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### Original Citation

Lever, John (2011) Urban Regeneration Partnerships: A Figural Critique of Governmentality Theory. *Sociology*, 45 (1). pp. 86-101. ISSN 0038-0385

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# Urban regeneration partnerships: a figurational critique of governmentality theory

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**Abstract:** This paper provides a critique of governmentally inspired accounts of urban regeneration and partnership working. Drawing on the work of Norbert Elias and prominent figurational sociologists, it discusses the changes taking place *within* and *through* the many partnerships set up by New Labour around the notion of 'community safety'. Whilst recognising the important insights provided by accounts of urban regeneration emerging through studies of governmentality, the paper argues that such accounts fail to adequately consider the impact of partnership working on the individuals, communities and organisations involved. Although urban regeneration partnerships have the potential to be the motor of the civilising process in the manner identified by figurational sociologists, the paper concludes that they are not currently living up to this civilising potential. **Key words:** civilising process; community safety; Elias; Foucault; governmentality; partnership working; urban regeneration

## Introduction

Over the last 35 years the restructuring of British society in line with the demands of neo liberalism has been mirrored in the individualisation of social welfare. The changing focus of policy has been increasingly channelled through partnership working and governance strategies based on urban regeneration. Although partnerships were a feature of urban regeneration throughout the 1970s and 1980s, their use increased significantly from the middle of the 1990s when over 900 Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) partnerships emerged at the neighbourhood level under consecutive Conservative administrations. This process intensified greatly from 1997 onwards when Tony Blair's first New Labour government introduced around 60 new partnership arrangements at the sub-national level, a development that resulted in around 5500 new local partnerships overall (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002).

Throughout this period, governmentality studies influenced by the work of Michel Foucault (1979) have become the dominant theoretical framework for understanding these developments. In opposition to traditional accounts based on the centrality of an all-powerful state, Foucault (1979) puts forward a view of government as a set of governmentalized practices. To illustrate the process involved he coined the notion of *governmentality*, which he uses to demonstrate how, under conditions of liberalism, the state reconciles its need to govern with the personal liberty, choice and moral autonomy of individuals. A wider understanding of governmentality was developed by Rose and Miller (1992) to account for the rise of neo liberalism. Much like Foucault, they claim that expertise and knowledge are central features of governmentality, primarily because knowledge coordinates and secondly because experts form nodes around which issues and explanations can be organised. Government, on the other

hand, establishes the rules, frameworks and 'centres of calculation' necessary to govern 'at a distance' (Rose and Miller 1992).

While the appeal to freedom under classical liberalism was made through a form of economic rationalism that allowed economic actors to pursue their own best interests, Dean (1999, p. 196) claims that today it is made because security is seen to depend 'on the constitution of individuals, professionals, communities, organisations and institutions as sites for the exercise of a 'responsible autonomy''. Urban regeneration partnerships are clearly subject to strategies of governmentality in this sense. They are the mechanism through which new forms of expertise have been aligned with strategies of responsabilisation in individuals, communities and organisations in order to develop the forms of self control and self management thought necessary to facilitate institutional change and govern urban life effectively. Many accounts of these developments (Cruikshank 1999; Schofield 2002) stress the centrality of 'empowerment' as a way of cultivating particular forms of subjectivity by encouraging the involvement of vulnerable groups in the provision of public services, thus transforming them into 'self-sufficient, active, productive, and participatory citizens' (Cruikshank 1994, 35). Many stress the centrality of 'managerialism' as way of bringing about change in this context (Schofield 2002; Kurunmaki and Miller 2006). In an analysis of an SRB partnership Schofield (2002) claims that 'managerialism' is used to actively construct and mobilise the 'discourse of community' in order to make it conducive to the political aims of government. Kurunmaki and Miller (2006) argue similarly that the emergence of private sector management techniques in the public sector – they refer to *hybrid* forms of expertise and *calculating selves* – are part of a wider attempt to bring improvements in the delivery of public services through partnership working. The overall aim, they claim, is to link 'political and ethical objectives with service delivery' in order to 'establish the legitimacy of particular ways of delivering services and organizing social life' (Kurunmaki and Miller 2006, p. 89).

As is clear from this brief exposé, all such accounts draw attention to the governmental practices through which political power is realised, thus allowing neo-liberalism to be read not simply as an ideology or a political philosophy, but as an assemblage of techniques and technologies that facilitate the process of governing. The force of the analysis comes from the idea that government is based on a coordinated and relatively stable ensemble of miscellaneous political projects, individual strategies, and social institutions formed by the disciplined organisation and action of *free* subjects. However, while such accounts provide important insights into the inner workings of urban regeneration partnerships, this paper argues that they do little more than emphasise the institutional workings of power irrespective of the conscious subjects who act out their reality. Although they highlight the ways in which individuals can act and make choices within specific institutional regimes, I argue that such accounts overlook the way in which the individuals, communities and organisations involved are compelled to adopt new individualised forms of self management and self control that undermine the wider success of urban regeneration strategies. To illustrate these arguments the paper draws on Norbert Elias's (1983; 2000; first published 1939) account of the European civilising process, which it compliments with the work of other prominent figurational sociologists.

The paper starts off by examining the foundations of figurational sociology in order to develop a strategy to explore the changes taking place through urban regeneration partnerships in greater detail. While such partnerships have the potential to be the motor of the civilising process, I argue that this potential is currently being undermined by an institutional framework that hinders the ability of those working in

partnership to make choices in a way that addresses the problems urban areas face. To illustrate these arguments the paper draws on research examining urban regeneration and partnership working in Bristol in the field of community safety (Lever 2008). Emerging as a concern of public policy during the early 1980s, from what was previously called 'local crime prevention', community safety was primarily seen as a way of developing 'responsible' individuals in the 'disadvantaged communities' targeted by urban regeneration strategies (Hughes and Edwards 2002), and it is therefore a clear example of governmentality in action. The paper focuses on one aspect of urban regeneration policy been channelled through the community safety route – the attempt to increase the number of 'problematic' drug misusers in treatment in order to address the demands of the National Drugs Strategy (Home Office 1998; 2002). This narrow focus is necessary to illustrate the impact of urban regeneration partnerships on the individuals, communities and organisations involved. The final sections of the paper develop the figurational critique of governmentality through an examination of the impact of urban regeneration strategies on the trajectory of the civilising process.

### **The process of civilisation**

In a similar vein to Foucault, Elias identified a transformation in human interaction and psychology – alongside the rise of the modern bourgeois state – towards a more self-disciplined mode of human conduct. However, while Foucault – like Weber before him – looked at cultural and ideological changes, the actions of influential groups and individuals, and the emergence of particular modes of socially and historically distinct forms of organisation, Elias set out to explore these phenomena as the effects of changing social relations, as this led to an understanding, he believed, of *why forms of life change* (Elias 2000).

Elias starts off his analysis of the European civilising process in his work *Court Society* (1983), where he shows how the growth of human interdependencies around Royal Courts from the late Middle-Ages onwards had a profound impact on the behavioural characteristics of competing social groups. As rising bourgeois groups adopted the etiquette of the court aristocracy in their pursuit of social status and prestige, Elias shows that the habits of the aristocracy repeatedly lost their function as a means of social distinction and differentiation, a situation which meant they had to further refine their manners and so on *ad finitum*. Although both groups prioritised the long term over momentary affects, Elias claims that the rationality of the professional-bourgeois was more concerned with financial gain (economic capital) than the status and prestige claims (symbolic capital) privileged by the Aristocracy (van Krieken 1998). The forms of behaviour regarded as 'irrational' by the Protestant bourgeois were, he argues, highly regarded in court society because it was important to exhibit one's status if one was to retain one's position at the court. Affective outbursts were extremely problematical, not only because they exposed a person's inner state, but because they broke the etiquette on which court society stood. The tension between authenticity and instrumentalism was a central feature of court life and Elias argues that any display of authenticity was usually followed by a fall from grace. The affective management of one's emotions was, he claims, the primary way of maintaining ones position at court and putting in their place those who did not know their place. Meetings were a central feature of court life and to maintain their social standing courtiers had to meet on set days at set places to carry out set tasks. Although they complained bitterly about these rituals, courtiers carried them out in the manner expected, as they knew that even the 'slightest modification of ritual' would be interpreted 'as an attempt to upset the shaky social power balance' (van Vree 1997, p. 278).

As the prestige and status claims of regional nobleman were enhanced by their mutual interdependence at court, Elias argues that the dominant codes of etiquette on which court society stood slowly spread out through the regions, and how, as a consequence, the central courts began to monopolise and pacify larger geographical areas. He discusses these developments at great length in *The Civilising Process* (Elias 2000), where he shows how the civilised code of behaviour that emerged in court society became ever more widely adopted through processes of state formation. In much the same way that he describes how *civilité* became a central feature of court society because of increases in the pressures individuals exerted on each other at court, so Elias argues here that the increasing density of social relations during modernity had a profound impact on the psychological and emotional make up of the individual. These pressures are as relevant to the expression of violence and aggression – increasingly controlled in line with the monopolization of violence and taxation by the state – as they are for the emotions and bodily functions, as each individual requires increasingly more *foresight* and *self-restraint* to deal with the cognitive and emotive demands generated.

The civilising process is ambivalent in the extreme, and as contrasts between individuals and groups diminished as the civilising process advanced, so increasing varieties of civilised conduct emerged as individuals looked for new ways of differentiating themselves from each other. These developments are most evident in Elias's discussions on manners, where he demonstrates how changing attitudes and sensibilities towards a wide range of human practices drove the civilising process forward. Complex societies are always characterised, Elias (2000, p. 322) argues, by ambivalent social relations within which individual actions are both 'adjusted to and contrary to each others'. And it is this latent ambivalence, he claims, that molds civilised conduct and drives the civilising process forward. As we observe in what follows, while the civilising process has continued to exert pressure towards changing patterns of self restraint throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, departures from civilised standards are now also more likely to be met by stricter social sanctions, such are the expectations individuals now have of each other in increasingly complex societies. These changes become clear if we examine the changing nature of social welfare provision.

### **Civilising welfare**

De Swaan (1989) discusses the emergence of welfare provision within a historical cycle of collectivisation and civilisation. The central idea of his theory of 'collective action' is that self-enforcing agreement emerges voluntarily without *coercion* as the external effects of interdependence (i.e. poverty, disorder, crime, illness and disease) are more widely recognized by elites. De Swaan's work illustrates how, as a greater awareness of the consequences of interdependency emerged as industrialisation and urbanisation advanced, exclusive forms of urban management that blamed the poor for their own misfortune were slowly replaced by more inclusive urban policies.

Much like Rose and Miller (1992), de Swaan claims that concerns about a range of issues are best understood as the alignment of individual and group concerns through which everyday lives are organised. This does not mean, however, that the outcome of 19<sup>th</sup> urban policy was simply a consequence of top-down governmental strategies as many Foucauldians claim, more that it was a process of interaction, contest and collaboration between the parties involved. While experts may have taken the initiative on some occasions, implementing specific policy interventions, de Swaan claims that there was always a degree of complicity or collusion between the parties involved. The importance of these developments in second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

can not be overstated, and de Swaan (1989) argues that the links between the groups involved in welfare regimes and the state apparatus was only surpassed by the influence these groups established over the wider population. The advance of the civilising process during this period has been explored most thoroughly through the 'informalisation thesis' of Wouters (1977), and an analysis that demonstrates how, as explicit social rules and regulations started to lose their significance in the face of greater social mixing and changing standards of etiquette, so attitudes towards a whole range of issues appeared to relax. While de Swaan (1990) agrees with Wouters that there was a decline in the relevance of formal rules and regulations as these processes advanced, he claims that the new variations in behaviour that emerged are only acceptable through negotiation and mutual consent. He discusses what he calls the move away from relational and emotional 'management by command' towards 'management by negotiation' in a number of different contexts, illustrating how people in adjacent organisational ranks, for example, including those in local authorities' and participatory neighbourhood groups must – although they have gained more room for manoeuvre than they had previously – still cede to the demands of more powerful in many instances.

Although the distance between governments and the governed lessened during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, de Swaan (1989) points out that the number of organisational ranks in the state apparatus simultaneously expanded, thus increasing the pressures on those working within welfare regimes in a highly ambivalent way. Up to the 1980s, he claims that social relations that accompanied this process had a twofold impact on social life. On the one hand, management by command declined substantially as management by negotiation was carried over into family life by a range of middle class workers (often women) who became arbiters of contemporary lifestyles and opinions. On the other hand, a large proportion of this new professional-managerial class became clients of schools, health care organisations, and social services, thus pushing the civilising process forward through professionalised meeting regimes in various welfare contexts (see also van Vree 1997). From 1980s, however, as the state began to pull back on its welfare commitments, de Swaan (1989) claims that the prevailing alignment between collectivisation and civilisation within these regimes began to slow down.

### **Welfare retrenchment, urban regeneration and partnership working**

As the relevance of formal rules and regulation declined during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and individuals were released from traditional forms of authority and control, Wouters claims (1999) that temptation began to increase as things once forbidden absolutely became exciting, dangerous and possible. It was during this period, as increasing numbers of people began to give in to temptation, and certain crimes began to increase, that civilised attitudes towards poverty amongst the middle classes began to decline as new commercial attitudes and a more ego-integrated *self* began to emerge (Garland 2000; Kilminster 1998). Wouters (1999) claims that this process of reformalisation came to a head during the 1980s when, as the enterprise culture boomed, and outbreaks of public disorder began to increase, identification with the deprived – which had reached its zenith during the 1960s – was replaced by new forms of identification with the establishment. It was no longer acceptable, he argues, or beneficial, to align oneself sympathetically with the poor and vulnerable.

As individualisation of social welfare intensified on the back of these developments throughout the 1980s (van Rees 1991), the relative isolation of the lower social strata in relation to what is going on around them also began to increase (Elias 1991). While there may have been an expansion of the civilising process in an

upward direction, as interdependency chains lengthened, it has thus also been argued that decivilising trends have come to the fore in a downward direction, particularly in urban areas, where interdependency chains have fragmented (Fletcher 1997; Wacquant 2004). This does not mean, however, that civilising processes 'go backwards, as it were, down the path along which they have already travelled' (Fletcher 1997, p. 84). It is more that they may be partial trends within the wider development of a civilising process itself. De Swaan (2001, p. 3) emphasises the point well when he suggests that the 'monopolisation of violence by the state may result in the overall civilisation of society and yet, in certain cases, these civilised canons may nevertheless exclude certain categories of citizens from protection'.

Despite the process of strategic decentralisation that has accompanied the individualisation of social welfare over recent decades, the number of organisational ranks in the state apparatus has continued to expand as urban regeneration and partnership working have emerged as solutions to these decivilising trends. Meetings have become a central feature of these developments on a number of levels, and much as courtiers had to learn the rules of meetings at the court of Louis XIV during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, so a wide range of professionals and neighbourhood groups are having to learn the 'rules' of meetings in order to participate effectively in collaborative activities' (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002, p. 183). I have argued elsewhere (Lever 2005) that van Vree's (1997) work on meeting regimes is a useful starting point for a figurational analysis of urban regeneration in this sense, not least because the partnerships involved are essentially *inter* and *intra* organisational meeting regimes that bring individuals from different backgrounds together in ways that have the potential to be the motor of the civilising process.

As these developments have intensified the *politics of place* has also emerged as a central feature of regeneration policy (Amin 2005). In the field of community safety, it was expected that local authority wide Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) would cut across the hierarchies of the state in ways that allowed disadvantaged neighbourhoods to draw on funds to improve the delivery of public services and address the problems they face. However, while many of the initiatives being channeled through CDRPs now reflect the fragmentation and pluralisation of society, they are also the foundations on which New Labour's common approach to controlling behaviour stands (Crawford 2003). This situation can be seen in the case study of community safety presented below, where Bristol's CDRP uses very different strategies to engage neighbourhood partnerships in the inner city and on outlying estates, but where the overall outcome of policy is very much the same. While management by negotiation remains a feature these developments on a number of levels, it is clear from the material presented that it is has become increasingly more difficult for those working in the new institutional regimes emerging around the notion of community safety to act and make choices in the way envisaged by governmentality theorists, and that this process often undermines the wider trajectory of the civilising process.

### **Urban regeneration and community safety in Bristol**

In Bristol, New Labour's institutional reforms facilitated the emergence of various urban regeneration initiatives. By 2002, on top of the eight SRB regeneration schemes in operation, Bristol had two Education Action Zones, two Sure Start Programmes, two European Urban Programmes, 10 Neighbourhood Renewal areas, a New Deal for Communities partnership, and 17 citywide partnerships, including a rapidly expanding CDRP – Safer Bristol (Stewart 2003).

The brief for the doctoral research on which this paper draws – which was jointly funded by the ESRC and the former ODPM (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister) – required the recipient to examine the ways in which Government funding was being realigned through partnership working in order to overcome the failure of previous regeneration initiatives and improve the delivery of public services. The recipient had the freedom to examine these developments in a policy area of their choice; community safety was chosen because: 1) it was an area where government funding was being realigned in very particular ways, and: 2) it was a clear example of why urban regeneration partnerships had emerged in the first place, i.e. community breakdown. A single case study was chosen because of the perceived need to examine how the politics of community safety evolved across different spheres of governing (Edwards 2002). As a result of these factors the research set out to explore *how*, to *what extent* and *why* government resources were being realigned through partnership working in order to improve community safety in Bristol. The case study, which took place during 2005 and 2006, used semi structured interviews with partnership managers at the regional, city and neighbourhood levels, which were complimented with observations made at partnership meetings.

#### Partnership working at the regional and city level

The research started off by examining partnership working at the regional level. At the time there was strong political pressure to align the crime and drugs functions at the Government Office of the South West (GOSW) with NHS (health based) agencies in order to increase the number of 'problematic' drug misusers in treatment. At the local authority level, Safer Bristol was simultaneously overseeing a range of targets linked to the crime and disorder reduction agenda, the national drugs strategy, and a range of government initiatives, including the Drug Interventions Programme (DIP) and the Prolific and Priority Offenders Programme (PPOP). In line with Bristol's Crime and Drugs Strategy (BCC 2005), these developments were also mirrored at the neighbourhood level, where the city's Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships were developing their own projects and initiatives in the hope of attracting funding to address local crime, health and drug related problems.

It soon became clear that Safer Bristol was the central player in the new institutional architecture that was emerging around the notion of community safety. One of the partnerships primary tasks has been to bring together the resources of agencies at the city level in order to improve the delivery of public services in the city's disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This has been no easy task, and on almost all occasions Safer Bristol has been compelled by managerial pressure to redirect funding towards the Government programmes and strategies outline above. A number of the Government programmes overseen by Safer Bristol were also linked to the Pooled Treatment Budget, which emerged as a result of the new joined up approach to public health initiated through Section 31 of the Health Act 1999. A disparate number of agencies contribute funds to the budget, which has to deliver the treatment agenda in the city for all drug misusers, regardless of whether they are offenders or not. Not surprisingly, there have been many passionate debates between criminal justice and non-criminal justice agencies about who gets priority access to the limited pool of resources that are available and, therefore, about who receives treatment first.

By late 2005, drug treatment provision in the city was becoming increasingly prominent as a result of the work done by Safer Bristol's Drug Action Team and the Primary Care Trust (PCT) Social Inclusion Team, who had been targeting vulnerable groups (rough sleepers, beggars, and drug misusers) across the city for a number of



years. The PCT team had achieved a star rating for achieving its targets and increasing the number of people in treatment. An interviewee highlighted the importance of these developments for furthering Bristol's community safety agenda, claiming that if the team had to keep increasing the number of people in treatment to be successful then that is what it would have to do. However, it appeared that the team was a victim of its own success; if it increased the number of people in treatment the team would receive more funding to develop new services, but it would be unable to cope with the demands its success had generated. If it failed to get more people into treatment it would be seen as a failure and penalised with even more stringent targets and demands. A respondent explained the possible consequences of these developments in the following way:

I have real concerns about capacity for the system in the future because we have got such high numbers of people in treatment, and we've got more people expected to come in because we've got extra money for this that and the other (Interview with Primary Care Trust Manager 2005).

This situation had not been helped by the demands of the DIP, which required individuals coming through criminal justice interventions to be seen more quickly than those emerging through community referrals. A respondent from the Police highlighted the problems this situation creates on a number of levels, arguing that the system was effectively penalising people who self-presented through community based agencies. As the interviewee pointed out: 'It's bloody difficult for them to get in and get treatment and support at that stage, they almost have to come into the criminal justice system' to receive help. Moreover, stressing the question the Police always ask themselves when they have to make a decision about reallocating funds towards this type of initiative, the respondent emphasised the answer that is always given: 'If we don't get measured on it, why are we doing it' (Interview with Police Superintendent 2006).

Other agencies were in a similar situation. The Avon and Somerset Probation Service had been involved with the PPOP with the Police since 2002. There was a clear crossover between the DIP and the PPOP and there was a shared objective to reduce drug related offending by diverting problematic drug misusers into treatment. Initially Probation had around £34 million a year from central government to deliver its work on PPOP, but with funding due to expire late in 2005 it was expected that they would continue to fund their involvement in the programme from their core funding stream. This had not been possible without making cutbacks elsewhere, and probation had been forced to pull back on their pooled treatment budget commitment. In many ways the service was in a similar position to the PCT team. Even if they met the targets set for them in the manner expected, and pushed the required number of people into treatment, they knew they did not have the capacity or resources to deal with these developments effectively.

Safer Bristol manager's often stressed the benefits of partnership working in this type of situation, arguing that they could hold defaulting agencies to account. An Probation Service executive was more sceptical and highlighted a number of issues that impinged on the ability of the service to carry out its core obligations effectively, not least the pressure to play the partnership game in Safer Bristol's (*sic* New Labour's) terms. Being held to account at a meeting of the Safer Bristol executive – which was attended by senior managers from all the major government agencies in the city – was clearly humiliating for the individual concerned, who explained the process involved in the following way:

[The] thing that happens is you put funding into something for two or three years but you don't have the funding to continue beyond that period of time ... [and] ... then you say to the partner agency that ... you can't continue to fund it [and] ... you get the accusation levelled at you that you're disinvesting in the delivery of that particular service (Interview with Probation Service Executive 2006).

It soon became clear through observations made at meetings of the Safer Bristol executive that they were not much more than a symbolic exercise, a way of giving legitimacy to the workings of the wider regime. Important decisions were often made before meetings took place and partner agencies that disagreed with Safer Bristol's agenda in a meeting would be dismissed with polite but firm intent. Time and again, the executive dismissed long term solutions in favour of measures that could more easily achieve short term reductions in crime and disorder.

As the research progressed, meetings were attended, and informal relationships built, the attitudes of Safer Bristol managers began to soften. Beneath the cold exterior on public display, there was clearly a concern about the inner workings of the wider regime, with many managers expressing the view that targets had become the overriding focus of work, almost an end in themselves, and that crime and disorder reduction had taken the place of what was once called community safety to the detriment of all concerned. As one manager pointed out:

[With the] focus on targets you get self-fulfilling prophecies ... the target is just an abstraction of a bigger picture and it tends to focus you down on this narrow target rather than the big picture of community safety (Interview with a Safer Bristol Manager 2006).

Not surprisingly, these developments were also causing problems at the neighbourhood level.

#### Partnership working at the neighbourhood level

Although many neighbourhood partnerships in the city were developing strategies to tackle crime, health and drug related problems, it was all but impossible to get funding for their initiatives unless they were aligned directly with Safer Bristol's short term crime and disorder reduction agenda. This was problematic for individuals working at this level. One neighbourhood manager appeared mystified about what was expected of the local partnership and what could be done to carry out the requirements of the job effectively, as she explained in the following way:

I'm pressurised from above and I'm pressurised from below, and I can't make a decision on anything because I'm not allowed to have a view on anything (Interview with Neighbourhood Partnership Manager 2005).

This type of response was common in neighbourhoods where the local strategy was *opposed* to Safer Bristol's agenda. This was often the case in the inner city, where neighbourhood partnerships had developed long term strategies to improve community safety through employment, education and health related initiatives.

When a local strategy was *aligned* with Safer Bristol – which was sometimes the case on outer lying estates where problems were less complex – the pressures could be very different. In this type of situation 'successful' managers were often cajoled and coerced to work with Safer Bristol's core team to roll out the crime and disorder

reduction agenda more widely, often to the detriment of the plans and strategies of the inner city neighbourhoods outlined above. Another neighbourhood manager explained:

In a way it's like you can have what you want but only through Safer Bristol, and it's difficult for me to disagree with that because I want to keep my job, and keep the good work we've been doing and share some of that good work with other communities, but we may not be so welcome in other communities (Interview with Neighbourhood Partnership Manager 2006).

While many neighbourhood managers clearly recognised the pressure Safer Bristol was under to deliver on the targets coming down from central government, they were clearly uneasy about the new ways of working that were emerging.

These feelings of unease turned into open confrontation when a neighbourhood partnership in the inner city discovered that Safer Bristol had applied for planning permission to build a new drug treatment centre in the area to accommodate the increasing number of people requiring treatment. Things came to a head in 2006 when Safer Bristol withdrew funding for a number of community-based drugs projects and gave the Bristol Drugs Project (BDP) – a citywide voluntary sector drug agency – a £1.8 million contract to carry through plans that had been left in limbo by the refusal of planning permission some months earlier. This caused a great deal of ill feeling across the city. Although funding was reinstated at a later date, it was only reinstated on limited terms linked directly to Safer Bristol, the concerns of the national drugs strategy, and a rapidly expanding BDP.

In the early months of 2006 a regional news bulletin on TV reported that Bristol City Council was struggling to house people who had completed one of the new treatment programmes introduced by Safer Bristol, such were the numbers involved (BBC 2006). Many of the individuals concerned were thus being housed together in some of the worst housing in the city, often in isolated tower blocks, where they were encountering many of the problems that had forced them onto the streets in the first place – crime, anti social behaviour, drug misuse, and violence. To make matters worse, Safer Bristol preferred to deal with the problems their policies were in part perpetuating through the use of initiatives that again forced vulnerable individuals on to the streets and into the criminal justice system.

### **The Emperor's new courts**

Rodger (2008) argues that the new institutional structures on which these developments stand can be equated with what Etzioni (1968) once referred to as *inauthentic politics*, a political process that appears to be responsive but which is actually alienating and manipulating. Although it draws on governmentality theory for its intellectual rationale, Rodger claims that the governance model developed by New Labour under Tony Blair shares this 'problem complex' in that it constructs actors who are able to respond to government stimulation through contractual relations that facilitate their involvement in partnership working through what Crawford (2003) terms 'consent-by-coercion'.

In many ways, it appears that partnerships like Safer Bristol are in a similar position to the Royal Courts in earlier centuries. As well as playing a coordinating role at the local authority level, such a partnership provides a buffer zone between the Government and local authorities which protects the Government from any direct

responsibility for policy failure. The pressures faced by the individuals working in this environment are intense and in much the same way that courtiers were constrained by the wider figuration they formed around the King, so the individuals working in this institutional regime are constrained by the managerial pressures being channelled through Safer Bristol. Although they have developed a clear and unambiguous understanding of their relations with the individuals they engage with, off the record many Safer Bristol managers expressed concerns about policy development. However, in a situation where career prospects and job opportunities are clearly dependent on playing the partnership game, many stressed the benefits of instrumentalism over and above any claims to authenticity. Much as it was in court society, the affective management of emotion is the primary way of maintaining their position, the position of Safer Bristol, and putting in their place those who do not know their place. Much as individuals in court society were ostracized and excluded from the wider figuration if they stepped out of line, so the individuals and agencies who fail to maintain the etiquette on which Safer Bristol's agenda stands are ostracized and excluded. As van Iterson *et al* (2001) note, to be successful in these complex environments individuals need to combine flexibility and friendliness with an ability to get results; they must combine a strict sense of discipline with an ability to smile and get on with it.

In this context, we could say that management through negotiation *paralyses rebellion* (de Swaan 1990). While it forces individuals to consider the views of others more openly, it takes place in a context where some organisations hold all the cards. This is clearly evident when one considers the expansion and development of meeting regimes over recent decades, for while successful partnership working may well be dependent on attendance at a far greater number of meetings than it was previously, attendance in itself is no guarantee of success. This is why the forms of empowerment highlighted by Foucauldians – even if they are to be thought of as liberating – are so rarely experienced as such by those involved. Despite the many claims made about the empowering nature of the contemporary governance programmes being channelled through urban regeneration partnerships, there is still no guarantee that fair and equal arrangements will emerge. Although the changes implemented by New Labour compelled different groups and organisations to speak more openly with each other about the problems they face, it is clear that some must still abandon their demands if they clash with the claims of the more powerful. While some organisations have undoubtedly gained a greater degree of movement and autonomy than they had previously, it follows that others have undoubtedly lost out.

Perhaps the clearest example of this process is the loss of local government power over recent decades and the rise in importance of government agencies and neighbourhood groups, for any gains made by one have often been counterbalanced by the demands placed on them by others. While partnerships like Safer Bristol may have gained more freedom of movement *vis-à-vis* central government than the decentralised units that preceded them, they have also become more interdependent on a number of levels. While in earlier periods these processes had a wider civilising impact, they are now being reversed as the pressures cascading down from central Government through the crime and disorder reduction agenda exert their wider influence.

### **The reproblematisation of society**

Crawford (2006, p. 470) claims that the attempt to transform contemporary British life through the imposition of formal rules and regulations is problematic, not least

because it entails 'an acute danger' of over heightening sensitivities 'about young people, crime and anti social behaviour'. A respondent from Bristol Social Services argued similarly that the development of the new drugs industry was nothing more than a *moral panic* through which concerns over drugs related problems were being overemphasised for political reasons. The new industry was seen to be extremely problematical, not only because of 'the pressure it places on agencies', but because it also 'criminalises and worries young people' over things they have no control over (Interview with Social Services Health Manager 2005).

Van Krieken (2003) refers to these developments as the *reproblematisation* of society, and he is clear that they can be seen as markers of a slow down in the civilising process and of an increase in disidentification across society more generally. He claims that:

The greater emphasis on the study of *governance* rather than human beings and the social life *being governed* has generated a relative inability to engage with what remains a central feature of those developments: the apparent disruption of an overall long term trend towards the increasing pacification of social life (van Krieken 2003, p. 2: emphasis in original).

He suggests further these developments are a direct outcome of specific attempts to deal with lengthening of chains of interdependency, and further that an important aspect of the new punitiveness embodied in these developments emerges from the increased expectations individuals now have of each other. The title of a book published in 2005 – *Making People Behave* (Burney 2005) – puts this phase of policy development in perspective, and it is clear from what has been said that since 1997 'the state has embarked upon nothing less the attempted transformation of contemporary British manners' (Atkinson *et al* 2006, p. 44).

From a figurational perspective there are two ways of looking at these developments. On the one hand, it could be argued that the targeting of 'problematic' individuals over and above the concerns of disadvantaged neighbourhoods became New Labour's poisoned chalice – a problem of Gordian complexity – and that however hard they searched for solutions to the problems at hand, the more such problems appeared to grow; this would be a clear vindication of Elias's insistence on the importance of *unintended* social change. On the other hand, it could be argued that these developments were the *intentional* outcome of New Labour policy, of an attempt to demonstrate that they were in control of the crime problem; and on this account it could be argued that New Labour at least created an institutional framework through which partnership working – defined in terms of crime and disorder reduction – could succeed. Either way, it is clear that New Labour's approach to community safety was problematic, not least because social manners are illustrative of the ways in which individuals relate to one another within social space; they are the psychological and emotional structures that express the appropriate way of behaving in the company of others, and they cannot, therefore, as many policy makers tend to assume, be imposed from the *outside* through the use of formal rules and regulations; they must be encouraged from *within* through polices that help individuals to articulate their experiences and manage their expectations of each other in an open and inclusive way. As Elias pointed out, the crucial determinant of the civilising process is the *self*-compulsion individuals exert on themselves when assessing the possible consequences of their actions.

## **Concluding discussion**

Much like accounts inspired by the work of Foucault, the figural account presented in this paper focuses on the forms of subjectivity that emerge within the institutional regimes emerging around urban regeneration partnerships. But whereas Foucauldians focus on the ways in which the plural 'arts of government' construct different discourses of subjectivity across historical different periods, a figural account focuses on the way in which diverse forms of subjectivity emerge within fluctuating networks of social and political interdependence. There is no straightforward relationship between governmental strategies and specific ethical and political outcomes as there is for governmentality theorists. Shifts in the personality structure are a consequence of the *growth* or *decline* of human interdependencies, and although power works – much as it does for Foucault – as an anonymous force to shape social relations and notions of *self*, there is a more dialectical relationship between the specific patterning of social and organisational relations and the forms of subjectivity they produce in individual actors, both inside and outside institutional regimes.

While the civilising process has continued to exert pressure towards a rise in the moral standard – as evidenced by the necessity to develop policies based on higher levels of mutual consent and negotiation – the other side of the coin is highlighted by the fact that departures from civilised standards are now more likely to be met by stricter social sanctions. We have seen how, if individuals fail to maintain the etiquette on which Safer Bristol's wider regime stands, they are held to account by the central executive, and further how formal rules and regulations cascading down from central government determine the modes and forms of life that are emerging in wider society. It is clear that urban regeneration partnerships have the potential to be the motor of the civilising process, but it is only when the external effects of interdependence create the demand for more inclusive urban policies, much as they did in earlier centuries, that the potential in this mode of governing will be realised.

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