

Introducing our new series: the Northern Powerhouse

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Welcome to the Northern Powerhouse collection of articles for Open Democracy, curated by Manchester Left Writers. Here, I want to outline what we aim to do across our pieces.

It is worth stating from the off that what we don't want to do is declare what 'it', 'the Northern Powerhouse' is, or to try to predict how that concept may or may not roll out in concrete form. What we want to do here is to present the Northern Powerhouse as a kind of prism, being viewed from different sides, through different facets. The light, of course, bends at different angles through a prism, into different colours, a process called 'dispersion'. So we want to examine how 'the Northern Powerhouse', that big, slab-like, declarative name, actually operates as a disperser of different political colours and structures of feeling, in our present moment.

Much of what we have to contribute will focus on the tensions between public and private interests. Between culture, identity and belonging and capital, accumulation and the state, between superstructure and infrastructure. We want to highlight the long-running role of private firms like Peel Holdings, owners of Liverpool and Salford Docks, and the Manchester Ship Canal, and their fraught relationship with local government. The Pomona docklands site is currently a contested space too, argued for as public, against private interests. The BBC also leases much of its iconic Media City infrastructure from Peel.

part of the £38.5bn five-year upgrade for northern rail networks has been frozen by central government, just as the Powerhouse rhetoric rolled out. We want to begin in Manchester – as we are Manchester Left Writers – then look outwards to the national 'Northern Powerhouse' rhetoric. There are immediate tensions here. Some funding has already been halted. For instance, part of the £38.5bn five-year upgrade for northern rail networks has been frozen by central government, just as the Powerhouse rhetoric rolled out.

The standoff with Sir Richard Leese regarding the homeless camp in St. Ann's Square has focused these issues into a very visible crucible. Leese, and others within Manchester City Council, were and are using health and safety legislation, the traditional weaponry of trade union activism, to militate against the homeless camp. Some of our texts, then, will be about 'the right to the city'. The fight over the homeless camp known as 'The Ark' on Oxford Road rages on, with Manchester Metropolitan University entering the fray.

We don't propose to look to the past, or produce a series of ethnocentric 'Manchester pride' articles. There are homeless, international migrants here, whose citizenship status is in total limbo. We want to begin in the city and look outward, via the 'Calais crisis', to the global position. In this sense, we need to track the very visible signs of what the current top-down place-making and place-branding of Manchester conceals, but also these hidden signs, which connect our arguments to the global picture. We also need to show you how global investment consortiums, such as Deloitte, are currently circling above 'the Northern Powerhouse', with greedy eyes.

The Conservative Party Conference took place in Manchester on 4-7 October. David Cameron notoriously chose iconic Manchester group The Smiths for the BBC Radio 4 Desert Island Discs programme, shortly before key ex-members of the group expressed dissent.

Our series is timely in several ways then, not least in relation to the recent Conservative Party

Conference. Also, after May 7th, 2015, British identity and belonging began to re-assemble itself, something strongly detectable across a variety of social media platforms. The devolutionary logic, culminating in the rejection of Scottish independence, began to bubble up in ideas such as ‘the new north-south divide’, with Manchester voting to devolve from England, into a Scotland perceived to be ‘more socialist’.

We want to begin in the city and look outward, via the ‘Calais crisis’, to the global position The Conservative party repeatedly holding their conference in Manchester, and the rhetoric of the Northern Powerhouse itself, is an attempt to win support on this changing electoral landscape.

We want to provide an understandable overview of the complex interplay between identity and belonging, local, regional and central economics and politics, in Manchester and ‘the north’ more widely. Collectively, we have a big overview of Manchester and ‘the Northern Powerhouse’, a term at least publicly associated with George Osborne, and how that rhetoric fits – or doesn’t – the reality.

We want to highlight tensions and provide signposts for the future, as we proceed through the uplifting Labour leadership contest and beyond it. In some ways, then, this series sides with the current Momentum campaign.

But we don't want to claim that our picture is ‘objective’, it is subjective, political, left wing writing, and we want to call up other voices, because the one thing ‘the Northern Powerhouse’ needs right now is a set of oppositional visions of what that might mean.

We hope to stir up a hornet's nest of debate, before stepping back, in order to allow that to continue.

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