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Rescaling the local: Multi-academy trusts, private monopoly and statecraft in England

Author

Andrew Wilkins

Publication

Journal of Educational Administration and History, 2017

Author Accepted Manuscript

Abstract

For the past six years successive UK governments in England have introduced reforms intended to usher in less aggregated, top-down, bureaucratically overloaded models of service delivery as well as secure conditions for greater school autonomy. Yet the 'hollowing out' of local government has not resulted in less bureaucracy on the ground or less regulation from above, nor has it diminished hierarchy as an organising principle of education governance. In some cases, monopolies and monopolistic practices dominated by powerful bureaucracies and professional groups persist, albeit realised through the involvement of new actors and organisations from business and philanthropy. In this paper I adopt a governmentality perspective to explore the political significance of large multi-academy trusts (MATs) – private sponsors contracted by central government to run publicly funded schools – to the generation of new scalar hierarchies and accountability infrastructures that assist in bringing the gaze of government to bear upon the actions of schools that are otherwise less visible under local government management. On this account, it is argued, MATs are integral to statecraft and the invention and assemblage of particular apparatuses for intervening upon specific organisations, spaces and peoples.

Introduction

For the past three decades both Labour and Conservative UK governments in England have, to varying degrees, pursued legislation and policies designed to mitigate state monopoly of education, especially from command economies and top-heavy bureaucracy led by local government-run municipal or county administrations responsible for running schools in a given area. State monopoly is often used to describe a system of public administration in which government power takes priority over the public interest and the needs of service users or customers (Downs 1967; Niskanen 1973). More generally state monopoly refers to a model of welfare governance in which geographically dispersed service providers, each one uniquely placed to serve different publics with diverse aspirations and needs, are brought under the control of a single authority or body of professional advisers, administrators and managers who prepare and roll out a blanket strategy which all organisations are required 'implement' (or translate) as part of their 'offer' to service users.

Guided by perspectives drawn from neo-classical economic and public choice theory (Gilder 1981; Willets 1992), both Labour and Conservative UK governments in England have insisted on the virtues of economic liberalisation, privatisation and market competition as organising principles of welfare governance 'with its appeals to the efficiency of the markets, the liberty of

individuals and the non-interventionist state' (Keat and Abercrombie 1991, p. 1). Here state monopoly, as symbolised through the interventionist role of government organisations and bureaucrats, tends to be maligned as antithetical and counter-productive to the dynamics of a fully marketised welfare system, namely one that is competitive, consumer-driven and choice-saturated. As Clarke (2005, p. 449) observes, a key feature of New Labour policy (1997-2010) was its view of 'the people versus the state, with the people requiring rescue from an over-bearing, intrusive and dominating public power'. Similarly, the Conservative government (2010-present) have promoted through their vision of a 'Big Society' (GOV.UK 2011) and more recently a 'devolution revolution' (GOV.UK 2015), decentralising reforms intended to shift powers away from civil servants and politicians and disperse them downward and outward towards schools, local communities and citizens: 'by the end of 2022, local authorities will no longer maintain schools. This change will help us to empower local communities, putting children and parents first' (DfE 2016a, p. 53).

Yet despite the scaling back of government bureaucracies and professional groups in favour of greater legal and financial freedoms for schools to govern themselves (typified through the rapid growth of converter academies and free schools in England since 2010, DfE 2016b) there is evidence of new forms of monopoly taking shape, albeit realised through the interests and practices of actors and organisations drawn from business and philanthropy. The role of private sector involvement in public sector organisation, and privatisation in general, has a long history

in education in England stretching back to the 1980s, the policies, politics and effects of which have already been well documented by researchers of education (Ball 2007; Gunter 2015; Hatcher 2006). The aim of this paper is not to rehearse these arguments but to add to this important literature, and to the burgeoning literature on MATs more generally (Salokangas and Chapman 2014; Simkins 2015), by tracing the development of new forms of privatisation taking shape in education in England, and more importantly, theorising their relationship to new forms of governance or statecraft.

Here I posit the concept of private monopoly – as distinct from state monopoly – to capture the role and development of MATs as distinct private entities with monopolising tendencies and practices, and therefore similar to the techno-bureaucratic setup of local government agencies. This highlights the politics of monopoly, namely that monopoly in the field of education is not necessarily something the government wishes to eradicate; on the contrary, I argue, the government actively sanctions specific forms of monopoly, but monopoly of a particular kind (to be elaborated on shortly). Since 2010 the Conservative government has presented the academies programme as a vehicle for facilitating a ‘school-led system’ (DfE 2016a, p. 6), one that combines school autonomy and self-improvement with decreased bureaucratic overload and steering from central authorities. Yet the existence of large MATs suggests something qualitatively different since it undermines rather than enhances school autonomy, and reproduces the same kinds of legal-bureaucratic arrangements practised by local government.

A central argument of this paper is that private monopoly is legitimated to the extent it brings about greater visibility and transparency to the management of schools considered to be problematic or beyond the control of ordinary governments. In other words, private monopoly reflects a rescaling enterprise in which the state contracts new agents from business and philanthropy to assist with ‘setting rules and establishing an enforcement mechanism designed to control the operation of the system’s constituent institutions, instruments and markets’ (Spotton 1999, p. 971).

To help make sense of these new trends in education governance, I adopt elements of a Foucauldian analytic perspective. For Foucault (1991, p. 100), the art of government – or ‘governmentality’ – concerns perfecting the means for optimising the welfare, education, health, security and efficiency of a population, and so the population emerges as ‘a datum, as a field of intervention and as an objective of governmental techniques’. As I will go on to show, these perspectives are useful for thinking through the politics of monopoly in British education and for drawing attention to the role of large MATs as government-sanctioned programmes intended to maximise opportunities for imposing market discipline on schools.

The spectre of state monopoly

Since the 1970s successive governments in England have reformed elements of state education so as to erase traces of its Keynesian welfarist past and replace it with the virtues of the market paradigm as the only viable programme for organising public and private institutional arrangements and transactions. This has included undermining socialist planning and organising of the economy and welfare, namely a political economy predicated on the socialisation of risk and security, the bureau-professionalism of civil servants and welfare administrators, the administration of 'needs' through bureaucratic centralism and rationalist social planning, and the construction of agreed social purposes. The New Right critique of Keynesian welfarism (or welfare liberalism) in the 1970s and 1980s has been instrumental to these efforts (Joseph 1976) and served as a bulwark for the formation of 'neoliberalism' in general. Here neoliberalism is best understood as a movement or 'thought collective' (Mirowski 2009, p. 428) consisting of governments and supraorganisations collectively pursuing the rationality of the market as the basis for transforming relations between citizens and the state.

Couched in the language of economic liberalisation, market competition and consumer choice, the New Right excoriated state intervention in the economy and welfare as authoritarian, demoralising and inefficient (Gamble 1986; Hirschman 1991). Key to their rejection of state monopoly was a damning indictment of the self-seeking propensities of government-employed bureaucrats working in public, non-commercial organisations: 'Civil servants and welfare administrators are far from the selfless platonic guardians of paternalist mythology' (Deakin

1987, p. 159). Furthermore, the New Right lambasted the state for working from a position of epistemological arrogance or naïve presumption regarding the relevant facts about human or social 'needs' and, therefore, the 'impossibilities of successful central planning' (Gray 1992, p. 1). Instead the New Right borrowed heavily from the ideas of ordo-liberals like Fredrich Von Hayek to argue that innovation or greater efficiency can only be incentivised through the spur of competition, and that dynamism and democratic control is counterposed to central planning and command economies (Gilder 1981).

As Hayek (1960, p. 261) argues, 'It is sheer illusion to think that when certain needs of the citizen have become the exclusive concern of a single bureaucratic machine, democratic control of that machine can then effectively guard the liberty of the citizen'. Borrowing from these and other neoclassical economic insights, the New Right belied the notion that the needs of the citizen should be decided by monopolistic public systems that assign discretionary and uncontrollable powers to government-run bureaucracies and professional groups, and instead appealed to a narrow rational, utilitarian conception of the citizen as consumer and to the benign forces of the market in general as an 'enabling devise for human autonomy' (Gray 1992, p. 26).

These perspectives have been etched into the education policy rhetoric of successive governments in England for over four decades, albeit re-articulated using different vocabulary. Iterations include the 1980 and 1986 Education Acts and the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA) which introduced parental choice of school, rate capping on education provision and budget levels linked to student intake, reduced independence for local government, and opportunities for schools to 'opt out' of local government management and become administratively self-governing under the Local Management of Schools (LMS). In the 1990s Prime Minister John Major reiterated the importance of consumer choice and voice as mechanisms for improving quality in public service delivery (HMSO 1991), thus confirming the role of citizens as bearers of consumer rights. Parents for example were constructed as educational shoppers who exercise choice on the basis of performance indicators communicated through league tables and inspection reports. Later in the 2000s the New Labour administration led by Tony Blair pursued a similar set of arguments albeit using a different rhetorical flourish:

The rationing culture which survived the war, in treating everyone the same, often overlooked individuals' different needs and aspirations. Rising living standards, a more diverse society and a steadily stronger consumer culture have...brought expectations of greater choice, responsiveness, accessibility and flexibility. (OPSR 2002, p. 8)

In other policy texts New Labour employed similar rhetorical strategies that sought to separate out images of an 'old' and 'new' system of public education. The old system of education was represented as 'one-size-fits-all' (DfEE 2001, p. 15) or 'monolithic' with a 'focus on a basic and standard product for all' (DfES 2004, Foreword). In contrast, the 'new' system of education was represented as flexible and responsive to the changing expectations and needs of consumers, one that 'fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system' (DfES 2004, Foreword). The spectre of state monopoly – of a welfare system governed by the interests of government providers rather than the public interest and needs of users or consumers – is the proverbial bogeyman in all the above policy texts. Here state monopoly is characterised as oppressive and oppositional to a welfare system driven by market prerogatives of supply and demand guided by externalities of consumer preference and competition. More specifically, state monopoly is sometimes considered risky since any rational-consensus approach to securing the aims and purpose of education is likely to stagger under the conflicts and confrontations resulting from interest groups competing for power: 'the case for capitalism is that the democracy of the market offers the masses more than the democracy of politics' (Seldon 1990, p. 103).

The obviation of state monopoly therefore necessitates elements of depoliticisation. Here depoliticisation signifies the removal of certain policies, agents, dialogue, structures, bases or organisations that permit any consolidation of power among politicised 'collectives' or 'publics'

with significant bargaining power over claims to how education should be governed (trade unions, local government, sectional pressure groups and the like) (see Gunter 2015). Hence the break-up of concentration of power among local governments and other groups is expected to improve efficiency and innovation through freeing up schools to govern themselves, albeit within a prescriptive framework of national policy directives and provisos (admissions code, funding agreement and statutory obligations relating to special needs and exclusion). Greater private sector participation in public service delivery is also expected to improve efficiency, to the extent it purges public organisations of bureaucratic impediments and combative, political contests that might otherwise obstruct the smooth, efficient running of the school as a business (Wilkins 2016). Instead, the goal is to usher in a system of 'allocative efficiency' (Boyne 1996, p. 704) that permits education services to be funded and designed on the basis of market prerogatives guided by consumer preferences and neutral expert administration rather than a system of bureau-political rule directed by partisanship and the sectional interests of elected officials or the interests of government providers.

But rather than disappear, state monopoly has been reimagined and realised through other means and actors as it shifts from public to private hands. Despite long-term efforts to extricate schools from the purview of local government rule, secure greater school autonomy, undermine

central planning, and producer greater school choice, there is evidence that state monopoly has not dissipated so much as it has changed its form and proliferated under the ideologies and practices of commercial, not-for-profit, non-government actors from business and philanthropy. As I will go on to show, certain forms of monopoly are rendered more legitimate than others to the extent they produce schools that are navigable spaces of 'commensurability, equivalence and comparative performance' (Lingard et al. 2016, p. 542), and which enhance accountability to the funders and regulators, namely the Department for Education (DfE), the Education Funding Agency (EFA) and the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). This suggests that monopoly in the field of education provision is permitted, even celebrated, but only conditionally so. The legitimacy of MATs to education is that they are instrumental to generating new scalar hierarchies and accountability infrastructures that consolidate forms of state power; that is, they help to rescale the local so that the gaze of government comes to bear on the actions of others far more successfully than it would under local government management.

Reimagining monopoly

When a school is deemed by the school's inspectorate, Ofsted, to have 'serious weaknesses' or require 'special measures' under section 44(2) of the Education Act 2005, the Secretary of State

has the power to make an academy order in respect of that school and make the school eligible for takeover by a sponsor such as a business, university, other school, faith group or voluntary group (Academies Act 2010). Different sponsors (some large, some small) enter into a competitive bidding process to secure public funding from DfE to oversee management of the school. Once under the management of a MAT the school is no longer a separate legal entity with powers to employ staff, enter into contracts and plan budget spending (as is the case for 'converter academies', and some 'free schools' and 'maintained' schools, to be expanded on shortly). Instead the school is stripped of its assets and any legal entitlement to self-determination and subject to the requirements and provisos of the MAT, specifically the board of directors or board of trustees who, having entered into a funding agreement with the Secretary of State, retain legal powers to shape key policy decisions for all the schools within the cluster or chain (Wolfe 2013).

Schools brought under the control of a MAT are called 'sponsored academies' and possess significantly less autonomy compared to their more 'liberated' counterparts, namely 'converter academies' (those previously with 'good' or 'outstanding' Ofsted grades that have converted from 'maintained' to academy status). Converter academies, sometimes called stand-alone or free-standing schools, operate under a similar governance setup to sponsored academies in that both are financially regulated by a separate legal entity known as an academy trust. The academy trust receives its funding directly from central government who in turn exercises

strategic-legal powers over the design of the school curriculum, admissions, staff pay and conditions, and the like. The head teacher or principal together with other middle management – senior school staff and managers, namely heads of year, finance directors, and human resource managers – are responsible for operational duties relating to the hiring and firing of teaching staff, premises management, liaising with contractors and suppliers, and overseeing curriculum implementation. The key difference here is a converter academy retains a governing body with separate statutory rights and powers to the academy trust and head teacher, and who are responsible for holding senior school leaders to account for the educational and financial performance of schools. Under the MAT model, a sponsored academy is unlikely to retain its own governing body – depending on the scheme of delegation set out by the academy trust – as there is only one group of members and governors appointed to manage all of the schools within the cluster.

About one-third of academies are converter academies while the remaining two-thirds of academies (roughly 65%) are sponsored academies and represent around 15 per cent of all secondary, primary and special schools (Hill 2015). Like some free schools, converter academies retain an academy trust with legal-administrative powers and responsibilities to set the curriculum and admissions policy, employ the staff, appoint the head teacher, source own suppliers and professional advisers, manage the admission appeals process, and adopt

particular accounting regimes. Sponsored academies on the other hand are subject to central planning and standard operating procedures devised by the MAT. This is what Hill et al. (2010, p. 68) call the '80/20 split': '80 per cent being standard across a chain but with 20 per cent flexibility to adjust systems and models to the local context'. Depending on the 'scheme of delegation', some schools within the chain may retain a local governing body (LGB) or 'academy council' with freedoms to affect policy design and implementation, but ultimately decision-making powers reside with the board of directors.

MATs vary considerably in their size, geographical reach and governance setup, with the majority of MAT setups (517) comprising two to five academies and the largest four MATs in England – School Partnership Trust Academies, Oasis Community Learning, Academies Enterprise Trust, and United Learning Trust – managing 193 academies between them (Hill 2015). The largest of these MATs – Academies Enterprise Trust – runs 66 primary, special and secondary schools. Similar to charter management organisations (CMOs) in the US (Scott 2009; Lipman 2011), MATs tend to govern through hierarchy and consist of a board of directors who work at a distance from the schools they manage, but who retain significant steering powers over the senior leadership who are responsible for the day-to-day operation of the schools. The role of the board of directors is to draft and approve policies relating to admissions, curriculum, budget, staff pay and conditions, and length of school day. The 'scheme of delegation' means that policy decisions are the preserve of the board of directors who in turn place limits on the

decision-making powers of individual schools (NCTL 2014). The MAT also inherits significant management overheads in the form of premises management, employment disputes and contractual issues, payroll and legal advice.

These trends in education governance are suggestive of the very same forms of monopoly that successive governments in England have sought to undermine over the last four decades through pursuing market prerogatives of competition, choice and diversity of provision. From this perspective, the scaling back of government-run bureaucracies and professional groups is not intended to stifle monopolising practices entirely, but monopoly of a particular kind.

Moreover, this does not mean that no competition takes place, only that certain providers (like large MATs) are permitted to dominate large chunks of the market subject to a contract with the Secretary of State. It is also important to note that while large academy sponsors are not accountable to local government – other than on matters of special needs and exclusions, as is required of all state-funded schools – they are accountable to central government vis-à-vis their funding agreement for making good on their promise of raising education standards in underperforming schools.

Ironically and somewhat paradoxically, monopoly exercised through large MATs enables central government greater steering of schools formerly managed by local government. This is because

MATs represent a new cadre of professionals devoted to implementing risk-based approaches to regulation that mean in practice less autonomy for schools and strict compliance with standard operational procedures in terms of teaching, learning and assessment (Stewart 2016). These types of top-down, highly prescriptive, command and control setups are more common among large MATs who run multiple schools, compared to small MATs (usually comprising two or three schools, called collaboratives or soft federations) where typically a less formally rigid structure of governance interlinks each school to enable greater opportunities for power-sharing within the federation and, concomitant with this, the freedom of each school to pursue their own forms of management, leadership and policy solutions, albeit still achieving a level of collaborative governance through the creation of joint, cross-school committees with delegated powers (Salokangas and Chapman 2014). As Simkins (2015) observes, there is a dearth, albeit growing body of research looking at the politics of these new school configurations which will hopefully shed important insight into why certain schools federate to become a chain and what kinds of reconciliations or accommodations are negotiated as part of the ongoing labour required to bring disparate elements together and force connections between schools with potentially divergent interests and conflicting histories, traditions, practices, interests, positions, stakes, discourses, and so forth. In contrast, large MATs appear to avoid this kind of labour or bridging work, and favour instead the generation of sameness or equivalence to maintain a homogenous, almost predictable and calculable sets of interests, positions and practices among its schools. This requires forms of concentrated power rather than dispersed power.

Typical to the governance of a large MAT is a CEO who empowers a board of directors to make key policy decisions about curriculum, admissions, staff pay and conditions (NCTL 2014), coupled with an executive team who oversee finance, human resources, governance and data management for all the schools within the chain. These new scalar relations in theory tighten lines of authority and accountability from the schools through executive team to board of directors to MAT CEO. The creation of tight, centralised accountability within the school system is perhaps why government has expressed a preference for MATs and MAT boards:

The growth of MATs will improve the quality of governance – meaning that the best governing boards will take responsibility for more schools. As fewer, more highly skilled boards take more strategic oversight of the trust’s schools, MAT boards will increasingly use professionals to hold individual school-level heads to account for educational standards and the professional management of the school. (DfE 2016a, p. 50)

The department’s preference is for groups of schools or academies intending to collaborate to form a multi-academy trust in which there is robust shared governance arrangements and clear lines of accountability. (DfE 2015, p. 32)

A new governmental programme

From a Foucauldian analytic perspective, governmental programmes may refer to the 'invention and assemblage of particular apparatuses and devices for exercising power and intervening upon particular problems' (Rose 1999, p. 19). The art of government therefore is encapsulated through techniques and procedures that undertake 'to conduct individuals throughout their lives by placing them under the authority of a guide responsible for what they do and for what happens to them' (Foucault 1997, p. 68). Moreover, it is often around 'difficulties and failures that programmes of government have been elaborated' and through which government and non-government jointly 'seek to configure specific locales and relations in ways thought desirable' (Rose and Miller 1992, p. 181). From this perspective, MATs can be characterised as a governmental programme aimed at increased targeting and management of individuals and institutions that are otherwise beyond the scope of ordinary governments.

Consider that under the Academies Act 2010, the Secretary of State has the power to remove a maintained school from the management of local government and make that school eligible for takeover from an academy sponsor if the school has been deemed by Ofsted to have 'serious weaknesses' or require 'special measures' – itself a form of problematisation or 'problematizing activity' (Rose and Millar 1992, p. 181). As Rose and Millar (1992) show, government is

exclusively concerned with intervening upon specific activities, events or experiences deemed to be problematic or failing in some way, and therefore in need of greater regulation, discipline or correction. From this perspective, MATs are important mechanisms to the rescaling or 'deterritorialisation' (Brenner 2004, p. 30) of schools in that they help to establish 'a regime of visibility' and 'a grid of codeability' (Rose 1988, p. 187) through which multiple schools within a chain may be better regulated, in this case rendered amenable to administration, statistical mapping and governance through appropriate prudential calculations. Saltman (2014, p. 42) presents a similar, draconian vision of the charter school movement in the US:

Privatized school management typified by the charter school movement and its venture philanthropy backers is responsible for the promotion of "scaling up" homogenous school models that are characterized by a climate of repressive control in schools.

A key focus of MATs in England are strategies that enable the recalibration of 'underperforming' schools as manageable entities with demonstrable, calculable or 'legible' gains that can be measured and audited to the satisfaction of external regulators and funders. Standardised tests, performance monitoring and expert evaluation for example are ruthlessly pursued by MATs for the purpose of enhancing organisational preparedness, response and answerability. Similarly in the US, researchers of the charter school movement point to the 'technologies of

expertise' (Mitchell and Lizotte 2016, p. 222) and 'repressive pedagogies' (Saltman 2014, p. 43) explicit to the organisation of CMOs. The suggestion here is that MATs are instrumental to forms of statecraft in that they assist in bringing the gaze of government to bear upon the actions of schools that are otherwise less visible and transparent under local government management. It is precisely because the MAT model expands opportunities for increased instrumentalist, market-oriented approaches to school governance that they are favoured over state monopoly, such as capture from local government. Arguably local government is no less technocratic or bureaucratic than the MAT model, to the extent both make themselves accountable to others through the setting of performance indicators, the establishment of benchmarks, the administration of audits, the delegation of management overheads, and the contracting-out of services. The key difference here is that local government is vulnerable to capture from political opposition and deliberation as a condition of its democratic, open-ended organisation. In other words, the power to govern under democratic rule is not reserved for experts, professionals and technocrats exclusively, making local government 'politics' unwieldy and unpredictable. Local government politics is risky in so far as it cannot be comfortably squared with the kind of rational-consensus, techno-managerialist approach to school governance favoured by politicians and policy makers who counterpose 'quality' and 'democratic accountability'.

Research shows that academisation as a form of system redesign helps to open up the internal operation of schools to greater visibility and scrutiny from external regulators and funders (Wilkins 2016). Whether this leads to an improved education system is matter of contention (Hutchings, Francis and Kirby 2015; LGA 2016; NUT 2015). What is clear however is that academisation not only enhances the visibility of schools to the gaze of government but, conversely, undermines the visibility and transparency of schools to others – parents and communities for example – as academy conversions are sometimes negotiated in secrecy and enforced without consultation with the wider public (Mansell 2013), the decisions and values upon which schools are governed are increasingly removed from the space of democratic consultation (Wilkins 2016), and schools are permitted to circumvent local democratic processes and decisions enshrined through practices of local government (Unison 2010).

This is not to presuppose *a priori* coherence of policy enactment across all schools within a chain since policy discourse is always constructed imperfectly and in tandem with other, local influences. As Mitchell and Lizotte (2016, p. 224) advise, it is important to remain circumspect of the ‘apparent seamlessness of these elaborations and articulations, especially with respect to the translation of the programs into the consciousness and practices of individuals and groups’.

It is more realistic to assume that ‘control is imperfect and incomplete in the face of contradictory systems, contested positions and contentious subjects’ (Clarke 2004, p. 3).

Instead policy enactments need to be conceptualised as ‘creative processes of interpretation

and recontextualisation – that is, the translation of texts into action and the abstractions of policy ideas into contextualised practices’ (Ball et al. 2012, p. 3). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the legal-bureaucratic arrangement of MATs as effective technologies or ‘major policy steering systems’ (Lingard et al. 2016, p. 539) integral to emerging governance patterns in the modern state. The scheme of delegation decided by the board of directors means that, in theory at least (an important orienting point for this paper), all schools within a chain must comply with the standard operating procedures set out by the MAT and implement those on the ground regardless of their context-rich specificity as local providers. This suggests a vertical, one-way, top-down form of accountability with restrictive and reductive effects on the day-to-day administration of schools.

What has been described so far can be attributed to the shift from government to governance, namely arrangements in which the ‘informal authority of networks supplements and supplants the formal authority of government’ (Rhodes 2007, p. 1247). To some extent this includes ‘disintermediation’ which describes ‘the withdrawal of power and influence from intermediate or ‘meso-level’ educational authorities that operate between local schools and national entities’ (Lubienski 2014, p. 424). The scaling back of local government is one form of disintermediation. On the other hand, the rise of MATs point to new forms of ‘reintermediation’ (Wilkins 2016, p. 74) or repopulating of the middle since MATs supplant the bureau-professional role of local government as deliverers and overseers of education provision. Similar to local government

running maintained schools, MATs develop their own systems of administration and governance as well as aim to achieve economies of scale through integrating back office services and jointly procuring functions. At the same time, it is important to recognise that the legitimacy of these arrangements are contingent on MATs rigorously adhering to market concepts of 'performance', 'value for money' and 'productivity' through carrying out checks and balances and utilising data (specifically, financial data, pupil attainment scores and staff performance data) to enhance accountability to the funders, regulators and parents as consumers. Here the state emerges as an 'instrument for constructing market opportunities, absorbing market costs, and imposing market discipline' (Soss et al. 2001, p. 3) (also see Ball 2007). As Ozga (2009, p. 150) observes, 'we see the governance turn as a shift in strategy that is highly dependent on the appearance of deregulation, but that is equally marked by strong central steering through various policy technologies'.

Modernising instruments of state power

In this paper I have explored the phenomenon of MATs as a way to draw attention to some of the contradictory tenets endemic to neoliberal policymaking in education in England, a key contradiction being that market reform of education is not necessarily concerned with stifling monopoly than it is with undermining certain forms of monopolising practices, namely state

monopoly and local government management of schools. Despite being anti-competitive, anti-choice and anti-democratic in many cases (Mansell 2016), private monopoly as a governing principle of neoliberal education is legitimate in some cases, but only to the extent it brings about greater visibility and transparency to the internal operation of schools as businesses.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the development of MATs can be conceptualised as elements in the formation of statecraft and a burgeoning state power since it performs a certain labour and purpose, namely to bring the gaze of government to bear upon the actions of others. MATs are therefore complimentary and supplementary to the will of government in that they work to align the micro-politics of schools with the political and economic aspirations of the state.

An important function of local government is political wrangling and advocacy work designed to balance the needs and interests of residents, voters, political parties and the councils (LGA 2011). This means enabling widespread citizen involvement as a condition of securing public agreement on how best to govern welfare services. Hence some politicians, policy makers, school leaders, and governors, especially those 'less interested in democratic accountability than in quality' (Stuart 2014), characterise local government as too costly, sluggish, bureaucratic and interfering, but moreover too unwieldy and inefficient as an instrument for effecting a technocratic or 'professional' model of education governance (Wilkins 2016). Thus the academies programme is celebrated by some as a positive form of producer capture since it is designed according to a depoliticising logic with a strict focus on securing technical proficiency

in and oversight of internal operations pertaining to budget spending, strategic planning, target setting and performance monitoring. However, it is misguided to think that MATs are apolitical or anti-political. On the contrary, MATs can be characterised as deeply political and politicising since they derive their authority as expert practitioners in 'deliverology' (Barber, Moffit and Kihn 2010), namely effective technologies for the delivery of specific outcomes, techniques or rationalities that satisfy an instrumentalist, techno-managerialist practice of education. Large MATs are tolerated and even celebrated to the extent they are 'unlikely to engage in any significant, paradigm shifting deliberation and more likely to seek to achieve the political objectives which run in line with the governmental (and therefore state) rationality' (Foster, Kerr and Byrne 2015, p. 131).

As Fielding and Moss observe (2011, p. 21), 'the draining of politics is political'. When schools are depoliticised – removed the politics of local government and entrusted to govern themselves or be governed under the authority of others, a business, university, other school, faith group or voluntary group – they are simultaneously re-politicised as modernising agents of state power. This is evident in the way school governance is undergoing 're-agenting' (Hatcher 2006, p. 599) to cope with demands for professional governance underpinned by 'intelligent accountability' frameworks, self-regulating networks and policy microspaces led by experts and technocrats (Wilkins 2016). Similar work conducted by Ball and Junemann (2012) demonstrate the emergence of new forms of government – network governance or 'heterarchical relationships'

(p. 137) – made possible through the mobilisation of new policy actors and authorities drawn from the philanthropic, charity and private sectors. From a governmentality perspective, these reforms can be viewed as mobile, calculative strategies that seek to bind schools to a plethora of micro structures, relations and processes that help to match ‘political aspirations with individual actions and judgement’ (Rose 1999, p. 152).

These insights give rise to a set of contradictions and tensions that are endemic to the contemporary policy moment. Rather than view MATs as simply evidence of ‘backdoor privatisation’ of state education, they need to be understood and conceptualised vis-à-vis a governmentality perspective (Foucault 1991, 1997) as a set of rationalities or programmes designed and sanctioned to intervene upon schools deemed to be ‘problematic’ or failing to regulate themselves properly and efficiently. Here the state assumes the role of market facilitator or ‘market-maker, as initiator of opportunities, as re-modeller and moderniser’ (Ball 2007, p. 82). On this understanding it is important to remain circumspect of political narratives that wrongly conflate monopoly with local government control only or insist that less state monopoly is conducive to greater efficiency, marketisation and competition within education. In fact, it is clear from the discussion in this paper that under actually existing neoliberalism monopoly and markets do not preclude one another, albeit they sometimes exist in tension with one another. As Birch (2015, p. 116) argues, many “market-based mechanisms, instruments and

incentives...are not in fact market-based at all since neoliberalism plays second fiddle to the re-emergence of corporate monopolies which inhibit the operation of markets’.

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