA would have the biggest percentage of the vote and so on, even though each of the sub-regions had three members, so that would make three fives are fifteen, there was then the question of, what about the Economic and Social Partners, they then came in with, I think they have nine members now, so that became For North West with a Chair,

they set up and the Chair has always been someone from AGMA, so it was [named individual] until last year, now it's [named individual]. I mean, that signifies the dominance, if you like, of AGMA in the region and they set up then a system of committees for transport, housing, economic development, audit and they were, sort of, balanced proportionately according to the sub-regions and that's where we are today and there is a tripartite agreement between Government Office, the Development Agency and For North West, as it's now become, to take, which is called the Regional Partnership, to take forward things like agreements on the regional funding allocations and so on'

(NWRA_LG07).

It is certainly a lengthy extract, but this is because it locates both the wider and longer-term trajectory of institutional design/change for the region in the hands of AGMA. Taking the data here presented together demonstrates that the sub-regions were not quite 'always there' as much as would be reasonably assumed from the regular repetition of this idea by the interviewees. The data here does not exactly 'disprove' this notion, indeed it demonstrates that the sub-regions were entrenched to varying degrees, but what it draws out is the dominance of one sub-region in particular. What is therefore implicated is the idea that 'there were always five sub-regions in the North West' was discursively selected and strategically promoted as a story, persuading the actors involved who were both listeners and then tellers of the story, and that this thus allowed AGMA to entrench its dominance. This actor was able to strategically use its context to construct and argue for a material reality in the form of the executive board with its streamlined representation. The elements are mutually constitutive, reinforcing each other. And it is the work of a powerful actor − of AGMA − which was

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arguably empowered by the pre-existing institutional context, though this too was constructed and reinforced by the perception (an ideational element) of empowerment.

What is also emerging is the lack of analytical clarity about the actor involved. It is usually AGMA as a bloc that is described as the almighty, hence the description in the previous paragraph of AGMA as a single actor. However, data presented earlier in this section points to named individuals. The analysis follows the data; on occasions AGMA as a single unit is demarcated and solidified against others and on other occasions AGMA can be penetrated to decipher certain individuals that make it so. The following extract demonstrates the oscillation between the two:

> 'In AGMA, throughout all of the period that we're talking about, there has been one Chairman [...]. There has been one leader of Manchester City Council [...] and together, they have taken the other eight authorities along with them. Now, that's never occurred, no disrespect to the powers that be at Liverpool City Council, but there's never been a situation where there's been anyone at Liverpool who has been able to, sort of, bring the leadership to bear, to get everybody behind the common cause and I think that's a, plus the fact, I mean, once we moved, I mean, once the Regional Assembly was set up in Wigan, which was in Greater Manchester and in fact was the shared building, which was the home of AGMA, the secretariat of AGMA was across the corridor from the officers of the Assembly and it was geographically impossible for the Assembly not to take into account, very much so, the views of AGMA on everything'
>
> (NWRA_LG07).

This extract also touches upon AGMA's rivalry with Merseyside, or more specifically the rivalry between Manchester and Liverpool that is taken as accepted common knowledge in the region (or with reference to the competing airports for those not *au fait*). There is also a degree of rivalry, or perhaps only a slightly competitive mutual respect, between Greater Manchester and Lancashire, which has been demonstrated as another sub-regional force to be reckoned with. Thus, there are a number of frames within the local government component of the assembly with varying degrees of strength or relevance to the institutional design/change process.

A regional elite?

In the second story regarding the streamlining of the wider assembly into an executive board structure with representation from the sub-regions and a smaller stakeholder component, the original group positions were significantly easier to decipher. A number of reasons could account for this. Firstly, the task of arranging the stakeholder component around and for the new executive board structure was still being finalised at the time of data collection, hence for some the wounds were still raw and the fissures between groupings visible (relative to the contained conflicts between sub-regions within the local government part of the NWRA). Secondly, the rationale in this story did not have as long or as established a back-story as the sub-regions story could draw upon (which, on a more theoretical level, points to the role of persuasion and argumentation implicit in the stories). Finally, despite the previous point about specific points of history that can be drawn upon, it is of note that the chronology is often hazy with specific regard to the streamlining of stakeholders. The critical 'walk-out' that is drawn upon happened significantly earlier and was, for many stakeholders at least,

understood as resolved. That it was brought up in this story demonstrates that for others it was not resolved, and it also provides a clear example of discursive selection.

By now it is clear that there was a leader in the local government section of the assembly. The following quotation offers an account of how AGMA came to assert itself and, significantly, it points out towards other actors on the region scene (wider than the assembly):

'Well, after the vote was lost and after the campaign for regional government, after that failed, it was quite a deflated really and there was a question of what are we about and that lent credence to those who said that it's got behind its remit and the need to be a cut back and it came to a head, in a small way really, in budget discussions, cut backs were forced upon [the Chief Executive] who came under great pressure and I think that's where AGMA started to flex its muscles in terms of saying, well, look, unless the Regional Assembly sorts itself out and takes notice of us, we'll do our own thing and that was the writing on the wall, I think, plus the fact that the Development Agencies then went from strength to strength, no risk to their position and probably a feeling that they weren't as accountable as they had been previously'

(NWRA_LG07).

This sets the tone that for the reframing of this second story so as to include other actors in the region. In the development of the streamlined executive board structure and its concomitant institutional design/change, there was a secondary but significant aim to create an entity that would be enduring (i.e. would withstand criticism from and even meet the approval of central

government in the first instance). This was taken to necessitate the inclusion of 'big business'

in line with what was heard as the Government's likely wish at that point in time. Thus, the

earlier departure of high-profile business stakeholders was made to be significant again in

order, firstly, to tempt such figures back and, secondly, to convince the others of their

necessity.

Given the (very small) amount of people involved in this process, it is difficult to reproduce

data that demonstrates the divisions between groupings on this matter but that does not

expressly names those individuals or make frequent reference to their business 'constituency'

(or lack thereof) thus rendering them identifiable. The following quotation, however,

summarises the situation and the feeling of the SEEP perspective:

> 'The Executive Board, in terms of stakeholder representation, was selected by the
>
> Board. Now, the original three stakeholders they had on board were
>
> representatives of very large business interests in the region […], which is quite
>
> legitimate for them to want people with that level of business experience to be on
>
> board. […] The other point about this – the three stakeholder representatives on
>
> the Executive Board that were initially co-opted were not members of the SEEP
>
> group, the stakeholder group, on the assembly and had no contact with that group.
>
> They were just, kind of, they were business men drafted in from outside, who had
>
> no other engagement with the business of the assembly. I think you can probably
>
> imagine – we were dashed cross and continued being very cross…'

<div align="right">(NWRA_SEEP05).</div>

Unsurprisingly, there are more instances of softer tones when recounting this episode. One local government interviewee, while attempting to direct attention away from the issue, put it quite simply – 'there was a feeling that we didn't have any proper capitalists, right?' (NWRA_LG06). Another stakeholder expressed a fair degree of understanding, attaching importance to the expected central government perspective:

'So there was pressure on to produce an Executive Board that had, you know, kind of, the leading local authority leaders on plus individuals that would be clearly seen by central government as, you know, kind of key private sector people. You wouldn't necessarily have got that if you'd have simply gone through an electoral college process of the existing Social and Economic Partners Group because you still had the problem with [named individual] being outside, so on and so forth. I can well see there'll be some interest groups that will see that senior politicians have wanted to pick and choose who […] came to the table and people will question various motives. I think the motive to it was very much a kind of, we need to demonstrate to central government that we've got […] leading figures from the private sector'

(NWRA_SEEP03).

The story of central-regional relations

There is a clear undercurrent to all the collected interview data that draws attention to the relationship between the region and the thing – the force or entity – with which it constantly works. The North East '"no" vote' story makes clear reference to central government, as do most mentions of the executive board structure and the necessary streamlining that was

entailed in this development. However, it is the tone of the reference that alters somewhat depending on how the situation is being framed. At times this is expressed as the Labour Party or specific named individuals within it who are particularly sympathetic to the regionalist project, generating mutually beneficial engagement, and at other times this is expressed with relative hostility, as a tale of 'us-and-them' in which the region is jostling against central government variously labelled 'Westminster,' 'London' or 'Down South.'

The process of framing and reframing the story plays on the geography of region. Its distance from the location of central government, where decisions about it are made and instructions for it are given, can be used to create a common enemy of central government behind which the NWRA members can pull together. But more frequently interviewees describe the relationship in a more neutral manner, using the distance as a factor that relates to and helps to justify the very existence of the NWRA as well as the whole regionalisation project. This is obviously the collectively developed version. Eager to convince outsiders of the value of their work, assembly members are accustomed to and even anxious to repeat this point when questioned about any and every aspect of assembly business.

In the collective North East '"no" vote' story, the development of the executive board story is presented as something that was desired – the actors here were doing this because they wanted to – and the approval of central government was a supplementary 'tick box' exercise that was mentioned in passing. Probing this matter and this relationship further, however, reveals an attitude more aligned with a sense of duty – the actors were doing this because they had to. This demonstrates the nested or embedded quality of the institutional design/change process.

Despite the autonomy that was granted to the regional institutional design/change process, the actors perceived themselves to be part of a system that requires central government approval.

This is undeniably true, or it demonstrates that the widespread perception of the necessity of central government approval made this true. It is still a discursively selected understanding that is acted upon, which is brought to light by the positive spin that can be put on the relationship. The distance and difference of the North West from London (and its other labels) is occasionally used to promote the potential leadership of the NWRA in the development of regional institutions and structures and thus the value of a degree of autonomy for the region. Reconstructing the rule of councillor representation on a sub-regional basis and forming an executive board makes the North West the 'model' region.

Data on this point are peppered throughout the transcripts because actors regularly frame the relationship from these two different angles described above. However, more substantial portions of interview transcripts relating to the (then) latest central government agenda can demonstrate the different stances on the relationship. On that central government agenda at the time of data collection was the HM Treasury's Review of Sub-National Economic Development and Regeneration, which called for a re-evaluation of working relationships between the regional bodies and for a reprioritisation of assembly core functions. Actors in the North West region felt that they were already doing this, as one interviewee details:

'In a sense the SNR plays just into our hands in that. It's perhaps not the way we would have liked it to come about – it could have been a lot better and more supportive a document, but actually the single strategy we buy into completely. It

makes sense to us the RDA having delivery powers if we have the power of strategic direction. Any model that puts bureaucrats as politicians is unsustainable. So the politicians that we bring to the table through our Executive Board, they will always make sure that they have the power to sign off and they will always make sure they have the power to influence strategic direction in the region'

(NWRA_LG02).

Interviewees draw comparisons with other regions, emphasising their own forward thinking, for example

'I don't know what RDAs in other regions, the attitude they're taking, whether they're being triumphal, I do not know. But in our region, our RDA is being a lot more realistic that this is about LAs, the powers LAs have. SNR is all about LAs in my view and it's more effective and it makes life easier for the RDA in this region if they can talk to the LAs collectively through an Executive Board structure, which has already been shown to work, than individually'

(NWRA_SEEP02).

Always returning to the omnipresence of central government, many interviews conclude with some recognition that the North West region's proposals require a seal of approval, for example:

'So long as government don't shoot us down, this will continue. And all the indications we have [...] we've consistently, the message we've got has been we like the North West model and we think the regions should have the freedom to come up with solutions that work in their own region – then I don't see any reason why that should not be approved… And the civil service also – although my own view is that it was the civil service that wrote the stakeholders out of the SNR and that it's they who have least appetite for stakeholder engagement, you know, even they accept the strengths of the new model'

(NWRA_LG02).

This quotation reveals the mixture of hope and expectancy. Interviewees audibly try to tell the tales with enthusiasm and pride, as the new format not only promoted the criteria of impact with efficiency but it also foresaw and withstood the effect of the Government's agenda that shortly after decreed the discontinuation of the regional assemblies in their contemporaneous form. The NWRA had become defunct but the newly branded '4NW' lived on.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented the data generated from the North West Regional Assembly case study. In it, I have distilled the data into story formats that were as close as possible to the format in which they were offered by the interviewees in the first instance. There are three significant stories identified, the first of which centres around the long-standing and enduring

presence of five sub-regions in the North West. Another story deals with the streamlining of the NWRA into a more effective and efficient format, working towards the institutionalisation of an executive board structure. And a final story constructs a crisis of the negative North East referendum result.

With reflection of this case study alongside the previous, it became necessary to probe deeper into those stories presented to ask questions about the groups of actors involved in constructing and sharing the stories. Through this process of reframing the stories, I discovered the dominance of a particular actor in the region (AGMA). This raised questions about who was effectively in control of the institutional design and change processes here, eventually distilling an elite set of actors in the region (AGMA included) that promoted the conveniently streamlined executive board. And finally, the reframing of the North East '"no" vote' story confirms the inter- and intra-sectoral groupings present, but brings actors together for the aim of regional institutional development as against the region's common foe of central government.

This chapter moves notably faster than the previous two, because it was no longer necessary to demonstrate the methodological (as well as theoretical, though to a lesser extent) development that accompanied the data analysis. But this chapter still demonstrates the movement back and forth between the concepts, and the light this sheds on the data. Essentially, what is demonstrated is another layer of complexity in the institutional development story. Here, it is less a battle between the local government actors and the stakeholders for greater influence as in the West Midlands assembly, but between particular units of local government and between particular stakeholders in the region for control of the

design process. The construction of stories that can resonate with actors wider than the particular actor or set of actors vying for power is key, creating an inclusiveness that effectively contributes towards the design and sustenance of a representational format that would endure through the foreseeable move to discontinue the assemblies but retain a streamlined board in its place.

CHAPTER 8: THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

<u>Introduction</u>

Thus far, I have presented the case studies of this thesis alongside the significant methodological development that has become a central part of this thesis. I have attempted to demonstrate this as it speaks to the theoretical projections set out earlier in this thesis. However, I have perhaps done so to the detriment of the findings specifically as they relate to constructivist institutionalism. This chapter attempts to redress this imbalance, demonstrating the strategic-relational behaviour of the actors and highlighting the selection behind their discursive offerings. It is a relatively short chapter, mirroring the pause for reflection presented in chapter 6. In a similar vein and format, it refreshes and clarifies the key findings of the preceding data chapters (through their interview data and repetition of regional assembly stories). As such, it retains the detail of the findings, before more general conclusions can be drawn out in the following chapter.

What is brought to the fore in this chapter is the role that comparing the case findings *en route* played in getting to the intersubjectivity of the cases i.e. to the discursive constructions that became shared and perpetuated understandings of the organisational divisions of representation in the assemblies, thus supporting their specific design. This, to a large extent, resolves the dilemma described earlier about the ability to make comparisons and then draw general conclusions for the assemblies – the role of comparisons across case studies was not to explain institutional design and change processes in all the regional assemblies, but to instil

a critical reflex, more aligned to that of a more practiced researcher who can tacitly draw upon previous experiences of handling a wealth of primary data.

8.1 Forming frames in the West Midlands Regional Assembly

The case study of the West Midlands Regional Assembly, beginning in chapter 5, concentrates on the different groups of actors involved in the regional policy-making process and constructs their discursive constructions, or here their frames. It details the local government, business stakeholder and other stakeholder group positions through distilling the interviewees' perceptions of their situation and their perceptions of themselves as well as their others, holding these together as their frames. In this WMRA case, even the early, informally gathered data pointed to the significance of separate positioning of the actors, thereby enabling a conception and construction of frames as that web of references to the actor's perception of their situation, themselves and their others.

According to local government interviewees, which included local government association employees who played a significant role on behalf of the local councillors, it was 'natural' for local government to lead the institutional development of the WMRA. Whilst there were a number of balances to be achieved internally in this sector, there was a clear goal and, effectively, a democratic mandate to work together for the greater good of the region. Their relationship with the business sector had to be formalised and with the third sector had to be nurtured, and then the assembly would develop an identity apart from the LGA. The business sector frame was marked by a cohesiveness born of similarity and practised collaboration as

well as a defensiveness born of an initial 'snub' for some from the RDA. The third sector had to manage their diversity and maintain their multiplicity of voice whilst forging an identity as the 'other stakeholder group' that was distinct for its 'otherness.'

It is *from* the construction of these frames that instances of institutional design/change begin to emerge. The local government example is quite straightforward. The local government section describes itself as the 'natural home and host' and from this takes the lead in the assembly's organisation. The idea of 'natural home and host' is a discursive selection and demonstrates strategic-relational behaviour. It uses the commonly acknowledged and widely accepted 'fact' that local government is a unit of 'proper' formal government to assert a leading role for local government in this arena. And 'fact' is presented here in inverted commas because it is not incontestable in this context; it did not have to be a relevant piece of information here, but it was an idea that was discursively constructed as a fact of context. The actors that voice this are relating their position to the pre-existing institutional context, taking (and creating) the understanding that sub-national government is (or should be) embedded in the wider system of government, and from this they are developing an idea of the appropriateness of their formal lead in a governmental arena. This is their strategy to create a norm, hardened into a rule about councillor representation standing at a 70% proportion, which is then formalised further in the embodiment of the assembly's organisational structure via seat allocation. This becomes institutionalised and would affect any subsequent attempts at design, having empowered the local government actors as lead designers.

This presents a good example of strategic-relational and discursively generated institutional design/change in a site of institutional ambiguity. This example demonstrates strategy

because the perception of local government as 'natural home and host' helps to pursue an interest for local government, that is to gain (or as they saw it, 'retain') a larger proportion of seats relative to the other actors involved. It is relational because it draws on the surrounding context and its pre-existing institutions, in that it locates the regional assembly within the system of British government (rather than some novel form of voluntary tripartite governance). It is strategic-relational because it draws authority from, and is therefore convincing because, it makes demands against that governmental backdrop. It is strategic-relational also because this was a matter of discursive selection, of choice. This has already been revealed to some extent through this section's interpretation of government rather than governance, but recall that the WMRA never *had* to be as it was, indeed it never had to take any particular form or even exist at all because the institutional design for the RAs was a decision for the region (and hence its qualification, in part, as a site of institutional ambiguity). Thus, the development of the 70% norm or rule was the result of uncontested discursive selection.

The analysis above presents an example of strategic-relational and discursively generated institutional design/change in a site of institutional ambiguity, but it does not deal adequately with the intersubjectivity that is an explicit part of this research. Arguably, there is already some degree of intersubjectivity involved in constructing the frames, because these are the group positions that have been formed and therefore represent a collection of different peoples' – the subjects – perspectives and opinions moulded into a single whole – the intersubjective. This occurs not only by myself as the author of this research but also by the interview respondents as they answer questions about their involvement in the assembly,

particularly as relative to others. This act itself could potentially contribute towards the discursive construction of that group collectivity and the strengthening of that group identity.

This sectoral group identification and formation could be seen as a 'first round' of intersubjectivity in institutional design/change, but, because the research was focussed on the institutional design/change of the regional assembly, there is not the data to support this claim. More significantly, this data did not reveal itself, which suggests that the groupings did not become successfully institutionalised. Indeed, the data pointed towards the lack of or the erosion of group divides in the process of and realising institutional design/change. This begins to point to the intersubjectivity *between* groups, where the group is the subject and the intersubjective relates to the wider assembly that brings the groups together. From this perspective, it could be seen that this tag-line of a 'natural home and host' is an intersubjective product because it was not contested but accepted, thus becoming a WMRA truth. This, in part, created a case for taking a different (story-based) approach to the next case study. But, before that, the other sections of the WMRA case also pointed towards the revision of the concept of frames for analysing institutional design/change.

Analysing attempts at institutional design/change from the business and other stakeholder groups was much more challenging, but there were a number of revelations of discursive selection and strategic-relational action. In constructing the frames, the interviewees were probed about the relationships between the sectoral groupings and this induced reflections that compared as well as empathised with other positions (alongside answers that more closely fitted the questioning about roles and relationships). From this position framing, the other stakeholder group, in particular, asserted their difference and defended their 'inability' (as

they rightly supposed the local government section would probably see it) to speak with a single voice. This revealed a good example of discursive selection by some of the OSG by their use of the idea of 'participatory democracy' to justify and promote their internal diversity.

What is less clear in this instance, however, is the strategic-relational action towards institutional design/change that results from or is supported by this discursive construction. It is difficult to decipher because it is not easily viewed as an active action, but the OSG's strategy that related to their relative diversity as contextualised was their retention of that diversity. There were multiple organisations that participated in the OSG, thus a multiplicity of voice and, effectively, connection to a wider demos (hence the reference to democracy). From one perspective, it could be viewed that this did not result in any specific institutional design/change because the OSG voice was superseded in the wider assembly context. However, it could equally be argued that the OSG's retention of their diversity and multiplicity of voice contributed towards the demise of the assembly in its form at that time because the stakeholders would not bring one OSG position in the traditional majoritarian representative style that the local government section (who had made firm their leadership) would have wanted.

Having stated this, it must be recognised that the OSG were keen to stress the positive aspects of their relationships with both the business group, where they perceived and promoted their kinship, and the local government section, pointing towards the large degree of consensual working. Exploring instances of institutional change, as the OSG respondents described them, raised two examples of organisations moving from the OSG to the business group as

well as a challenge to the scrutiny chair role and the establishment of an equality and diversity partnership for the assembly. However, critically examining these instances led to further questioning about instances where the OSG did not change or challenge decisions that could have worked to their detriment, or could have institutionalised a marginalised position for the OSG. These were the uptake of a proportion of OSG seats by town and parish councils that effectively could have fit in the local government section, the ratio of local government to stakeholder proportions and, finally, the proportion of business and others between the stakeholder component of the assembly.

Despite (my) viewing these as examples of 'collusion' against the OSG, though, it became clear that the data more firmly pointed towards an overwhelming feeling of consensus. The OSG did not feel that they were in a marginalised group relative to business or the assembly as a whole, but that the assembly had developed a clearly consensual style of working. These instances transpired to be simply isolated instances rather than discursive constructions that contributed towards institutional design. They might have contributed towards institutional design/change, in that they were instances of acceptance of local government attempts at institutional design/change but they were not discursively constructed as such. Indeed, they were exactly the instances that the wider discursive construction was designed or strategically selected to hide. The assembly members pulled together behind this emerging story of consensus and did not mention what I had viewed as collusion unless teased out of them (due to my own normative stance of supporting the idea of a 'truly' collaborative assembly).

Thus, aiming to analyse the attempts at institutional design/change (or non-change/challenge) from these discursive constructions labelled frames in the first case led to the key finding of a

shared story across the group frames. It was in building up specifically the relationship aspect of the frame that directed the analytical probing over the sectoral divides. What this case study reveals is that there was previously perhaps excessive attention paid to the separation between the groups to the detriment of the sharing between them. The data had initially pointed to the significance of sectoral groupings in this case and, methodologically, the attention on group frames was warranted given the theoretical assumption that group identification and belonging were important in this multi-sectoral collaborative environment. The constructivist institutionalist framework had been developed to analyse the connection between individuals and institutions, and the empirical site had directed attention towards representatives of a group (as any public policy environment invariably would, be that a sector, constituency, political party etc.). Therefore these group frames were sought in the data but, while these were found or forged, there also emerged a collective story about consensus that seemingly brought the separate groups together.

This raised a complex issue concerning the separation of groups and the impact of time. It is perhaps understandable that in the early stages of collaboration actors would be supported by what was familiar already and what was also the factor that marked their entry into this policy process. These actors were brought into the regional arena from sectors that they already worked in or for and on the grounds of some sort of representational link (to be developed) with that sector, and so it was assumed that this sectoral grouping would have an impact in this intersubjective institutional design/change process. Thus it was important to gain an understanding of those positions, but the data then pointed to the gradual erosion of the group divides and the construction of collective consensus, presumably and effectively over time.

8.2 Sharing stories in the North West Regional Assembly

Chapter 7 presents the North West Regional Assembly case study. It focuses on the stories actors tell about the development of this assembly, which are, effectively, stories about the institutional design/change process. These stories present themselves in a much more organic format than the position frames that required more selection and categorisation of the data in the previous case. However, this point is relative; the data still required first the breakdown then the reconstruction of data into the story format as traditionally conceived of with a beginning, middle and end, because they were often intertwined or ran in snippets across the length of the transcript. Translating this format specifically to the institutional design/change process, the traditional story format was mirrored as 'complaint, justification and aspiration' to plot the developmental dramas.

The first section of chapter 7 gives a detailed account of the background in this case, more so than that which was given in the WMRA case, because the NWRA appeared to go through much more institutional design/change both before and after the legislation that introduced and allowed for the regional assemblies (the RDA Act 1998). The history of the assembly was generally recounted from earlier than the legislation, referring to the North West Regional Association in place from 1992 and the North West Partnership that the association morphed into in 1995. There were also connections made to earlier governmental structures that bore some resemblance to the region in that they were larger than the regular size of local authorities (the Greater Manchester and Merseyside metropolitan county councils that were in place between 1972 and 1986), which in turn led to connections made with the large

Lancashire County Council in place before and throughout the period of regionalism under analysis in this thesis.

Following this, the chapter presents the three stories detected in the data. The first relates directly to the history briefly summarised above. Its tellers use, or discursively select, the pre-existence of these large county council structures to justify the idea that the North West region had 'always' been made up of the (now) 'sub-regions' of Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Lancashire as well as Cheshire and Cumbria. This story complains about excessive localism and party politics and creates wider collaboration as an aspiration, using the extant sub-regions as a means to get from the (then) current situation towards the ideal. This is closely related to the second story, which concentrates on streamlining the NWRA. Building on the complaints and the aspirations of the first story, which effectively dealt with streamlining the local authority component of the assembly, this second story focuses on the streamlining of the stakeholders. It plots a crisis event of 'the walk-out' in which a number of high-profile (business) stakeholders left the assembly (and a number of local authorities also threatened to leave). This story structured such volatility as something to move away from, and aspired to create instead an assembly that was better able to work constructively for the region. The story reasoned a streamlined and high-profile tier to be more 'efficient' and 'effective' for regional decision-making.

Both of these stories play into the third, which takes a broader perspective and situates the region in its national context. Its central drama is the North East '"no" vote' which refers shorthand to the referendum on directly elected status for the assembly in the North East region that returned an unfavourable response and effectively extinguished the proposal for a

referendum and directly elected status for the assembly in the North West region, too. The lack of organisation robust enough to withstand the expected onslaught from central government was the complaint in this story, drawing on and creating a commotion of the local party politics of Councillors and the problematic stakeholder engagement. Ideally, there needed to be in place a region-wide decision-making body for and of the North West, and that needed to be efficient and effective to be palatable (and thus justifiable) to central government. This story collects together the actors behind a common cause, much like the story of consensus in the West Midlands region.

What these stories are doing is overcoming divisions. Critically examining the stories with reference to the WMRA case leads to questioning about the positions and relationships involved in the stories. When probed, the actors retell their stories from a slightly different perspective. The resultant process gives the impression of telling the 'truth.' The actors reframe their stories back to reveal the positions from which the assembly and its development were once viewed. Framing those forwards, the actors revise any rigidity of their own position to accommodate others and create commonalities. By creating stories together with others beyond their own frame of reference, actors build bridges across those divides to support and realise the process of institutional design/change.

In the NWRA case, the first story of the sub-regions appears to take the local government actors outside of their localised (i.e. local authority and party political) positions to encourage a wider collectivism towards the region. The sub-regions are a step in that direction. Probing this story for the original positions reveals the strength of the former Greater Manchester metropolitan county council, in particular, as well as its rivalry with the former Merseyside

metropolitan county council. Playing on this 'fact,' or indeed strategically acting in relation to it and *reframing* it via the discursive selection of the sub-regions' (now 'long-standing') pre-existence, the story accommodates the interests of the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) whilst effectively empowering the other sub-regions to balance that strength and begin to work towards the region.

The frames, here, are evidently not along the sectoral divides as they are in the WMRA case, but along divides within the local government section. Framing a story about the sub-regions enables the localised and party-politicised actors here to move forwards in the institutional development of the regional assembly (and, as a methodological tool, reframing them backwards enables an understanding of the original frames that the story has developed from and also erodes). In the second story, too, reframing the story about streamlining reveals divisions that are not necessarily on sectoral lines but within the region, between an elite set and the wider assembly. The story supported the development of an executive board for the assembly, effectively a higher tier, upon which the key stakeholders in the region could participate in more efficient and effective decision-making. The inclusion of 'big business' interests in the region (but not at that time in the assembly pool of stakeholders) became essential to this end. And this was made palatable to other assembly members, some of whom were left disgruntled by the preference shown to outsiders, through the discursive construction of the earlier experience of regionalism as chaotic and in urgent need of improvement. Thus, whilst the necessity of developing a streamlined assembly was parroted by all, reframing the story enabled an appreciation of the tiered groupings in the region.

The final story has the effect of bringing everybody together. Critically analysing it for the former frames, it is now clear that there were divisions within the local government section and within the stakeholders in the region. The story of the North East '"no" vote' then, brings the local government actors and stakeholder together in order to realise an assembly, pressurising actors to overcome their sectoral differences for the greater good and constructing them behind a new 'us and them' against anything and everything not of the North West (though central government in particular). It layers over the other stories, giving an overall push to institutional development for the NWRA, in order to institutionalise a form of regional governance that central government would approve of or, at least, could not easily dismantle. It is equivalent to the WMRA's story of consensus, bringing all the actors together over their sectoral divisions to realise the assembly.

A number of instances of discursive selection and strategic-relational behaviour have already been revealed within this discussion. The framing of the metropolitan county council rivalry as the long-standing presence of sub-regions is an example of how one element of the context was selected and constructed into an idea that would enable institutional development. It is relational because it is related to the pre-existing context, which effectively structured the options for the institutional design of representation onto the executive board (i.e. three local government members per sub-region). And it is strategic because it contained and maintained AGMA's hold as well as enabled an efficient and effective assembly (tier) to be realised.

Likewise, the second story discursively selects 'the walk-out' and constructs around it a need to regain order. It relates the story to a 'real' event and it strategically achieves the inclusion of high-profile business stakeholders onto the emerging executive board structure. And 'real'

is here presented in inverted commas because, just as the 'fact' of formal local government being necessary to lead the WMRA institutional design/change was presented in the previous case study, this 'real' event need not have been a relevant piece of information nor a significant event. It is undeniably a material fact – it certainly happened – but for some interviewees it was insignificant. It was *constructed* as significant by those proponents of the story that stood to gain from the strategy that it supported. There were other dramatic events that were arguably more significant, but those arguments were not made, either because it was not in any actor's interest to do so or because any story around them did not impact upon or realise any institutional design/change that would render it worthy of repetition.

The third story relates the NWRA to the national scene, discursively selecting and constructing the North East '"no" vote' as an impetus to quickly approve an imperfect but acceptable tiered representation on an executive board with the strategic aim of quickly institutionalising the NWRA, or something akin to it specifically of the region and for the region as a counter-balance to central control. This story thus draws attention to central government and, by doing so, demonstrates the nested or embedded nature of the institutional design/change attempts. All the other stories draw on, or strategically relate to, the pre-existing institutional context but what is particularly interesting about the way that is done in this story is that while the NWRA looks laterally (to the East) to build a strategy for institutional design/change it simultaneously looks to the South but develops a rather ambivalent approach to central government. It discursively constructs central government as an entity against which the NWRA has to struggle for some degree of power, thus the story uses this relationship as part of the strategy to institutionalise a streamlined tier for the assembly. At the same time, though, with the same 'fact' of central control, this story also

reveals that the NWRA's interests are structured *a priori* to this attempt at design, in aspiring to a streamlined format that would gain central government approval.

It could be argued that this interest was constructed by and was the strategy of the elite in the region, that it suited the key stakeholders who were seen to be crucial for the operation and survival of the assembly to participate on an efficient and effective decision-making unit serving the NW region by achieving economic growth (and simultaneously their own stakeholder interest) rather than concentrating on creating the means to achieve the same ends collaboratively. And it could be argued that it suited AGMA (itself part of that elite set) to conflate its interest in having a streamlined executive board sustaining its influence with a central government exigency born of the rejection to any regional bureaucracy, that this was AGMA's strategic-relational discursive selection. Indeed, the process of reframing the sub-regions story unearthed data that expressed AGMA's dominance in the NWRA's institutional development, but the intersubjective story for institutional design/change was constructed to get around or (reflecting attention away from my critical 'collusion' interpretation) get over such grievances.

Herein lies the role of intersubjectivity. The intersubjective product − the story − demonstrates what was effectively collectively decided to be taken forward for the process of institutional design/change. The North East '"no" vote' constructed to achieve a streamlined board structure that would meet the approval of central government in the NWRA case, like achieving 'consensus' in the WMRA case, was something that pulled the actors together. It became a repeated line of reasoning that justified the particular institutional design/change that transpired. From a critical perspective, it could be viewed that the story was merely

'parroted' by all. But regardless of whether all the actors were 'actually' convinced or 'merely' acquiesced, these stories effectively became a truth in their respective contexts and thus a material reality. The success of the stories is demonstrated by not only the institutional design/change that transpired but also by the lack of clarity regarding the initial sources of the strategy. Only with critical examination, via framing the story backwards, can the actors' original positions be deciphered, thus raising another round of critical questioning.

Conclusion

I have, in this chapter, brought the findings of this research to bear on the projections set out in the theoretical framework given in chapter 4. I have not lost the collection of terms developed and employed on the way, even if some of the breakdowns of the concepts and ideas could have been forgone. But I have brought them together into a cohesive package of analysis. This is not to say they have been forced into use, only that the results transpired to be relatively straightforward and perhaps could have been achieved without recourse to such a collection of terms. By this, I specifically refer to the breakdown of frames into the different angles of the actors' positionality and to the breakdown of stories into the component parts to chart the development of a plot. Whilst I maintain that the employment of frames and stories together enabled the results to be clarified in this project, a significant – perhaps excessive – amount of time and effort was expended in making these work and, at times, distracted from the wider project. The following and final chapter looks at the wider project to draw final conclusions, highlight the contributions of the research and direct attention to further points of study.

CHAPTER 9: FINAL CONCLUSIONS

9.1 Thesis conclusion

The preceding chapter has demonstrated how the rules regarding representation in the West Midlands and North West assemblies were developed by the strategic discursive selections and actions of the actors involved. Certain actors, namely local government (in both cases), had demonstrably more sway in the proceedings than others, because they were well-placed to reconstruct their authority and experience of governmental affairs in the local tier and bring this to the regional arena. And the stakeholder members, whilst evidently able to exercise some influence over smaller details, largely did not question or oppose this balance of power. Thus, the patterns and mechanisms of representations in the assemblies did not transpire into any innovative form but maintained, or imported, the 'status quo' from other tiers of government i.e. with elected members effectively 'in charge' but working closely with other actors, while listening particularly attentively to private sector allies.

This summary of the findings, away from the specifics of the discursive constructions of frames and stories detailed above, serves to demonstrate the interplay between structure and agency that constructivist institutionalism highlights. The actors clearly had some level of agency, because they were able to construct the assemblies and make changes, as evidenced by the small-scale changes by and between the stakeholders in the West Midlands and the larger-scale restructure in the North West, but this was structured by the pre-existing context. The influence of institutions in the wider context, i.e. of democratic representation as it works

in local government, rendered the local government actors more powerful. This was not 'fact' as such in the regional arena, but it was accepted by all involved. The pre-existing institutional context was brought to bear on the regional institutional design and change processes so that this was not a 'level playing field' and, rather, the local government actors were already positioned into a controlling faction by all the actors' understandings about, and perpetuation of, their collective pre-existing institutional context.

As stated in the case study results chapters, a number of the stakeholders, notably those from the private sector actors, had already been involved in partnership working with the local authorities in the region, which therefore affected an earlier phase of institutional development that effectively constructed the designers of this phase of institutional development under investigation (as the framework drawn up from the theory of constructivist institutionalism set out). This meant that the inclusion of business stakeholders was not wholly novel in the regional assembly phase of development, and that that previously hierarchical relationship was brought into the institutional design of the assemblies. This previous partnership working also meant that the business actors enjoyed the fruits of what could be described as a longer 'run-in' to the institutional development of the regional assemblies, thereby being more 'empowered' than the other/ third sector stakeholders in the process. There is still agency on the part of the stakeholders, which is confirmed by how actors strategically draw on elements of the surrounding context to justify attempts at change as well as an overall lack of attempt to change the organisation and operation of their representation because it was 'acceptable' or 'appropriate' or 'pointless' or even a 'good deal.' These terms at once reveal strategic agency whilst also demonstrating the actors'

understandings that they are already part of a system – a structure – within which they must act (or otherwise not be part of it).

This is the picture as seen through the lens of constructivist institutionalism. It is important to note that, with that sentence, I am not saying 'constructivist institutionalism works.' Certainly the data fit the theoretical projections of constructivist institutionalism, because it was this theory specifically that was being explored. Or, rather, I set out a research programme exploring institutions in a way that fit with the ontological position of interpretivism, which prefigured any theorizing about institutions. But the aim was not to prove or disprove the theory of constructivist institutionalism, nor to argue through the empirical data that constructivist institutionalism is better than the other institutionalisms. As chapter 3 argued in detail, the 'choice' of constructivist institutionalism was based on ontological coherence, and my ability to select and 'test' other institutionalisms would be precluded by my interpretivist 'skin.' However, I am still able to see how other institutionalists would frame the same picture. Normative institutionalists would hone in on the thoughts of appropriateness from both the stakeholders and the local government actors in the assembly; the maintenance of the status quo would be seen as the inevitable effect of actors already structured into these patterns because of the weight of governmental institutions surrounding and penetrating the regional arena. And rational choice institutionalists would hone in on the consequentiality attached to the representative proportions; it would be rational for the local government actors to try to retain their power and it would be equally rational for the stakeholders to concentrate on protecting their right to a 30% share of assembly seats.

There is an undeniably clear case for employing historical institutionalism's concept of 'path dependency' here. The maintenance of the status quo and the inevitability of the balance of power are both accounted for through this concept, so much so, in fact, that historical institutionalists probably would not have recognised any institutional ambiguity in the first instance. Instead, the historical context of the assemblies' institutional design shows that the development of the regional bodies was a governmental agenda, rather than an organic one, and so the process would continue with governmental representatives at the helm. Even if the North East region, where the initiation of institutional development could have been described as organic, were taken to full case study depth, historical institutionalists would perhaps point to the historic reasons for the politicised actors wanting, fighting for and maintaining some degree of regional governance. And the position of constructivist institutionalism would not disagree with that, but would draw attention to the construction of that history to support that actor's cause, to the agency involved in the discursive selection of fitting elements of the structure, rather than to the inevitability of that path.

What constructivist institutionalism thus allows for and demonstrates is interplay between structure and agency in the institutional design/change process. This is better demonstrated by the North West case study, specifically by the ability of AGMA to convince others that they way forward (out of the ambiguity) was to work on a sub-regional basis, which served simultaneously to retain and consolidate AGMA's power as well as to inject an idea that many actors could support into a process of regional development that had suffered a setback. Indeed, even the idea of a setback or a crisis induced by the North East '"no" vote' was something constructed to play a part in the story supporting AGMA's desired institutional development for the region. In a similar vein but in a less obvious way, the apparent lack of

power of the OSG in the West Midlands region can be reframed to reveal a strategic move to defend the OSG's desire *not* to represent, *not* to speak with one voice and *not* to have to behave like local government, leaving that role to the councillors, as the pre-existing context could be drawn upon to support.

9.2 Thesis contributions

As I stated earlier, the point is not to prove or disprove constructivist institutionalism but to operationalise it, to explore how it helps to analyse a process that institutionalism on the whole has struggled to account for. I have attempted to do this by designing a complementary methodological package to the theory for the analysis of institutional development, firstly by translating constructivist institutionalism into a set of projections to identify the component features of the institutional design process (context, ideas, designers) and, second, by constructing a set of discursive forms to understand the designers and their use of contexts and ideas (frames, stories). There was, *en route*, a significant methodological journey that regularly returned and referred to the philosophical considerations of social science research, which perhaps became prioritised to the same extent as the empirical results. But it was only through this that the empirical results could be navigated, could start to take shape and make sense of actors' sense-making processes. The complex layers of meaning had to be deconstructed to identify the component parts as well as reconstructed to identify the processes of institutional design and change.

It was specifically by taking forward two cases at different points of the regionalist agenda that enabled this analysis. While the context-specific nature of interpretivist research precludes comparisons between case studies to arrive at truths that are generalisable across, in this case, all the regional assemblies, the constant reflexive and critical engagement with the data encouraged by interpretivism enabled my development as a researcher to question my initial readings of the data. Otherwise, a more superficial understanding of the data perhaps would have seemingly 'stated the obvious' and confirmed my assumptions about the relative weakness of the stakeholders rather than appreciated the complexity of the interplay of structure and agency that was revealed through working back and forth between the cases. And what transpires is a story of findings that does, in fact, have general relevance, if not applicability; through the empirical work in this thesis, I put forward a case of collaboration in a public policy environment whereby different types of actors were differently able and differently motivated to affect processes of institutional design and change. Pursuing two regional assemblies to full case study depth, particularly these two cases which contrasted significantly in their levels of developmental activity, revealed the process of actors' discursive selections and related actions.

Therein lie the contributions of this thesis. Empirically, this thesis presents primary research of the 'insider' perspectives of regional assembly processes. Whilst the assemblies received a fair amount of academic attention in their early days, interest – both public and academic – waned after the North East referendum, but this thesis generates findings about how these bodies continued to exist and, in doing so, it gets into the internal workings of the assemblies, rather than treating them as whole and solid units of government. On a more abstract level, the empirical findings of this thesis contribute an example of collaborative governance, more

specifically of institution building in sites of governance where there is a degree of ambiguity, which, as the introductory chapter set out, is of interest to current public policy practice and theory.

Furthermore, the marriage of the theory of constructivist institutionalism and the methodology of interpretivism is, perhaps, the central contribution of this thesis. There is significant overlap in the projections of these '-isms' – with constructivist institutionalism focussed on institutions but drawing out the role of discursive selection and its subsequent strategic action, and with interpretivism focussed on actors' meaning-making of their situations thus drawing out their agency in relation to their institutionalised understandings. They travel in different directions but are complementary, stemming from the same ontological base of anti-foundationalism, so they both draw attention to what is socially constructed, but their historical development has meant they are focussed on different points of analysis – institutions and meanings, respectively. In this thesis, I attempt to bring this together, arguing that constructivist institutionalism is an interpretivist researcher's theoretical lens though which to look at institutions. This brings a level of coherence to the interpretivist explorations into institutions and a way for interpretivists to debate on a topic of central importance to political science and public policy, across the spectrum of ontological/epistemological positions, not focussed solely on meaning and discourse etc., but understanding the relevance of these concepts to other topics. At the same time, this union, as it has been set out in this thesis, equips the researcher empirically exploring constructivist institutionalism with a set of conceptual tools from interpretivism by which to navigate and analyse the primary data.

This methodological development was perhaps the biggest challenge of the thesis. Battling through questions about the value of interpretivist research and the generalisability of the findings led to a somewhat protracted development of conceptual tools through which to analyses the data. The two case studies were, at times, almost treated as if they were at two different points of the same regionalist trajectory, revealing a normative position (supporting regional assemblies and a significant proportion of stakeholder representation within them) that, arguably, an interpretivist researcher should not have if the tenet of interpretivism is to unearth a range of views and not interject in the process to privilege any of those views. This employment of the concepts of frames and stories could be described as a strength of the thesis, as a methodological contribution that innovatively encouraged a heightened level of reflexivity to become a central part of the research process. It certainly was a route out of the dilemma faced between conducting a properly interpretivist, single case study and the requirements of the 'commissioned' element of the project. And, indeed, as stated above, without this iterative analysis, the results would not have captured the terrain of structure and agency that constructivist institutionalism was seeking to capture.

In so doing, however, I conducted analyses that were on the peripheries of their theoretical bedrock, for example, this thesis could have easily taken just one case study and conducted either a frame analysis or a story analysis of the empirical results. In putting together a set of methods for data analysis, I adopted the concepts away from their wider theoretical programme which perhaps pulled the project in too many different directions and meant that the concepts were only quite superficially dealt with (relative to the literature available on them). But there is certainly some merit in joining or relating together some of the myriad of interpretive concepts which can be employed and developed in quite an insular, isolated and

mutually exclusive manner. In that sense, my motivation here was similar to the theoretical development: this thesis was about honing in on those areas where there potential overlap and room for development by creating and clarifying links. But the imbalance that transpired in justifying the method to layer upon the discursive selection involved in constructivist institutionalism meant that my results demonstrated a process of argumentation.

Given this and the heavy reliance on particular transcripts in the analysis, I see a future research agenda in locating those particularly powerful individuals involved in institutional design and change. How do certain actors become leaders in the institutional development process, leading others to be convinced of their stories and changing frames to widen inclusion behind those stories? Even if the specific concepts of frames and stories were deemed superfluous to need, it would be interesting to focus on those particular individuals whose words are parroted and whose institutional preferences are perpetuated. And whilst it would be interesting to continue to keep abreast of the developments in the sites that were the regional assemblies, these arenas are perhaps too narrow to explore those individuals without revealing their identity. However, the difficulty in exploring an alternative site of ambiguity is the risk entailed in that ambiguity: like the regional assemblies, it is difficult to explore institutional design without knowing whether that institution will take hold or not. But some form of governance in the regions will likely continue and this research will provide a fruitful base from which to conduct some longitudinal analysis of institutional construction by individual designers.

9.3 Final words on governance, institutions and ambiguity

Returning to the starting point of this thesis, it is fair to reflect that the overall stories of institutional development in the West Midlands and North West regional assemblies certainly were not the rosy stories of novel collaborative governance that many had wanted them to be. That different people unencumbered by traditional governmental ways of working could have taken advantage of an ambiguous situation by developing new institutions with some appeal to enacting a different kind of democracy was an idea that was scuppered with the publication of the SNR. Of course, the objective researcher is not supposed to have such a normative position but the inclusive nature of the interpretive position – unearthing those previously marginalised viewpoints through critical analysis – follows through into the empirical world. And what remains is a call for a more deliberative form of political analysis, like that promoted by Hajer and Wagenaar (2003), or a phronetic social science, as promoted by Flyvbjerg (2001), whereby researchers are much more directly involved, almost as 'facilitators' in their sites of research. That would certainly create impact by mitigating state-centric moves made in line with the latest swing in adversarial politics. But, in the meantime, attempts to overcome ambiguity and design institutions of collaborative governance in the regional arena will continue to be subject to the direction of the pre-existing institutional apparatus of the local and central government.

A) Meetings attended

Meeting	Date
English Regions Network Stakeholders meeting	28/11/06
English Regions Network Annual Conference	13/03/07
East of England Regional Assembly Stakeholders meeting	17/04/07
North East Assembly Executives meeting	14/05/07
Yorkshire & Humber Regional Assembly Stakeholder meeting	15/05/07
English Regions Network Stakeholders' meeting	12/06/07
English Regions Network Stakeholders' meeting	11/09/07
South East England Regional Assembly Plenary	14/11/07
English Regions Network Stakeholders' meeting	04/12/07
West Midlands Regional Assembly Conference	28/01/08
North West Business Leadership Team Forum	08/04/08
WMRA Other Stakeholder Group meeting	17/04/08

B) Example interview guide

1) How does the regional assembly work?

2) How did you come to be involved in the regional assembly?

3) How do the different assembly members work with each other?

4) How was the way the assembly works decided upon?

5) How have you seen the assembly change over time?

C) (i) West Midlands case study – schedule of interviews

WMRA	Interviewee reference	Interview date	Length	Notes
Other Stakeholder Group	WMRA_OSG01	22/04/08	59:27	
	WMRA_OSG02	28/04/08	53:40	
	WMRA_OSG03	01/05/08	01:05:52	
	WMRA_OSG04	02/06/08	01:29:58	
	WMRA_OSG05	04/06/08	42:15	
	WMRA_OSG06	11/06/08	42:29	
	WMRA_OSG07	24/06/08	01:21:04	
	WMRA_OSG08	19/11/08	01:27:20	Not part of the assembly when interviewed
	WMRA_OSG09	13/07/09	50:41	
Private sector	WMRA_BG01	16/04/08	01:24:51	
	WMRA_BG02	25/09/08	33:44	
	WMRA_BG03	03/03/09	49:02	
	WMRA_BG04	29/05/09	46:26	Telephone interview
	WMRA_BG05	25/06/09	32:46	Not part of the assembly when interviewed
	WMRA_BG06	28/07/09	31:14	
Public sector	WMRA_PS01	11/06/08	Approx. 1 hour	Not part of the assembly when interviewed Not recorded – consent not given
	WMRA_PS02	11/11/08	45:22	
	WMRA_PS03	04/06/09	47:00	
	WMRA_PS04	19/06/09	47:37	
	WMRA_PS05	15/07/09	50:02	
	WMRA_PS06	24/07/09	38:29	Telephone interview Not part of the assembly when interviewed

C) (ii) North West case study – schedule of interviews

NWRA	*Interviewee reference*	*Interview date*	*Length*	*Notes*
Social, environmental and economic partners (SEEPs)	NWRA_SEEP01	08/04/08	01:11:57	
	NWRA_SEEP02	08/04/08	51:09	
	NWRA_SEEP03	09/04/08	02:13:00	
	NWRA_SEEP04	09/04/08	Approx. 1 hour	Not recorded – consent not given
	NWRA_SEEP05	15/04/08	01:32:49	
	NWRA_SEEP06	15/04/08	17:18	Telephone interview
	NWRA_SEEP07	16/04/08	29:16	Telephone interview
	NWRA_SEEP08	17/04/08	51:44	Telephone interview
	NWRA_SEEP09	17/04/08	19:19	Telephone interview
	NWRA_SEEP10	18/04/08	01:19:54	Telephone interview
	NWRA_SEEP11	30/05/08	13:00	Telephone interview
	NWRA_SEEP12	05/08/09	42:52	Telephone interview Not part of the assembly when interviewed
Local government	NWRA_LG01	20/02/08	Approx. 1.5 hours	Not recorded – equipment failure
	NWRA_LG02	22/02/08	01:17:36	
	NWRA_LG03	22/07/09	13:06	Telephone interview
	NWRA_LG04	28/07/09	30:33	
	NWRA_LG05	28/07/09	52:08	
	NWRA_LG06	29/07/09	39:49	Telephone interview
	NWRA_LG07	03/08/09	37:40	Telephone interview

Stakeholder Representation

Tatum Matharu

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

English Regions Network

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Working with Regional Assemblies

Introduction

This paper is part of a series of research papers that focus on the stakeholder members of the English regional assemblies and aim to generate a greater understanding of the stakeholder perspective of regional working. The specific issue focussed upon in this paper is that of the representative role of the social, economic and environmental partners (SEEPs). Representation is a key issue throughout the political system, leading to debates about representativeness and electoral systems. This paper presents the range of stakeholder opinion on representation and considers the tensions of the stakeholder role, highlighting the dilemmas faced by stakeholders and regional assemblies.

This paper does not attempt to offer specific solutions to the challenges of stakeholder representation or promote one particular model for the future of regional working. It provides a framework for understanding the range of stakeholder opinion, which has been gained through in-depth semi-structured interviews, and presents a series of choices to be considered in the development of regional working. The SEEP members are the focus of this study but it must be acknowledged that this reflection is not limited to the SEEPs; local authority representatives, too, have to question their representative role in the region, for example with regards to geography – do the local authority members represent their ward, their council or the region? For many assembly members the responses to these questions raise complex and unresolved issues about representation, as will be demonstrated and explored in this paper.

The first section of the paper examines the concept of representation, locating the stakeholder experience in a wider context of debate around the complex nature of the term. The paper then considers the difficulties of stakeholder representation and highlights the dilemmas involved in the role. Finally, in light of the current consultation regarding the future of regional governance, this paper explores alternative models of stakeholder engagement and representation.

Representation

The concept of representation

In order to understand stakeholder representation in the regional assemblies, it is helpful first to understand the concept of representation more generally. The term 'representation' is not easy to define. In attempting a clear and concise definition of representation, it quickly becomes obvious that there are a number of different meanings or dimensions bound to this concept. This complexity has been recognised in discussions and debates regarding the role of politicians, and more recently it has become relevant in discussions and debates about other actors ('partners' or 'stakeholders') given their inclusion in the policy-making process.

A recent study exploring the experiences of those involved in local strategic decision-making highlighted the complexity of representation and identified several meanings for 'representative' as tabulated below[19]:

Range of meanings for 'representative'	
Elected by	Has achieved a majority vote in a process agreed as legitimate by those represented
Similar to	Has characteristics, experiences, interests or skills in common with the group, community or organisation represented
Nominated by	Has been asked, invited or appointed by a group, community or organisation
Presenting a case for	Is present to advocate a particular cause or protect a particular interest. This may be on behalf of group, community or organisation or for a more abstract constituency – e.g. the environment
Answerable to	Will in some way be held accountable for their actions and decisions. This may be at formal meetings, through briefings and reports, or what was described as 'walking on the streets', i.e. by living in close proximity to those they represent

This same complexity exists at the regional tier of governance. Given the lack of predetermined form and function of the regional assemblies as well as the novelty of the situation or lack of tradition at this level, those concerned have frequently questioned the representative role of regional assembly members. Responses vary and the range of meanings matches that presented in the table above. For a greater appreciation of this complexity it is helpful to understand the detail of stakeholder engagement, which reveals much about what and how stakeholders represent.

Stakeholder engagement

Social, economic and environmental partners are engaged in regional assemblies to ensure that social, economic and environmental concerns are taken into account in the process of policy-making at the regional level. SEEPs represent these sectors or, as many from the wide and diverse social sector prefer, a 'community of interest' via region-wide strategic organisations. Some of these organisations became established at approximately the same time as the assemblies, as part of the wider regional agenda, and thus almost naturally

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[19]This is taken from Maguire, K. and F. Truscott (2006) *Active Governance: The value added by community involvement in governance through local strategic partnerships.* York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

became SEEP members, whereas other SEEP members were invited into the regional assemblies and others presented their case for being involved.

In general, in most regions, stakeholders can become assembly members if they can demonstrate their ability to represent at the regional level the sector in which they are involved. In practice, this usually means that stakeholders have a two-tiered route into the assembly: they belong to and work in an organisation on a daily basis, sometimes referred to as their 'day job' or their 'parent' or 'home' organisation; and this organisation in turn belongs to an umbrella, regional organisation for the sector through which the stakeholder enters the regional assembly, usually referred to as the 'nominating' organisation or body. In some cases stakeholders only belong to this latter regional organisation or their home organisation is naturally a regional organisation, for example a senior officer of a body that speaks for a sector at a regional level or a regional officer of a national organisation that speaks for a sector could both be SEEP members.

Whilst SEEPs are officially nominated into their regional assembly seat, many undergo a formal election procedure to become the representative for their nominating body. SEEPs are clear that it is this latter, sector-wide organisation that they represent at the regional level, rather than their parent or home organisation. The stakeholders interviewed for this study were resolute and unhesitating in their responses to this question. They experience no conflict between their nominating organisation and their sector; in effect, as one stakeholder succinctly put it, 'they are one and the same thing.' Furthermore, all SEEPs are accountable to this nominating organisation and they fulfil this requirement through a variety of methods, such as formal meetings, regular emails and written reports.

As at the local level, there are several dimensions to the representative role of SEEPs. The table above can be used to summarise this point in relation to the stakeholder members of regional assemblies:

The SEEP representative role	
Elected by	Many SEEPs undergo a formal election procedure to represent their sector or community of interest in the regional assembly
Similar to	SEEPs, given their 'day job' in their 'home' or 'parent' organisation, are well connected to the sector or community of interest they represent; SEEPs have characteristics, experiences, interests or skills in common with their 'constituency'
Nominated by	SEEPs are formally nominated to the regional assembly following the internal selection process of their nominating body (whether this is by election or appointment)
Presenting a case for	Regional assembly stakeholders present the cases for the social, economic and environmental interests of the region in the decision-making process
Answerable to	SEEPs are accountable to their nominating organisations through a variety of methods

It is clear that the stakeholder representative role is multi-faceted. The complexity of the role as well as the variety of interpretations of what the stakeholder role should and should not involve has given rise to a number of tensions. These tensions require further attention for a greater understanding of stakeholder representation.

Understanding stakeholder representation

Having gained an appreciation of the complexity of representation as well as an understanding of the process of stakeholder engagement, this paper will now explore the difficulties of stakeholder involvement in the regional assemblies. This section presents the range of opinion on stakeholder representation as a series of dilemmas about what stakeholders should do and how stakeholders should be organised. These issues have emerged from the experience of SEEPs in regional assemblies in their current form and function, and an examination of these issues could contribute towards the current consultation that provides an opportunity to resolve these dilemmas for the future of regional working.

Delegate/Trustee

In the political system, both in theory and in practice, the ambiguity of representation has been recognised. There have been attempts to clarify the role of the representative, perhaps partly due to the sensitive nature of political representation, and normative judgements about the way in which political representation works have developed. There are two commonly cited categories of representation, that of the delegate and the trustee. The delegate model of representation posits that a representative acts strictly in accordance with the instructions or mandate of the group from which that representative is delegated. In contrast, the trustee representative is entrusted to exercise their personal judgement on issues whilst acting in the interests of those they represent. Seen as alternatives, these two notions of representation have dominated debates about representation.

In the regional assemblies, too, there are debates about whether stakeholders should be delegate representatives or trustee representatives. Many believe that the SEEP members are engaged to provide the voices of the social, economic and environmental sectors, seeing the stakeholder role as a two-way channel of information between the regional assembly and the SEEP sectors. However, the stakeholders' relationship with their sector or community of interest is questioned because of the practical difficulties of the role, for example the size of the constituency. This raises doubts about the delegate representative role as one perspective illustrates:

> "...if you represent someone you have a personal relationship with them... We have a constituent group of 18, 600 organisations – I would never say I represent them..."

Yet many recognise that the SEEP role entails a significant degree of pro-activity on behalf of their constituency and highlight this particularity as a legitimate part of representing the interests of their sector:

> "Very often we are pushing new agendas. So we're not necessarily consulting with our members [asking] 'is this important?' What we see is: there's a new policy or strategy being talked about and we want to get a foothold in there, we want to find out more about it, we want to send information out to the sector, we want them to get engaged, so it's quite pro-active…"

It is apparent that the issue is complex and, for many stakeholders, it is unresolved. Respondents in this study were reluctant to identify themselves as one type of representative or the other and they highlighted that the role often involved an interplay of both the delegate and trustee modes of representation. Either this needs greater recognition and understanding, or if one type of representation is considered more

suitable there needs to be more clarity about the role to ensure that appropriate representatives are involved in the regional decision-making process.

Informant/Decision-maker

Turning to the detail of the decision-making process, there follows a dilemma about what stakeholders do once they have reached the regional table. Are stakeholders supposed to present their perspective for the benefit of the decision-makers, or are they supposed to use their perspective to help negotiate a collective assembly decision? Are they informants to the decision-making process or are they regional assembly decision-makers? Opinion on this issue is divided and diffident, although it is generally perceived that the stakeholder role does not stop at simply presenting the priorities and preferences of the sector but includes actively shaping the outcomes of assembly work for the greater good of the whole region.

The design of the regional assemblies, however, can be a barrier to this broader role. Most of the regional assemblies have developed a similar organisational structure, which includes some form of executive board and a number of subgroups, committees or partnerships, as they are variously known, as well as a full assembly. Stakeholders value their inclusion in the subgroups, which enable SEEPs to use their expertise and provide a forum for collective deliberation. Whilst these are not the arenas in which final decisions are made, stakeholders prefer this constructive work to the frequently ineffectual full assembly meetings. Commenting on this, one stakeholder remarked:

> "I have no idea what it's like to be a back-bench MP, but I suspect it's like being a back-bench MP – you're kind of lobby-fodder if you're simply an assembly member and you're not part of one of those groups…"

In this environment, feelings of loyalty to the joint assembly decision or of regional assembly collectivity are not engendered. Describing the formal process of the full assembly meetings, one stakeholder commented:

> "We were all kept in separate rooms. We used to turn up an hour before the assembly, and the SEEPs would be in one room and the [party political groups would be in others], and then we all came together in this main assembly meeting and there was just formal business and then people left. And so there was never an attempt to integrate the groups…"

Compounding this problem the final decision-making power in most of the regional assemblies rests with the executive board, on which it is difficult to include more than a few SEEP members and function efficiently. This means that most stakeholders, whilst able to contribute significantly to the policy-making process, do not have decision-making power, and this leads to another related dilemma.

Individual/Collective

Given the executive board structure, there arises a dilemma regarding the relationship between the SEEP representatives at the inner core of decision-making and the wider SEEP group. There is a lack of understanding or a lack of agreement as to whether the stakeholders on these boards should be representing their sector or community of interest, as they are engaged in the regional assembly to do, or whether at this board level the stakeholder representatives should be representing the wider SEEP group. In most of the regional assemblies there are no explicit rules or guidance about whether the stakeholder role changes from the full assembly and subgroups to the inner core and where there are

rules stating that stakeholders involved on the board should represent the whole SEEP group, these are not always followed or enforced. One stakeholder elaborated why:

> "...we're there to represent some fairly diverse interests and those interests don't always align readily, and if they don't, I don't think any member of that SEEP group should feel constrained to express their views as they see them...If SEEP was seeking to act like a single voice, then I think it would not fulfil its purpose, which is to provide input from those different perspectives..."

The problem here is complex. There are differences of opinion about the stakeholder role at this level, as well as a number of difficulties that arise from each option, for example:
- If SEEPs act as a collective, how can the diverse range of stakeholder perspectives be accommodated by a single voice? If the board-level SEEPs are expected to present the whole range of perspectives, rather than a single collective position, do stakeholders become informants rather than decision-makers in the decision-making process?
- If, on the other hand, individual stakeholders are involved in the inner core of decision-making to represent their sector or community of interest, rather than the wider SEEP group, how should the board-level SEEPs be selected? Which of the stakeholder interests should be included on the board, and what, then, would be the purpose of the SEEP group?

This latter point about selecting specific stakeholders for specific roles leads directly to another dilemma facing stakeholders and the regional assemblies.

Issue-based/Continuous involvement
Related to the issue of the SEEP collective, there is a question about when or the extent to which stakeholders should be involved in regional policy-making. At present, the regional assemblies have collections of SEEP representatives from which stakeholders are channelled in to various subgroups. This is usually a decision taken in the SEEP group and stakeholders are usually selected according to their expertise and interests or sometimes according to stakeholders' availability. This means that stakeholder representatives are continuously involved in all aspects of regional assembly work, and this can also lead to fruitful, sometimes unexpected, alliances between different regional assembly members.

Harnessing the knowledge and skills of stakeholders alongside local authority members in this way has been one of the resounding successes of the regional assemblies. The discontinuation of the regional assemblies puts this achievement at risk. Stakeholders will continue to be involved in the regional policy-making process but the dilemma here is how they will be engaged. Should stakeholders be invited to participate in decision-making on an issue by issue basis or in specific policy areas according to their expertise and interests? Or should stakeholders be continuously involved in all areas of regional policy-making?

Involving stakeholders on an issue by issue basis or in specific policy areas according to their expertise and interests is logical. This usefully employs the knowledge and skills of stakeholders in the policy-making process. However, how will stakeholders be selected for the specific roles? Whilst some of the alliances that have been forged so far could potentially continue with little disruption, how will stakeholders be found for new policy issues and problems? There may be obvious choices but there is a risk that the selection will be narrowly defined, not allowing for the full range of diverse interests to be considered as has been enabled by the SEEP groups in regional assemblies thus far. Organising a collective SEEP group after the regional assemblies could enable the development of well-rounded

policy to continue, however there are practical barriers to this if stakeholders lose their administrative and financial support.

There are no straightforward solutions to these problems and no perfect model to fit all the regions. These dilemmas oblige standpoints, enabling priorities and preferences about SEEP representatives to be discerned and new ways of working to be designed.

The future of stakeholder engagement

The recent Sub-national Review (SNR) announced the discontinuation of the regional assemblies in their current form and function[20]. The document contained little mention of stakeholder involvement in future arrangements for the region but the subsequent SNR consultation document has made clear that stakeholders will continue to be engaged in regional working[21]. The consultation exercise provides an opportunity for actors at the regional level to address questions about the organisation and inclusion of stakeholders in the future regional policy-making process, which will now be led by the Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) and supported by a forum of local authority leaders.

The series of dilemmas presented in this study can be used as a framework to consider what parts of stakeholder engagement are necessary and what are desirable. This can be taken forward to inform the development of the regional policy-making infrastructure. Taking the dilemmas above together, the options presented can be combined to create a number of models for stakeholder engagement in the post-SNR region. There are two packages of options that clearly stand out and can be viewed as opposite ends on a spectrum of stakeholder inclusion. One model advocates a technocratic approach to future regional working and the other favours a more inclusive policy-making infrastructure.

Dilemma	Model 1	Model 2
Stakeholder relationship with their constituency	Delegate	Trustee
Stakeholder role in the regional assembly	Informant	Decision-maker
Stakeholders' relationships	Individual	Collective
Type of involvement	Issue-based	Continuous

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[20] HM Treasury, BERR and CLG (2007) *Review of sub-national economic development and regeneration.* London: HM Treasury.
[21] BERR and CLG (2008) *Prosperous place: Taking forward the Review of Sub National Economic Development and Regeneration.* London: BERR.

Model 1

In this first model, stakeholder representatives bring their expertise to specific, focussed areas of regional working, as is current practise in the regional assembly subgroups, thus retaining the quality of decisions in the policy-making process. The stakeholders are informants in the process, delegated from their sector or community of interest to represent its view without compromise and without any obligation or loyalty to the end decision.
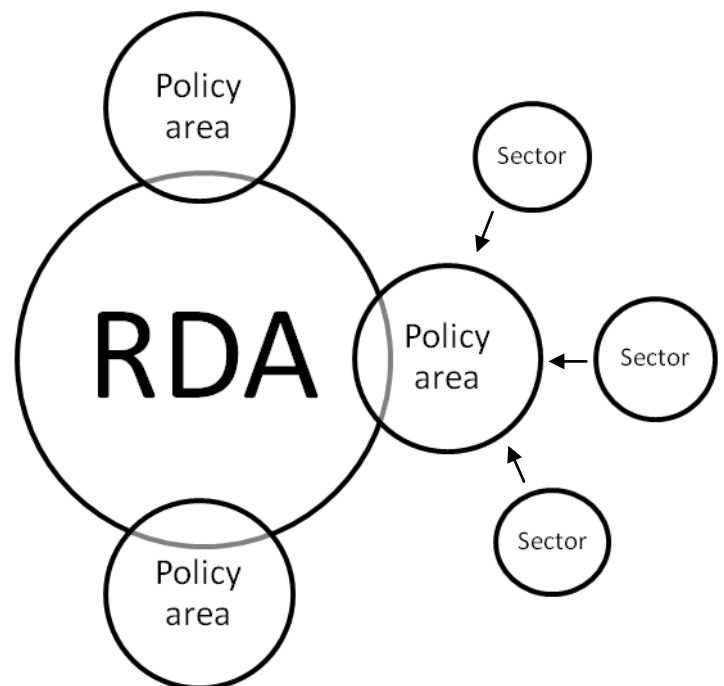
Model 2

Alternatively, stakeholder representatives could maintain their current SEEP groups or create an open and wide forum of stakeholders, generating a continuous dialogue on all aspects of regional policy on behalf of their sector and communities of interest. This does not mean that consensus between different stakeholders or between stakeholders and other decision-makers is necessary but constant dialogue may foster greater understanding and acceptance of the collective end decision. And within this model there is still scope for specialists to have a louder voice in specific, focussed areas.
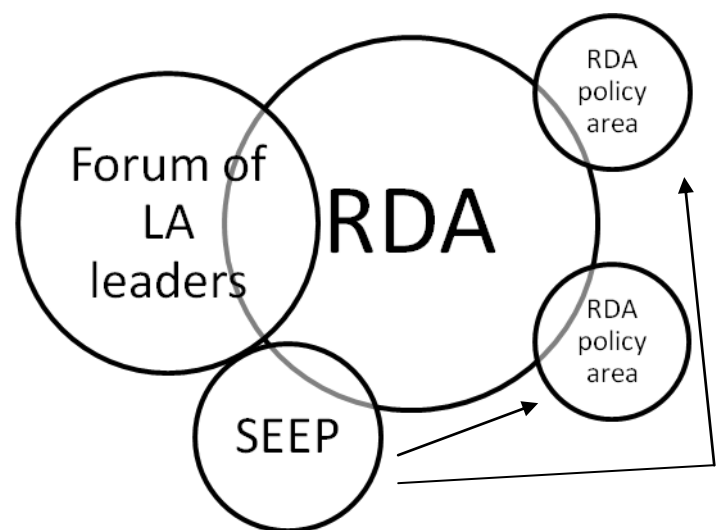
The models proposed here represent the two extremes of opinion on stakeholder inclusion. They are internally coherent because, whilst the principle of stakeholder involvement is generally agreed, the models represent opposing attitudes to what is a necessary or desirable level of stakeholder inclusion. The first presents a minimalist approach to stakeholder engagement that streamlines regional policy-making and promotes efficiency. Stakeholders are delegates, answerable only to their constituency, and they are informants, providing their sector's perspective on specific policy issues. Stakeholders are valued for their knowledge and skills, and are given the opportunity to usefully employs these and contribute towards regional working, but decision-making power rests with the RDAs, the leaders of local authorities and the Government. The second model builds on the partnership working forged in the regional assemblies, adapting the current form of stakeholder engagement to fit around the Government's agenda of prioritising economic

growth. Here, stakeholders are entrusted by their sectors to help make well-rounded, sustainable and collective decisions in all policy areas for the region as a whole.

These models are adaptable. They can be modified to suit the priorities and preferences of the regions. The choices presented by each dilemma need to be made within the parameters of what is possible in each region. For example, organising a SEEP collective may be desirable in many regions but such a body requires administrative and financial support from the RDAs, the local authorities or the individual stakeholder organisations, which may not be possible in all regions. The models can also be modified with ideas from other examples of stakeholder engagement. Whilst wholesale adoption of other models is not recommended, employing specific practises from other models can be useful to support the regional model. For example, borrowing from Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs), the first model could be complemented by annual conferences on the state of the region or regular conferences on particular themes, which would be open to all stakeholders and could enable new alliances to be forged for collaborative work on new policy problems.

The SNR consultation is an opportunity to propose innovative ideas and to design effective methods for the future regional policy-making process.   By confronting the tensions of the current stakeholder representative role, the process of stakeholder engagement, too, can be improved, thus ensuring the continuation of collaborative regional working.

Conclusion

The stakeholder role, like any representative role, is complex. There are several meanings associated with the term 'representation,' which each describe different but related aspects of the role. This study has focussed on the dilemmas of the SEEP representative role, demonstrating that there is a range of opinions on whether stakeholders should be delegates from or trustees of their sectors and communities of interest, and then whether they should inform regional decision-makers of their sectors' perspectives or actively participate in the decision-making process. These tensions lead to further considerations regarding the stakeholders' relationships with each other and the continuity of their involvement in regional working. All these issues need to be addressed in order to improve the regional policy-making process.

The current SNR consultation provides an opportunity to shape the future of regional working. This study has presented a series of dilemmas to be considered in this process and, bringing these together, two basic models of stakeholder engagement have been proposed. This paper does not attempt to promote either model as a specific solution as the shape of regional decision-making process will depend on specific regional circumstances. The dilemmas and the models together provide a framework for understanding and accommodating the complexity of stakeholder representation.

Stakeholder representation, and representation more generally, will continue to be a complex issue. The difficulties faced are not limited to stakeholders; the local authority members of regional assemblies, too, face questions about what they represent and how they represent. And in the wider political system, questions are continuously raised about representation, for example with regards to the representativeness of those elected and the suitability of electoral systems. In the regions, actors now have the unique opportunity to shape the future form of stakeholder representation, to build on the past and to enhance the capacity of stakeholder representation.

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