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# Creating Legitimacy for Citizen Initiatives: Representation, Identity and Strategic Networking

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## ABSTRACT

Citizen-led initiatives raise practical and theoretical questions about the criteria by which their democratic legitimacy should be judged. While existing analytical and normative frameworks are problematically based on a 'state'/ 'citizen' binary, a network ontology which sees these as strategically-deployed constructs is more practically adequate for analysis. We demonstrate this through a case of a successful citizen initiative, and conclude that such analysis should examine processes of strategic networking, along with claims and constructions of representation and identity. This means not taking participants' categories, identities, and evaluations for granted, and privileging the possibility of challenge as a fundamental democratic criterion.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Citizen initiatives; legitimacy; representation; identity; strategic networking

## Introduction

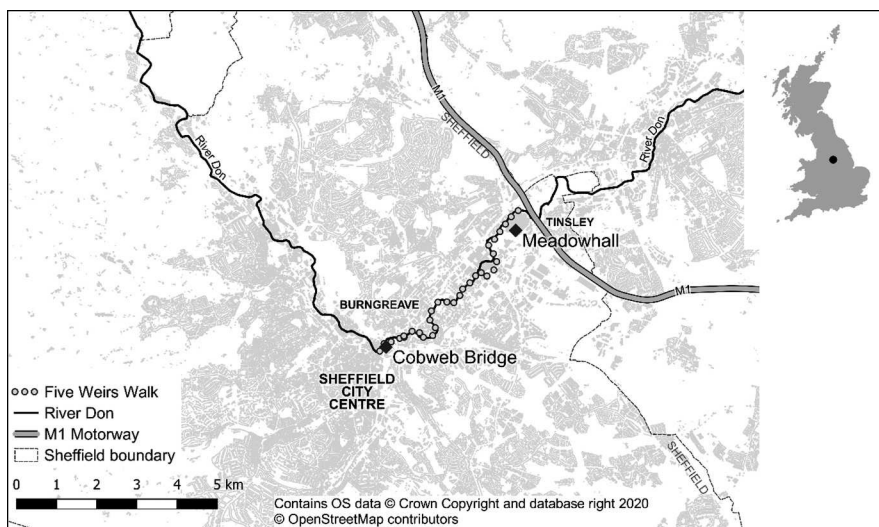
Across Europe, citizen-led initiatives are once again being seen as positive alternatives to the retrenchment and privatisation of the welfare state, providing opportunities for better, more responsive delivery of public goods alongside the (re)democratisation of the public sphere (Moulaert et al., 2010; Wagenaar et al., 2015). However, such initiatives also have practical and theoretical implications for democracy and dominant assumptions about legitimate forms of governance (Wagenaar & Healey, 2015). They bring to the fore longstanding issues with citizen action: they frequently challenge the status of existing democratic institutions; they may only represent the interests of organised (often privileged) minorities; and citizen groups may be internally undemocratic. Alongside theoretical questions about how governance and legitimacy are conceptualised, these issues have immediate practical significance, since they create tensions which have to be resolved on a daily basis by planners or city mayors deciding whether to engage with, side-line or oppose an initiative, and by citizens wondering if they should get involved. But on what criteria should they base their decisions? Theory and practice are tightly intertwined, as such questions of legitimacy are ones to which political theory should provide the answers. We argue here that current conceptualisations of governance and legitimacy are unhelpful, however, and put forward a novel alternative which helps overcome at least some of the difficulties.

The origins of this paper lie in a frustrated attempt to evaluate a long-lived citizen initiative, which succeeded in achieving its substantive goals, yet which raised questions for us about its

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democratic legitimacy. In 1986 a group of citizens of the English city of Sheffield set up a not-for-profit organisation, the Five Weirs Walk Trust (5WWT), and started a twenty-year process which led to the creation of an eight kilometre walk and cycle-way along the River Don through Sheffield's post-industrial landscape (5WWT, 1987) (See [Figure 1](#)). The authors of this paper began by assuming that we could use well-established theoretical frameworks to evaluate how the Trust established itself as a serious player in the city's governance and mobilised the resources to realise its goal. Starting from an assumption of the inherent value of citizen action, yet sensitised by constructivist accounts to expect that legitimacy might have locally contested meanings (Connelly, 2011), we expected to be able to draw on the range of established democratic criteria in Cowie and Davoudi's comprehensive heuristic framework (2015). However, four observations challenged this approach. Significant individuals behaved not simply as "boundary spanners", working skilfully across a divide between state and community (Healey, 2015a; Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2016), but in a deep sense had 'hybrid' identities as active citizens *and* state-employed experts (Sharp, 2017). Further, their scales of action, and the communities in whose interest they claimed to act, were multiple and changeable. In consequence, the group also had a hybrid and changing identity as both professional governance partner and community-based organisation. Finally, this did not just happen: it was the result of strategic choices in pursuit of the group's goals.

These observations lead to our original contribution to ongoing debates in planning and political theory, about how legitimacy should be judged in theory and practice (Cowie & Davoudi, 2015) and so more widely to how scholars and practitioners should critically engage with citizen initiatives and their proponents (Wagenaar & Healey, 2015). We claim that evaluating citizen initiatives through existing analytical and normative frameworks is problematic principally because the frameworks are grounded in an unhelpful binary and essentialist ontology of 'state' and 'citizen'. Our purpose is therefore not to present alternative legitimacy



**Figure 1.** Sheffield and the Five Weirs Walk (inset shows Sheffield's location in Great Britain). Map created by Ruth Hamilton.

criteria, but to provide a more practically adequate basis for making legitimacy judgements. We propose a network ontology which provides the underpinning for an analysis of processes of strategic networking (Hay & Richards, 2000) and the performance of representation and identity claims (Saward, 2010). While this argument is located in the context of European initiatives and theorising, the analysis is independent of specific institutional forms and discourses of democracy, and so may well be useful in other contexts. More tentatively, we propose as a legitimacy criterion the principle of “openness to challenge” (Disch, 2015; Tully, 2002), which is ontologically consistent with the analysis and so forms a better basis for judging citizen initiatives in the European context, at least to the extent that democracy is at stake.

The next section discusses the nature of citizen initiatives and the problems with existing frameworks. We then develop our alternative, and in the fourth section set out the case, drawing principally on the Trust’s documentary archive to further explicate our analytical approach (Siggelkow, 2007). In the concluding discussion we reflect on the generalisability of the analysis and the practical implications of our approach.

## The Nature and Legitimacy of Citizen Initiatives

The emergence of ‘citizen initiatives’ has been a significant element of the long-term increase in public involvement in local governance. Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos identify

bottom-up initiatives that are citizen or community driven, which aim to deal with a specific set of public issues and which have the ambition to set up lasting cooperation among citizens aimed at production and local ownership of services or goods to improve their social and physical environment. (Van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2018, p. 31)

Although we will unsettle the taken-for-granted idea of “citizen or community”, as a starting point this definition distinguishes a recognisable set of organisations which have recurrently aroused enthusiasm for their potential to make governance simultaneously more responsive and more democratic (Moulaert et al., 2010; Wagenaar et al., 2015). Their purpose and structure vary greatly, but they are distinctive from other kinds of citizen groups and modes of participation in governance.

In contrast to citizen initiatives, social movements are intrinsically and consciously conflict-oriented, being “a distinctive form of contentious politics that involve actors making collective claims to social or political action (or inaction), which if realized, would conflict with someone else’s interests” (Tilly, 2004, p. 4). Citizen initiatives are less ideological and more outcomes-focused, avoiding oppositional and policy-related activity except where it serves their tangible goals. Associated with this, they typically create strong linkages with state and other governance actors in order to achieve their ends (Edelenbos & Van Meerkerk, 2016, an approach seen as unproblematic in principle, if not necessarily easy in practice (Healey, 2015b). Yet, even when they work collaboratively with the state, citizen initiatives are distinct from partnerships and state-invited public participation exactly because they are citizen-led (Edelenbos & Van Meerkerk, 2016).

All these forms of citizen engagement raise implications for democracy (Agger & Lofgren, 2008; Wagenaar & Healey, 2015) and therefore of the appropriate criteria for making judgements about their legitimacy (Van Meerkerk, et al., 2015). However, specific issues arise for citizen initiatives: like state service providers they face questions of responsiveness, of who is provided for or not, of who decides and so on, but they do so without the basic legitimacy of a state body (Häikiö, 2007). It is

because of these distinctive legitimacy issues that this paper focuses on citizen initiatives rather than on citizen engagement more widely.

By what criteria might citizen initiatives be evaluated? Legitimacy matters: as we noted above, judgements about legitimacy have to be made as part of the everyday work of governance. The legitimacy of any governance practice is, at a very general level, the quality of being acceptable and accepted, based on its conformity to shared norms and the consent of those affected (Beetham, 1991; Connelly, 2011). It generally rests on closely-linked judgements of process and of whether adequate (and adequately distributed) substantive benefits are delivered (Beetham, 1991): perceived failures to deliver often lead to challenges to governance processes, and conversely even when “substantive legitimacy” (Cowie & Davoudi, 2015) is secured, arguments about process are always available as discursive resources to support challenges (Papadopoulos, 2003). However, notwithstanding this entanglement in practice, process and outcomes criteria are analytically separable, since they draw on different sets of principles, and in this paper our focus is on process and questions of democratic legitimacy.

Our central claim is that existing democratic legitimacy criteria are not practically adequate (Sayer, 2000) to support the evaluation of citizen initiatives’ processes. Clearly, what counts as *democratic* legitimacy depends very much on the theory of democracy in use. In a complex and contested field, we see two positions which currently have strong claims. Implicit in much valorising of citizen initiatives is the core principle of associative democracy, in which ‘associations’ (i.e. citizen groups) collectively constitute a democratic civil society, while cultivating attitudes and practices of cooperation, mutuality, respect for difference and so on, and thus countering the individualism and competitiveness of the market economy (Hirst, 1994). In ‘weak’ associative democratic theory, any citizen organisation is seen as contributing to an overall democratic public sphere. Stronger versions emphasise the kind of internal democracy and commitment to public goals which some see as inherent in citizen initiatives. Thus, for example, Wagenaar and van der Heijden claim that these function “in a democratic way (non-hierarchical, non-profit, democratically, sustainable, responsive to local and individual needs)” (Wagenaar & van der Heijden, 2015, p. 126). Elsewhere, Wagenaar goes further, welcoming participation in citizen initiatives as key to a post-neoliberal societal shift away from individualism and towards “realising a sense of community as shared destiny” (Wagenaar, 2015, p. 583). Although used as the basis for evaluative criteria by van Meerkerk and his colleagues (Edelenbos et al., 2017; van Meerkerk, et al., 2015), strong associational democracy probably sets the bar too high, as it would lead to negative evaluations of all but the most public-spirited and consciously democratic initiatives. Further, although these ideas were influential (in the UK at least) around the turn of the millennium (Bache & Catney, 2008), in general they have little traction in the ‘real world’ in comparison to dominant conceptions of representative and participatory democracy (Van Meerkerk, et al., 2015).

These normative concepts, in common currency in policy and planning, have been drawn together by Cowie and Davoudi to create probably the most comprehensive framework currently available (Cowie & Davoudi, 2015). This connects democratic legitimacy to: procedural aspects involving different forms of representation and qualities of participation; expressed consent; and the “substantive legitimacy” of acceptable outcomes. As with the balance between process and outcome criteria noted above, there is no generalisable way of adjudicating between this wider set of criteria, so Cowie and Davoudi create a heuristic framework of a “mixed conception of legitimacy” in order to support “situated and contextualised assessment” (Cowie & Davoudi, 2015, pp. 174, 175). Yet, while perhaps helpful in informing judgements, such a framework does not provide any overall principles supporting a conclusion on any given process’s legitimacy.

Such arguments have prompted some to abandon the aspiration to make judgements about legitimacy ‘from the outside’, in favour of analysing the discursive construction of legitimacy within specific processes of governance (Connelly, 2011; Häikiö, 2007). Empirically these authors show how local “repertoires” (Häikiö, 2007) of criteria are drawn on by community groups and other stakeholders, who establish and maintain their legitimacy through balancing and trading-off consent, process and outcomes. Such constructivism is arguably unhelpful, though, given the need in practice for initiatives to be evaluated as well as analysed.

As we described above, applying any of these approaches to democratic legitimacy in a real case was problematic, as we struggled to identify the actors and processes assumed by all three theoretical perspectives. The fundamental issue here is that the “inherited language” (Tully, 2002) through which such initiatives are described and judged is that of the European political theorising which has emerged from (and shaped) liberal nation states over the past two hundred years. Tully suggests that this may not be “adequate to the task” of analysing “the strange multiplicity of political voices and activities” (Tully, 2002, pp. 536, 537) which arguably characterises modern local governance (Griggs et al., 2014). This language is fundamentally binary, with the distinction between citizen and state at its core. This binary underpins the very idea of a ‘citizen initiative’. It also lies at the heart of normative democratic theory, with its arguments about how ‘the people’ can exercise adequate control or influence over ‘the government’ through practices of participation and representation. (Such language is clearly culturally specific, and so provides only one possible way of conceptualising ‘citizen initiatives’. While our language, empirical focus and discussion here is concerned with European practices and debates, we return briefly in the concluding discussion to the issue of the analysis’s potential scope.)

The binary language of citizen and state is both analytical and normative. While Tully worries that the normative element may lead us to “disqualify” citizens’ activities because they do not conform to pre-existing frameworks (Tully, 2002, p. 537), conversely we are concerned that analysing citizen activism in binary terms can also lead to judgements which over-value citizen initiatives as inherently democratic. However, while such language may be taken for granted in governance practice, this does not mean its concepts are appropriate for analysis (Brubaker, 2003). Both the associative democratic and ‘mixed’ frameworks are rooted in the binaries, as is Connelly and Häikiö’s limited constructivism, which, while problematising the core concept of legitimacy, still leaves intact the fundamental ontological categories of state and citizen. Our argument here is that a more thorough-going constructivist approach is needed.

### Citizen Initiatives as Practices of Networking

We stress that we are not denying the existence and efficacy of the concepts of ‘citizen’, ‘community’ or ‘state’, nor their apparent solidity. As social constructs, these categories have effects in the world, and people largely encounter them as really existing ‘things’ which they then construe (i.e. make sense of) but which they also (to varying degrees) have the power to shape (Sayer, 2000, p. 91). Our target here is rather the essentialism which starts both analysis and normative assessment from the position that ‘communities’ and ‘state’ etc. exist in some pre-given way.

Analytically, the task is to show how they are constructed, and with what effects. We adopt the rather obvious and well-used idea of networks of actors as the basic components of governance, following Davies (2011, p. 3) in seeing networks as “de facto resource-exchanges between government and non-government actors”. While this analytical move is paralleled in the literature on local partnership working (see, e.g., Razaque & Stewart, 2000), both this and the extensive literature on

networking between state and powerful non-state actors tends to see such networks as separate from and problematic for ordinary citizens (e.g., Taylor, 2007).

Instead, we take the idea to its ontological conclusion and extend the network concept to include the involvement of citizens and citizen groups in governance. This parallels interactive governance theory's emphasis on "the interactions and initiatives of a plurality of public, societal and private actors in dealing with complex societal issues", and its particular attention to the ways in which governments and citizens interact, including within citizen initiatives (Edelenbos & Van Meerkerk, 2016, p. 1). However, where "interactive governance" takes the citizen/government binary for granted, our constructivist approach differs in treating the distinction as a product of the practices of networking actors.

Implicit in this actor-centred network ontology is the deliberate construction of networks, and here we borrow the concept of "strategic networking" from Hay and Richards (2000). Networks result from deliberate, strategic actions, and are continually being reconfigured in response to contextual changes which alter actors' interests and intentions, and as a result of their learning about what is "feasible and desirable" (Hay & Richards, 2000, p. 8). The emphasis of this approach on adaptation resonates with the situation of citizen initiatives, whose members are not in the position of *designing* the governance processes within which they operate, but who instead are reliant on their ability to craft networks in an (initially) given context.

Strategic networking is done in part by "boundary spanners", who "negotiate the interactions between their organization and its environment" and in particular contribute to the organizational and democratic anchorage of citizen initiatives (van Meerkerk & Edelenbos, 2016, p. 471). As van Meerkerk and Edelenbos point out, little is known about such practices (though see Healey, 2015b): their own work provides a valuable analysis of what networking entails, with clear parallels to the practices of some of the individuals involved in creating the Five Weirs Walk. However, the ontological difference matters: while the boundary-spanning literature conceptualises the process in terms of key individuals working across boundaries, privileging the network promotes attention to the roles and actions of all individuals involved in governance, who may have more or less frequent and productive links with other actors. Concerning legitimacy, this leads beyond the obvious question about the legitimacy of the boundary spanners themselves (cf. Connelly, 2011) to questions of how actors individually and collectively construct groups and inter-group relationships, and how this is related to groups' legitimacy.

This is essentially a question of the legitimacy of the practices of representation which are central to strategic networking, with those in the network speaking and acting on behalf of constituencies which plausibly have some stake in the issues at hand (Pitkin, 1967). Yet, from a constructivist perspective these relationships are not objective connections between individuals and pre-existing groups, but are putative grounds on which representation can be *claimed* (Saward, 2010). Such claims are fundamentally about the identities of the representative and those they claim to represent, whether representation is purportedly based on demographic similarity, shared place of origin, electoral process or sheer commitment to the community (Connelly, 2011). Importantly 'formal' political representation is only one possibility. Any individual or group working to achieve a public good is implicitly or explicitly making a claim to act in the community's interests, thus performing as a representative in Pitkin's terms. These identities are constructed rather than essential, co-created in the process of claim and recognition (or not) of that claim: any claim may or may not be accepted by those claimed to be represented, or by another audience to whom such a claim is made (Saward, 2014).

Representative relationships, and therefore the identities of representatives and the represented, are spatialised. 'To represent' is to act or speak for a particular constituency in a particular forum – in



the case of citizen action usually a local one, at the scale of the neighbourhood or settlement. It matters what this scale is, as this affects who is included or excluded from 'the community' called into being by the claim (Evans, 2004). Representations can also be multiple and dynamic. Saward describes the ubiquitous "shape shifting representative" who "need[s] to be, or at least to appear to be, different things to different people" and shapes their claims accordingly (Saward, 2014, p. 723). These spatial and temporal dimensions to representation imply that the putatively represented community, the subject of a claim, may also be fluid and multiple, shifting locations and scales. Thus, we argue that, in a citizen initiative, representation, identities and scale(s) of representation and operation are intimately linked. As constructs these provide strategic resources amongst which actors may choose, albeit of course constrained by the plausibility and acceptability (and so legitimacy) of any claim they make to the other actors involved (principally the putatively represented community and the claim's audience) (Disch, 2015; Saward, 2010).

This is normatively problematic, as it undermines judgements such as the valorising of a 'citizen initiative' simply because it is based in 'the community', not only because the category of 'community' is unsettled, but because the usual criteria for making such judgements are themselves bound up in the same binary categorisations. This does not, however, necessitate relativism and preclude judgement, but rather creates a need for alternative criteria which are consistent with the constructed nature of 'community' and 'state' (Disch, 2015).

Before discussing the empirical case which motivated these theoretical developments, we summarise our position. The legitimacy of citizen initiatives must and will be judged, and we are presenting a way of analysing their construction in order to provide a better grounding for such judgements than the concepts in common academic and practical currency. These take for granted the existence of bounded categories of state and citizen in a way which is inadequate to capture the complexity of interactive governance. Instead our constructivist approach and network ontology underpins a different middle-range theory of how citizen initiatives are implicated in governance. We are concerned with groups of people engaged in strategic networking, who use, as discursive resources, representations of themselves alongside claims to represent others. This analysis leads us away from questions of how citizen groups participate in governance and how this matches against existing legitimacy criteria, and prompts us to ask: *how are networks constructed? what identities and representative claims are deployed? and what are the implications of this for (democratic) legitimacy?*

In the next section we elaborate on what this theorisation looks like in practice, following Siggelkow's argument for the value of linking conceptual development with analyses of cases, which show how abstract concepts are manifested in the real world (Siggelkow, 2007).

## Strategic Networking in Practice

Sheffield is a city of approximately half a million inhabitants in the north of England. Having developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries as a centre of steel production and heavy industry, it suffered rapid deindustrialisation in the 1970s and 1980s (Lawless & Ramsden, 1990). This left a legacy of deprived working-class neighbourhoods in the east of the city, including in the Lower Don Valley (Dabinett, 2012). From the 1980s onwards, Sheffield was the subject of economic regeneration initiatives, led, after 1988, by the Sheffield Development Corporation (SDC). This was a private sector-led regeneration partnership imposed by central government, with the remit to develop the Lower Don Valley, and given planning powers which took the area out of the local authority's control. The SDC's largest project was Meadowhall, created on a disused steelworks site adjacent to some of the city's poorest neighbourhoods. At its opening in 1990, Meadowhall was one

of the largest retail and leisure complexes in Europe (Lawless & Ramsden, 1990). The Five Weirs Walk closely follows the River Don from the city centre to Meadowhall, as a combined walk and cycle-way, using riverside paths and existing roads. Its frequent river crossings include two bridges installed as part of the project, including the innovative Cobweb Bridge.<sup>1</sup>

The Trust which established the Walk makes a useful case through which to examine citizen initiatives. On the one hand it falls squarely within van Meerkerk and Edelenbos's (2018) definition quoted above, and is typical of many citizen initiatives in the questions it raises about the legitimacy of middle-class active citizens creating an apparently valuable public asset in deprived neighbourhoods. On the other, the nature of the Trust and its project allowed high degrees of fluidity both in identities and representative claims, and we thus treat it as an "extreme" case (Flyvbjerg, 2006), which Flyvbjerg suggests are more revealing of basic processes than "typical" or "representative" cases, where similar processes are less obvious but nevertheless present.

### **Methods**

The Trust also presented an almost unique opportunity for research, in that we were given access, through the Trust's entire archive, to very rich data on its activities and how it had represented itself across twenty years, as well as a group interview with four of the founding members. The archive consists of three folders of textual and visual material, comprising 16 *Annual Reports* (1988/89 to 2009, with five years missing), 19 *Bulletins* (1988 to 2008), and 70 sets of *Minutes* of Steering Committee and Annual General Meetings (August 1996 to December 2008). There are also miscellaneous documents including the initial prospectus, technical reports, discussion papers, correspondence and formal agreements with owners and tenants along the Walk's route.

The archive was coded thematically, developing sub-themes inductively within broad, predefined themes of Stakeholders, Organisations, Individuals, Knowledge and Conflict. These constituted a common coding frame across a number of studies carried out within URSULA, an interdisciplinary research project on the sustainable development of Sheffield's river corridors (EPSRC, n.d.), and served to structure the initial analysis of the archive. The group interview was carried out (and recorded digitally and transcribed) alongside this first analysis of the documents, and treated analytically as part of the same data set. As the significance of networking, dynamic identities and scales of action and representation emerged, a partial re-theming of the material was carried out, using these categories as core themes. (These analyses were conducted entirely by the authors: what is presented here is our interpretation of the material provided by the Trust.)

The analysis gives a detailed picture of how the Trust represented itself through the years. While the material does not (of course) provide an objective, transparent account, and we are lacking alternative accounts of the same events, many of the documents were publicly available, and the activities of the Trust were well known and frequently mentioned in the local press. We have therefore treated it both as showing how the Trust chose to present itself in text, and as an adequately reliable account of what it did. The interview supplemented this account, providing more detail in particular on the strategic networking activities, and on some of the choices made by the group.

### **Who Was the Trust? Networks and Identities**

The idea of creating the Five Weirs Walk originated among a handful of individuals working in a Sheffield City Council neighbourhood office in 1986. As the new organisation emphasised from the outset, these were individuals with hybrid identities: officers *and* citizen activists "initially working in their spare time"

(5WWT, 1988d), holding “discussions in the office and pub” (Moug & Ogden, 2010, p. 3), who “put many hours of time into designing the first phase of the walkway” (5WWT, 1988b). Other individuals were quickly engaged, drawing in people through established friendship and work-based networks, with long histories of voluntary and professional activities connected to the river. These included representatives of two non-statutory organisations: the Sheffield City Wildlife Group and the Sheffield Junior Chamber of Commerce, which had been organising volunteer clean-ups of the river. These individuals set up the Trust, with the organisations as institutional founder members prominent in the prospectus (5WWT, 1987). British ‘trusts’ have charitable status, and are a commonly-used legal framework for citizen initiatives: creating the Trust effectively put an implicitly community-based label on the group, even though many individuals involved were also local government officials.

Membership of the Trust’s management group, the Board of Trustees, was very stable: half a dozen individuals, including several of the founders, were on the Board for all or most of the next two decades. However, the public description of the Board shifted in the early years. Initially it was to comprise representatives of at least

Sheffield City Wildlife Group, Sheffield Junior Chamber of Commerce, Sheffield City Council, local business and riparian owners, Yorkshire Water Authority, fishing clubs, ramblers organisations, local natural history organisations, canoe clubs. (5WWT, 1987)

Local residents were then added and the founding role of the Council erased:

[t]he Trust was formed by members of the Sheffield City Wildlife Group, Sheffield Junior Chamber of Commerce, and other concerned individuals. Representatives of local residents, fishing, canoeing interests and of the City Council and Development Corporation have also been welcomed onto the [Board]. (5WWT, 1989c)

After this time the group represents itself in two ways. The prospectus describes it as “clearly fit[ting] into the new spirit of partnership ... between public, private and voluntary sectors”, bringing benefits that “would accord with the Council’s current policies for the Valley” (5WWT, 1987). The Trust is thus represented as a group of professionals (“naturalists, landscape architects, a solicitor, quantity surveyor, a water analyst, a planner and a local bank manager” (5WWT, 1988d)) with the standing and credibility to partner with other professional organisations. Simultaneously it made an implicit claim to represent ‘the community’, downplaying the local authority links and adding ‘residents’ as a represented group. The success of this claim is reflected in the group’s self-description being reproduced by the City Council and health authority (e.g., SCC/Sheffield Health, 2001). Much later a regeneration partnership lists the Trust under “community representation” (EEQoLI, 2011) and academic researchers describe the Trust as “a small but tenacious community group” (Sheffield Water Centre, 2016, p. 18). Whatever other actors’ strategic motivations for doing this, the Trust successfully positioned itself so that its public representation was as a ‘community’ organisation.

### *Networking into Governance*

From the outset the Trust networked strategically with the city’s governance organisations, representing itself as competent and knowledgeable, and therefore a credible and valuable partner. In the interview two of the founders described how:

[i]t’s important to have a strategy, the whole idea summed up in a way that can be presented to politicians and planners ... There’s a strategy there that they can incorporate into their new documents ... (Interviewee A)

... and show how all your stakeholders can achieve their aims and objectives through your good work, you know, so that they can take you on board. (Interviewee B)

These individuals' professional knowledge of the planning system and the local authority's strategic interests was crucial. The archive contains Council documents pre-dating the Trust which establish the policy context for it (SCC, 1984, 1985), while the Trust's own material indicates their intended engagement with major developments such as Meadowhall (5WWT, 1987) and plans to use instruments such as planning gain and compulsory purchase (e.g., 5WWT, 1989a, 1990, 2001c, 2002). They quickly embedded the Walk in "official imaginaries" (Healey, 2018) and by 1989 "the idea of the Five Weirs Walk is now firmly established in planning proposals for the city. It features strongly in the Sheffield Development Corporation's Planning Framework and also in the City Council's Unitary Development Plan Draft" (5WWT, 1989a). This partly resulted from the strategic linking of the Walk with the city's powerful economic regeneration discourse (cf. Bache & Catney, 2008). The founders had "been faced with this *Leisure Challenge* document by the Council: 'do something with the Don Valley to replace the jobs that were lost and the environment that was totally wrecked [by the closure of steel plants]'" (Interviewee A) "and greening seemed a way of doing that" (B).

The enduring positive relationship with the local authority was publicly acknowledged, from the outset through to the Council absorbing the "significant overspend" on the Walk's final phase (5WWT, 1989a, 2007). The relationship was not always comfortable, however, with the council's erratic commitment to maintenance a recurring irritant (5WWT, 2000a, 2005a). This was clearly not just an arm of the local authority: an important distinction in a period when the neo-liberal Conservative central government was committed to shifting power from local government to the private sector, and was openly hostile to Sheffield's left-wing local authority (Seyd, 1990). Interviewee B reflected that

[the government] were saying if we want things done, then we need partnerships of public, private and voluntary sector, and we were just appropriate at that time because we'd got private sector links and they'd got cred[ibility], so people like [the Junior Chamber of Commerce] could talk to factory owners with a bit of credibility, who would never have given anything to the 'red revolutionary socialist republic', [because] that's how [the Council] were being labelled at the time.

This created a delicate arena for a group including Council employees, yet they proved remarkably adept at working as a community group with both the Council and the Sheffield Development Corporation, with whom productive links were established very quickly. The group again presented itself as a credible partner: "we went in at a very early stage. I remember giving [the first officer in the SDC] a map of a survey and saying 'that could be strategy for the River Don'" (Interviewee B). Existing Junior Chamber of Commerce links with the private sector were important: for example, the local businessman who spoke at the Trust's launch in 1988 went on to become Deputy Chairman of the SDC, and was publicly acknowledged for his personal support (5WWT, 1993a). Official SDC support included funding, the opportunity to benefit from planning gain (5WWT, 1989a) and compulsory purchase (5WWT, 1990), and continued until the SDC was abolished by a new, centre-left national government in 1997.

Networking at the city level was principally aimed at achieving the concrete goal of establishing the Walk, and [Box 1](#) provides an example of how this was achieved effectively. However, the trustees also had wider aspirations for environmental improvement of the river, and positioned the Trust as a leader in this larger, longer game. The creation in 2003 of the Sheffield Waterways Strategy Group (SWSG), including several 5WWT trustees alongside representatives of regional and national bodies, was hailed as "a major step forward in creating a co-ordinated action plan for river access,

**Box 1. The victory at Cobweb Bridge.**

The campaign for Cobweb Bridge epitomises the way the Trust could create and mobilise networks. During 1999–2001 they struggled to secure a right of way over a section of the Walk which included the intended location of the innovative Cobweb Bridge (SWWT, 1988c). The riverside tenant was “intransigent and uncommunicative” (SWWT, 2001b), and after unsuccessful mediation efforts by a former City Council Head of Planning and the President of the Sheffield Law Society, both colleagues of trustees (SWWT, 2000a), the Council agreed to start compulsory purchase proceedings. This was encouraged by the fact that “many Trust supporters have lobbied their local councillors and this has resulted in some strong cross-party political support” (SWWT, 2001b). However, fearing that compulsory purchase would take too long, the Trust’s lawyer successfully liaised with the landowner’s agent. “The Duke of Norfolk ... granted us an over-lease to the land” (SWWT, 2001c), effectively making the Trust the tenant company’s new landlord. The tenant was promptly deprived of control over the riverbank land, the Council made a new Path Creation Order, and the bridge was duly constructed (SWWT, 2001a, 2002).

restoration and management” (SWWT, 2005b). This plan finally materialised as the city’s first *Waterways Strategy* in 2014 (SWSG, 2014).

In parallel the Trust had proposed “a new permanent agency which would provide a warden service for the maintenance and management of the waterway” (SWWT, 1992). After repeated frustrated attempts to find the right organisational partner, they started working closely with the new Groundwork Sheffield in 2004 (SWWT, 2006b). Groundwork UK is a network of non-governmental regeneration organisations which typically work in “the UK’s most disadvantaged communities” in partnership with local community groups (Groundwork, n.d.). The Trust took on that latter role, emphasising the Walk’s location adjacent to the city’s poorest neighbourhoods. In 2007 the River Stewardship Company was established as “an innovative new partnership between Groundwork, the [local] Wildlife Trust, the [national] Environment Agency and the City Council” (SWWT, 2008), which finally achieved the Trust’s aim and outlived the Trust itself (RSC, 2017).

**Networking With Citizens**

The networking described so far was unabashedly not that of a ‘neighbourhood’ group but of one which acted as a city-level governance actor. The Trust simultaneously put much effort into networking with citizens, partly to access practical support for the Walk, and partly to construct the Trust’s identity as a group which could plausibly claim to represent some ‘community’ or ‘communities’ in the city, and so give it a legitimate voice in governance. They did this through networking with the public as individuals, with groups in the city representing communities of interest, and with communities of place at neighbourhood scale.

The first of these is closest to the concerns of those looking for conventional markers of democracy and legitimacy in a community group. The Trust, as a group of citizens acting collectively, would clearly contribute towards a weak associative form of democracy. It might also have developed internal democracy, reflecting the ideals of strong associative democracy, or created a representative structure appropriately judged in the ways Cowie and Davoudi set out. Neither happened, and like many other community environmental groups (Luckin & Sharp, 2004), the Trust focused on its substantive aims rather than on internal democracy. A two-tier structure quickly evolved, with Board members making decisions, developing strategies, and networking with sponsors, landowners and officials. “Supporters and volunteers” (SWWT, 2006a) were a sporadically mobilised, self-selecting group of individuals drawn from across the city, who responded to appeals for assistance with activities such as fundraising (SWWT, 2000d) and engaging people with the river through guided walks and river clean-ups (SWWT, 1988b).

In an attempt to institutionalise representation of these supporters, a separate 'Friends of the Five Weirs Walk' group was set up to "create more opportunities for involvement and more information for supporters" (5WWT, 1993a). The Trust's legitimacy in representing the voice of the people of Sheffield (potentially weakened by its professional, executive role) was thus strengthened by its close link to an organisation which arguably had a stronger claim to the 'community' identity (Purdue, 2001). While, as an organisation, the Friends seems to have been short-lived, only occasionally appearing in the archive after the first year (5WWT, 1994b, 2000c), it remained the circulation list for the Bulletins, and so comprised a body of citizens which could be mobilised for support when needed.

The Trust also attempted to network with communities of interest. Potential users of the Walk and river, particularly organised user groups, were an important perceived category of stakeholders who were to be represented on the Board. Although in early years there were "representatives of fishing interests, the disabled, conservation volunteers etc." (5WWT, 1988d), their role was ill-defined. It appeared to entail both representing the Trust's cause to the user groups (e.g., for fundraising (5WWT, 1988a)), and vice versa, as "fishers, canoeists, ramblers, naturalists etc." were invited to "find out more about the project, make suggestions and get involved" (5WWT, 1988b). This activity faded out after a well-attended inception meeting (5WWT, 1989b), and later attempts failed to revive a "group of river users" to play a key role in "shaping and improving the Walk" (5WWT, 1993a, 1993b). Overall the Trust did not manage to network successfully with this obvious constituency, perhaps because the latter did not recognise the Trust's claim to be acting in their interests.

An early change for the Trust was from claiming to represent citizens of the Lower Don Valley to constructing the entire city as 'their' community. Initially the Walk was connected to the regeneration of working-class neighbourhoods previously heavily dependent on the Valley's steel industry. The initial prospectus claims that "within half a mile of the river lie many of Sheffield's poorest communities" (5WWT, 1987) and the Trust aspired to have the Walk "supported, used and 'owned' by local people and ... designed to meet their needs as much as possible" (5WWT, 1989a). Central government job creation funds were accessed to support some of the early work, but the archive gives no indication of how it was intended to establish what local needs were, nor of how local residents would be involved in the project's governance. Significantly, the prospectus does not include representatives of local communities as intended Board members. While information display text from 1989 (5WWT, 1989c) says that "representatives of local residents" were among those on the Board, there is no further mention of *local* citizens in the archive (apart from the specific episodes discussed in Box 2), and even opportunities for people to get involved practically (rather than in governance) failed to attract local residents (5WWT, 2000b).

The Trust responded firstly by shifting the ostensible purpose of representation, constructing local communities no longer as active participants representing their own economic interests, but as beneficiaries of a cultural, educational and leisure resource. By the early 1990s community involvement has become synonymous with promotional and educational activities (5WWT, 1993a), and subsequent Annual Reports all contain reports of new interpretation boards, poetry and music events, guided walks, collaborations with local schools and so on.

The Trust also broadened the scale of representation and the claimed identity of the Walk's 'community'. They "want[ed] to see the Don become a 'People's River' where access is given to all without charge" (5WWT, 1989c), "'owned' by people and seen as a real feature of the city's heritage" (5WWT, 1993a). A decade later, support for the Cobweb Bridge campaign was claimed to show "how the Trust's original vision has now been taken to heart by the city as a whole" (5WWT, 2002).

### Box 2. Networking with local communities: failure and success.

In 1998 the proximity of the Walk to Burngreave, one of Sheffield's poorest neighbourhoods (SCC, 2017), "prompted the Trust to establish better links with the local community, via the Burngreave Environment Forum [which has] nominated a representative to attend the Trust board" (SWWT, 1998a). This representative attended only once (SWWT, 1998b). Neither side pursued the link, and it seems that the trustees' politically-principled motivation was insufficient without any perception of shared strategic purpose.

In contrast, the Trust cooperated successfully with a citizen group representing residents of Tinsley, a very poor neighbourhood (SCC, 2017) adjacent to Meadowhall. When the latter's owners failed to deliver the promised pedestrian routes through the complex, the Trust linked its own concerns – couched initially in recreational terms (SWWT, 1993a) – to residents' interests in the economic benefits of access to Meadowhall and the transport interchange which lay beyond (SWWT, 1994a). The interviewees described how they "built up outrage" (C), contrasting their alliance with working-class Tinsley with the Meadowhall management, who "were saying 'we don't want these scruffs coming across here shoplifting' ... that was the kind of thing you heard from people" (A). After a "lengthy campaign by the Trust, Tinsley Forum and others" the crucial linking bridge was opened by the Chair of Tinsley Forum (SWWT, 1997).

This repositioning did not replace attempts to network with local citizens, but changed their purpose away from having representation of local interests central to the Trust's aims towards ad hoc linking with local community organisations, as perceived needs arose. Two contrasting episodes are described in Box 2, which demonstrate in particular the importance of shared practical goals as a strategic aspect of networking.

## Concluding Discussion

This paper offers new conceptual and empirical insights into the nature of citizen initiatives. Prompted by the theoretical and practical issues raised by such initiatives for local democracy, we identify the problems arising when applying prevalent criteria for evaluating their legitimacy, and claim that the root of these problems is the binary ontology of 'citizen' and 'state'. We offer instead a middle-range governance theory based on an ontology of people and groups, engaging in strategic networking in order to influence other actors and access resources in pursuit of their substantive goals. To do this they need to establish their legitimacy in the eyes of other stakeholders: this rests on their ability to construct plausible identities as representatives, with the right to speak or act on behalf of others. These identities are resources used in networking, and may well therefore be multiple and/or dynamic, constructed and changing in response to perceived need and other stakeholders' responses. This analysis challenges a priori valorising of *citizen* initiatives and the use of traditional criteria for democratic legitimacy. However, rather than accepting that such constructivism prevents evaluation (Saward, 2010), we suggest that it can be done based on a democratic criterion consistent with both complex local governance contexts (Griggs et al., 2014) and constructivist ontology (Disch, 2015). This is the possibility of challenge (Tully, 2002): a representation process "can be judged as more or less democratic insofar as it does more or less to mobilize both express and implicit objections from the represented" (Disch, 2011, p. 111).

We have demonstrated this analytical approach through the case of the Five Weirs Walk Trust, whose success in creating the Walk came through the construction of two principal representations and underlying identities: as professional partners and as community group. These allowed the Trust to simultaneously embed itself in the city's governance structures and make links with Sheffield's citizens. The representations were intertwined, as the legitimacy in governance rested partly on the 'community' identity. Importantly, it is not that one identity was real and its representation true, and the other unreal and false: the Trust succeeded because it was both a community group (self-organised citizens, with

a legal structure common to community-based organisations) and simultaneously a reliable governance partner (a set of trusted professionals who had strong networks and knew how to make appropriate governance arguments).

It is this hybridity, multiplicity and dynamism which makes the application of the process elements of Cowie and Davoudi's framework so difficult, as these depend on identifiable categories and relationships. Interestingly there was no evidence from the archive that, in practice, this complexity itself undermined the Trust's legitimacy, in contrast to Saward's view that "shape shifting" (while ubiquitous) is usually viewed negatively (Saward, 2014). In other situations this might be different: for instance, in more conflictive circumstances perceptions of shape-shifting might provide opponents with discursive resources for undermining a group's representative claims.

Was the Trust open to 'challenge' from those it claimed to represent? The partial nature of the archive prompts caution in making such a judgement. Whilst no such challenges were revealed in the archive, it seems plausible that the Trust could be criticised, as the minutes and reports strongly suggest that dissent was not sought and if it occurred it was successfully resisted and not recorded. However, recalling that process and outcome criteria are always coupled (Papadopoulos, 2003), the Trust's "substantive legitimacy" (Cowie & Davoudi, 2015) gained through its success in establishing the walk will have supported its "process legitimacy": a less successful organisation (or one whose goals were more controversial) might have faced more criticism for 'undemocratic' governance. Any lack of openness to challenge was part of the skilful shape-shifting which enabled a small group of volunteers to achieve a substantial, non-controversial, public interest goal. Our analysis cannot, however, address more generally the complex relationship between process and substantive legitimacy, given that this is not a matter which can be decided theoretically, but is irreducibly context-specific and a matter of situated value judgement (Campbell, 2002).

Regarding generalisation, we stress that we are not generalising the case's empirical results. Instead as an "extreme case" it makes visible generally-found processes which have context-dependent outcomes (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and so explicates our theoretical contribution (Sigelkow, 2007). The Trust was "extreme" in the extent to which individuals and groups were state/citizen hybrids, and to which different identities and representative claims were possible. Other citizen initiatives will lie elsewhere on these dimensions of 'hybridity' and 'shape-shifting', and so also of the fluidity in space and time of the putatively represented communities. However, even where choices are very constrained over which communities can be plausibly represented (e.g., where a group officially represents a neighbourhood), or levels of hybridity are low, similar processes of claims-making are always taking place (Bound et al., 2005; Connelly, 2011). What will differ is the extent to which strategic networking can construct alternative, plausibly legitimate identities.

We thus claim that this analysis is widely applicable. Governance involves people, groups, interactions between these and so (inevitably) processes of representation (Plotke, 1997). In perhaps any context, questions can and should therefore be asked about what the networks are, how they are formed and the representative and identity claims involved. What will be context dependent are the justifying principles drawn on within a process, and also which would be appropriate for external observers to use. Thus, our suggestion of Tully's challenge criterion is tentative, though it has the merit of being consistent with the constructivist ontology and independent of particular institutional governance forms.

As with any analytic generalisation, it is for others to corroborate our claims (Sayer, 2000, p. 21). However, although our argument is based in the problems associated with a particular, European "inherited [political] language", we suggest that the analysis might have very general relevance. While outside European political norms, and the nature and motivations for citizen actions, may well



be different, 'western' political theory has a global reach, arguably underpinning most formal governance systems. Its concepts are present almost everywhere, even if only as one set of contestable discursive resources amongst others, potentially challenged by other, more culturally-rooted norms (Chatterjee, 2004). More fundamentally, the analysis abstracts from 'our' (or any) inherited language and its embedded norms: the point is that while the ways in which representation and identity claims are made will be context-specific, the making of such claims is a general characteristic of governance processes. The analysis may also be useful with respect to other kinds of citizen action. While beyond the scope of this paper, it seems likely that similar questions about representation and identity claims would be useful in analysing how social movements and participants in state-invited public participation construct their legitimacy, although their very different relationships to the state might well demand a rather different analysis of their relationships and networks.

At the outset we suggested that legitimacy criteria are of immediate, practical importance, as, in everyday governance, judgements are made continuously by planners, mayors, citizens and others. Our analysis thus clearly has practical implications. If such judgements draw on criteria based on the concepts of an inherited language relevant to (European) nation state politics, the potential exists for poor judgements, which might either over-value or exclude citizen initiatives' role in governance. In practice, therefore, we suggest that those involved with citizen initiatives should not take claimed identities, and evaluations of these, for granted, but rather pay close attention to strategic networking practices, and to the representation and identity claims being made. Of course, this is not just a means to critical - still less negative - judgements: reflexive awareness of these processes may open up avenues for more effective engagement in governance.

## Note

1. See <http://www.gps-routes.co.uk/routes/home.nsf/routeslinkscycle/five-weirs-walk-walking-and-cycle-route> for photographs and detailed maps.

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