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Representing London: Making and Claiming the city

Abstract

This paper explores what it means to represent a city. It does this by drawing from and seeking to read across two somewhat distinct meanings of representation, stemming from cultural theory and political studies. The reason for approaching representation in this way is an interest in the how elected representatives claim the city, using London as an example. Drawing from interviews with members of London Assembly, we take a transversal cut across party and geographical lines to analyse the nature and content of their representative claims. Identifying two main types of claims to representations - the city as an identity, and as a place or a collection of places we explore their visions of the city as it is and could be. . The politicians invoke cultural imaginaries and institutional dimensions of representation and representativeness. Their claims are framed by their peculiar institutional location and seeming structural weakness, yet the usefulness of taking both senses of representation together reveals that through its representatives the city – and urban democratic representation - is more than a discrete object or even a multiplicity of viewpoints, but rather a process continually made and remade through practices and claims, even as these slide across scales. These repertoires of representation signal how even from a place of seeming political marginality the city is open to multiple imagined ideals that are shared and cut across conventional political lines.

Introduction

A question about what it means to represent London might provoke distinct responses, depending on how the word representation is understood. Two traditions or approaches stand out. One, rooted in cultural theory starts by thinking of the role of culture, language and signs and how these connote and denote the meanings of a place called London. Applied to the city, this entails a range of linguistic devices and tropes, spatial imaginaries and mental maps that make up the multiple range of representations of the city, both symbolic and material. Discussions of urban imaginaries invoke the ways in which the city is conceived through the combination of representations and narratives. They are social and spatial constructions that can lead to the formation of collectives, contestations, struggles over and change in the city. For Taylor (2004) imaginaries are an ensemble of ideas, narratives, myths, and images with both material and discursive implications. A stress on difference and ensemble highlights the multiplicity of representations of the city, that are produced through a wide variety of practices, generating specific and diffuse ideas of the city (Isin, 2007, Jazeel 2021); it is always being made and incomplete (McFarlane 2021). Thus, the representation of a city is always a work of re-presentation, to follow King (1996).

As significant as this way of conceiving representation is, it runs on a largely parallel track to another approach and set of concerns, one in which the word representation has a more literal meaning. Rooted in political theory, governance and administration as well as debates about different forms of democracy, this is representation in the more everyday sense of the word. All cities have some form of governance and, in democracies, elected representatives. The extent these representatives do or can speak for the city is, inevitably, contested, and subject to differing views about legitimacy, authority, and the specific relation between the urban and democracy. However, it shares the view that urban politics has overstressed the 'the spectacular dramaturgy of street protest'... [which] tends to underplay the necessarily representative dimension of claims-making' (Barnett 2014, p.) The representative space of city government is also a contested arena of claims between the local state and communities, about what is seen as central and peripheral in the city, , as well as disputatious relation to the national state bequeathing or limiting devolution to the city. What arises from these levels and territorialisations is a tension between how the demos governs the polis and how the polis emerges and is understood in the first place. By looking at levels and layers within democratic structures, such as London government, we aim to go beyond rather

triumphalist claims about the potential of city Mayors (Barber 2014) to explore practices of representation. This is a perspective of city politics from the viewpoint of people who may be regarded as the ‘underlabourers’ of democracy (cf Beveridge and Koch 2024). This adds to debates about the relation of the urban and the democratic in shedding light on a somewhat overlooked part of the urban governance fabric.

These two approaches share the general sense of representation as a particular kind of description or portrayal, or as the act of speaking on behalf of someone. A gap between the cultural and the institutional/political is marked by different theoretical concerns within and across disciplines. Our purpose is not to treat them as dichotomous but rather to show these two forms as inter-related and co-constitutive. They each make up an idea of what the city is, and the different conceptions of representation are inter-connected in practice, even if not in theory and analysis. We explore this through engaging with elected politicians in the London Assembly. We chose to focus on this because despite all that is written on and about London, a city with its own unique and contested histories of government and representation, the role of the Assembly in the city is relatively under-studied, and it not through the lens that we employ here. The Assembly has arguably become somewhat invisible as the Mayor of London is the elected face of the city and the marginal position the members occupy shapes how they see and claim the city. Assembly Members (AMs) have some public profile but they operate in an uncertain place between scrutiny and representative roles, while sharing the fate of many elected politicians (including most Members of Parliament) in having little name recognition among the general public. We identify and assess several forms of claiming by these representatives. In pointing to the how the multiplicity of representations make-up the city we draw upon the culturalist approach, while in considering the claims of representatives we signal how the institutional is or can also be imaginative. This does not resolve the democratic deficit that forms their institutional environment, though it does open routes to exploring what representational practices can be in such a context.

Representation and claims

The idea of representation has become more specialised and narrower because various approaches to it – aesthetic, cultural, electoral and institutional – tend to remain apart (Saward 2010). This leads to a gap between the cultural and the institutional uses of the term; while the former can lack insight on the ways in which political ideas and practices are

changing and interlinked, the latter can be or become rather administrative or governance oriented. A way beyond that is to follow Saward's thinking about what representation does, rather than just what it is, either institutionally or culturally. Representation 'is constantly being produced (and perhaps changed or undermined) from a dynamic set of practices, which may or may not be performed well or effectively' (Saward 2020: 4). A stress on the practiced, performed and claimed features of representation emphasise its constitutive character in making up claims to represent something or someone, bringing together the electoral and performed sides of representation (Saward 2020). Connecting this to elected representatives suggests that they perform 'public identity work' (p.6) that acts to reproduce representation. They make claims to be representative rather than merely achieving the representative role by virtue of having been elected. This underscores the active making of representative claims, which need not be limited to elected politicians but can refer to a wider variety of actors and actions. However, for the focus of this paper we limit it to elected representatives to unpack the ways in which they perform through narration the act of representing, for instance in the types of claims they make, the issues they decide to talk about and the actions – and the space for action – they can take and possess. Although we do see this as associated with the identities of representatives, individually and regarding the parties they belong to, we draw from Spary's (2010) account of the performative repertoires available to representatives.

To develop the argument and link it to the city we bring in some additional lines of thinking. One is to redeploy Saward's (2020) discussion of subject and object in representation. The makers of representative claims – in this paper elected London politicians, as well as the parties they stand for – convey a particular relationship to an object. In our case the object they referred to could be the city, London. We found they often spoke or thought of the city in parts rather than wholes, while simultaneously claiming to 'know' London as a whole in ways unavailable to local (borough) representatives. Thus this synecdoche means that when they talk about the city they mean or refer to a part of the city; it indicates that the 'where' of politics is as significant as 'what' is thought of as political (Rodgers et al 2014). The ways that Members relate 'wholes and parts' contains claims to both speak for and about the city, as they slide across scales without question. This indicates that what is done in the name of representation is a significant element of what the act of representation does. At the same time, when they move from spaces of the city to its infrastructures and institutions (housing, transport, the police) this produces an overlapping

but also distinct way in which the city is represented. It appears like an assemblage (McFarlane 2021) in which there are a range of ways, levels and spaces involved in a politics of representation and its representation by politicians.

A second way forward is to connect the idea of representation to urban imaginaries and their social and spatial constructions (Bonakdar and Audirac 2021, Taylor 2004). The ensemble of narratives and images of the city have both material and discursive implications. They are consequential for the ways people live in and experience cities and thus constitute both the idea and the reality (both multiple) of the city (Isin 2007, Donald 2011). The politicians we draw on in this research are likewise the producers and products of such narratives; they help to construct the city in a literal sense (influencing through their speaking position matters such as the built environment and local planning), as well its lived character, while also at some level 'speaking for' and claiming the city. By centring the (local) state this approaches the city as a site of democratic claims making. Looking at this through the narratives of Assembly Members, rather than those with executive powers, we aim to expose the work of 'ordinary' representation.

A third element is a specific lens we brought to this research. While the participants had scope to shape the direction of the interview this occurred in a context motivated by our theoretical and empirical questions about the nature of contemporary London, particularly situating our inquiry to assess how welcoming and inclusive it is as a city (Liang et al 2022). Drawing together these various resources we examine various ways in which the city is represented through claiming the city through the representative role. This links the cultural and the institutional domains, casting representation and representativeness in and of the city in a different light. It also introduces a novel angle to discussions of claiming the city, going beyond its connection to social movements (Ofer 2017) and feminist approaches (Kern 2021), to set out and assess how elected representatives speak for and claim the city – the city as people, as a place or a collection of places, and as enacting welcoming and openness. We elaborate on these themes after presenting our methods.

Methods and context

In 2022 we approached two-thirds of the Assembly's 25 members for an interview. Eight interviews were conducted, (both online and in-person) aiming to achieve the best cross-sample we could obtain from those who replied. Our sample was approximately in line with

party, gender and geographical representation of the GLA, i.e. 44% of GLA members are London-wide, while in our sample 50% were London-wide representatives; 52% of members are women, it was 50% in our sample. As our interviewees are public figures they agreed to be named and to have quotes attributed to them personally, except in a few ‘off the record’ remarks, that we anonymise. The list of people interviewed and a breakdown of Assembly members by party and constituency is shown below. All eight of these members were re-elected onto the Assembly in 2024 though Sian Berry subsequently resigned when she became an MP in July 2024.

Assembly member	Party	Area
Marina Ahmad	Labour	Lambeth and Southwark
Shaun Bailey	Conservative	London wide
Siân Berry	Green	London wide
Andrew Boff	Conservative	London wide
Hina Bokhari	Liberal Democrat	London wide
Anne Clarke	Labour	Barnet and Camden
Unmesh Desai	Labour	Barking & Dagenham, City of London, Newham, Tower Hamlets
Sem Moema	Labour	Hackney, Islington, Waltham Forest

We chose semi-structured interviews as a method to explore how they speak about the city as well for London and its constituent parts. The interviews followed a list of five themes – their personal history, the specific policies they were interested in or scrutinised, any specific policy outcomes they could point to, the idea of welcoming, and the topic of housing. Analysis of the data occurred in two stages. From an initial review of the recordings, we established five recurrent themes: Migration (both from within the UK and international), London’s inclusivity, grounded challenges, , and London-wide policies. We analysed the transcripts, coding Assembly Members’ comments for the themes suggested by the theoretical framework. We then sorted them according to the types of claims being made by each representative, individually and collectively, looking for common themes and differences among them.

To locate the finding and the themes we briefly sketch London's legislative and political framework. Democratic governance of the city has historically been fraught. London-wide governance was – albeit with fewer powers than in previous iterations – restored in 2000 with the creation of the Greater London Authority (GLA), following a public referendum in which London residents voted for a mayor and a representative body. This marked the return of Ken Livingstone, as the first elected Mayor of London with his oft quoted “before I was rudely interrupted” speech, a reference to his previous role as Leader of the Greater London Council (GLC) until it was abolished in 1986 by the Conservative government. New Labour's 1997 election promise to create elected city Mayors envisaged them as figureheads, akin to some of the renowned Mayors of cities in the USA, and led the calls for more ‘metro-Mayors’ across Britain. Like some of those places, London has attracted high profile politicians, such as Livingstone who was later displaced by Boris Johnson in 2008. The current Mayor, Sadiq Khan has been in office since 2016 and was re-elected for a third time in 2024. Over the long durée from the London County Council (LCC) to GLC and now the GLA London has more often raised the scarlet standard with 21 out of 34 leaders being either Progressive or Labour. This is also mirrored in parliamentary London. Over the past 20 years London has become a clearly ‘red’ city with sizeable and increasing numbers of its parliamentary seats filled by Labour MPs (Hatherley 2020). Nonetheless trying to impose a pattern on the administrative and political shape of the city is fraught with exceptions as the metropolis contains a small but somewhat separate city within a city, in the form of the City of London, that has its own historic office of the Lord Mayor of London.

The GLA functions as the regional governing body for the Greater London area. The elected Mayor is an executive role but officially, or at least in theory, is but one of two political arms with the GLA. The role of the Assembly has been understudied, perhaps because it has been seen as or become somewhat toothless. The London Assembly's role is confined to examination of the Mayor's agenda, policies, and priorities. Assembly members are democratically elected to a governing body so they have a mandate of sorts, but the structure and ways of operating makes them rather powerless. Officially, they are tasked with holding the Mayor to account and representing constituent concerns, through a range of committees and a regular meeting of the whole Assembly. Yet they have no authority to propose or implement policy on their own. The power (or lack thereof) bestowed on London government

has been discussed elsewhere and evident from the start of the GLA (Travers 2002), making the position of AMs largely advocacy for London or a springboard for election to Parliament (Worthy 2019, Mace and Sitkin 2019). In practice, the Assembly is effective mainly when the Mayor and most Assembly members are from different political parties, but less so when they are from the same party. While AMs frequently refer to the London Assembly as the 'Voice of London' only the Mayor is a well-known public figure. In the odd space they occupy AMs operate in rather different ways, some much more focussed on their part of the city, while others can use it to raise quasi-national and international issues. The lack of a clear policy remit to the representative role indicates that their performative repertoire (Spary 2010) is restricted in some respects but wider in others, for example, it may give them more scope to think and talk in terms of city imaginaries rather than so-called 'bread and butter' issues.

Three claims about the city

Our investigation is based on the assertions of elected officials who can claim to 'represent' the city. What are the nature and form of the representative claims they make? As individual subjects, as well as public figures and members and representatives of political parties what is their relation as to the object – the city - they imagine they speak for and to? Representatives are both the producers and products of narratives about the city, imagining it while also shaping, to an extent, the constructed object. By taking a transversal cut across both party lines and geographic constituencies, we identify and describe these claims to representation. We take the 'city' to be an imagined environment, rather than a self-evident entity (King 1996), and from that ask what elected representative do when they represent. After coding the data thematically (Clarke et al 2015) we arrived at three predominant themes through which Assembly members speak about and claim the city, as

- (a) a polis, or people, focusing on who has the right to represent or claim to represent whom; they speak in terms of representing people, who they are as individuals and their own positionalities. These identity elements and personal narratives creates a claim that 'who I am' matters. However even as they do this it remains at the level of a claim to 'just' representation, suggesting an identification to and with people sharing 'the same' identities. The extent to which this is marked by

the lack of structural power that these representatives have is something we consider below.

- (b) as a specific place, with varying geographic scales and cohesiveness. From their vantage point as members of the London wide Assembly they employ a perspective that claims they can see the city as a whole, even when their specific take is not a 'helicopter' viewpoint but situated in a local area. At the same time while their London role enables them to claim a city-wide remit that borough level governance cannot or does not do.
- (c) claims about what the city could be or become, through small acts of inclusivity or visions of the potential of the city. We treat these as the making and remaking of the city. While (a) and (b) had clearer party political and gender divides, this last theme cut across party lines and geographies to make various aligned or competing claims.

In identifying their claims we also indicate what they do not say, for example about London's hegemonic status in the nation; and how they talk about certain topics, such as housing and diversity, and how that 'makes up' their vision of the city.

The identity of and identities in the city

The question of who represents whom is one that Assembly members most readily associate with the issue of representation and their own positionality, but how the multicultural politics of the city was understood was uneven. The representational issue here combines their own identity claims with felt or ascribed group identification and public performances in acts of representation. Assembly members make claims centred on identity representation, raising the issues of who is allowed to and who is assumed to speak for whom, although we noted that who makes claims to identity is uneven across party and gender lines. In a vacuum of political agency do claims to 'representativeness' take on more identitarian elements? We found this varied across Members by party and by gender.

Political discussion of representation (as identity representation) is widespread and perhaps the most common everyday feature of representativeness. It can be or become controversial when it is regarded as identity politics. In wider society this commonly refers to issues such as the representation of women in the board room, to racialised minorities on screen, or even those who hope to smash the 'class ceiling' in education or politics. Such

debates can seem divorced from the city and removed from debates around democracy and democratic governance, but they share the sense that the appeal to gender and ethnic diversity is as a boon in itself. Claims, for instance that having more black people in positions of power is simply positive or progressive have failed to recognise Hall's (1989) point about the end of the 'innocent black subject'. Any continuing belief that the mere presence of minoritised groups or gender diversity can be so has taken a large dent with the make-up and policies of leading figures in the current UK Conservative government, but it is still a position that informs ideas about and claims to representation and representativeness. While race and gender are paramount in our interviews we also found other identitarian claims centred on geography and claims to localness that are placed outside the realm of identity politics (Richmond and Charnley 2022).

Who the Members are individually and how this does or does not figure in their capacity to represent was a frequent point that came up in interviews, where Labour and Liberal Democrat Assembly members expressed their sense of representation as meaning visible presence. In the post-war politics of London this has come to mean two main things: gender and race/ethnicity, although of course there are a host of other and intersecting differences in the city. Nonetheless gender and ethnic representation were at the forefront when Assembly members talked about the importance of representation in the governing body of the city and the need for it to "look more like London" (Anne Clarke), a recurring issue in London politics and policy (Author 2017, Authors 2021). This shaded over into a question, perhaps even a worry, among some of the representatives about their own positionality and what that entailed for their own capacity to speak for others in advocating certain positions and whether they had the right to do so. We noted that this came from the Labour and Green Party members but not the Conservative members, even though one of the latter interviewees is black and one is gay. As this indicates, identity attestations are therefore skewed by political inclination, they signify in quite distinct ways that make some features of group identity (race, gender) prominent because they match issues and concerns in the politics of the city (Authors 2021). The representatives who do not stress race and gender identities were correspondingly less likely to see racism and sexism as key issues in the make-up of London. Yet, across party political divides, it is notable that class divisions are rarely articulated explicitly, and where they are they appear in the form of proxy terms such as culinary diversity.

For politicians broadly grouped as left/liberal this was expressed in several ways. One member, Marina Ahmad (Labour) felt that more diverse ethnic representation was a way to build an inclusive image of London; in her case her own self-perception overlapped with the wider goal she seeks, so being a representative and being seen as a representative was the most powerful aspect of her job. She stated “having role models is massive, I’m of Bangladeshi heritage. I was speaking at something for parliament,...and this young Bangladeshi heritage boy came up to me, and he didn’t want to ask about what I’ve been saying, he wanted to say how much it meant to him to see me up there. And I was taken aback, but since then I’ve realised how important that is.” Here the claim to representation is justified by in effect reflecting the cultural group of those who are represented. But there is more going on here than just a kind of ethnic matching. Ahmad’s comment was couched in terms of who she was as more significant than what she was saying – the latter “didn’t matter”. This ‘not mattering’ suggests an awareness of the limited powers of Assembly members, thus what seems to count is more her heritage than content, and that is the point of connection or recognition that she highlights in relating this story. This is a politics of recognition, related to but not quite as the term is usually used (Gutmann 1994), entailing a more individualistic connection of assumed sameness.

Another member, Hina Bokhari (Liberal Democrat) seconded Ahmad’s sentiment, while adding that representative bodies reflecting the cultural identities of the local population served a practical role in opening doors and access into political careers for under-represented communities. She spoke of her experience working for a youth charity for young people from diverse backgrounds who want to be involved in politics. Those young people approached their representatives and felt they were not getting responses or access. From this she concluded “I need to do more. I stood for local council, got elected, was totally shocked to find out I was the first Muslim women to get elected in Merton, totally gobsmacking.... I’m still the only Muslim woman, and got elected again this year, thinking ‘Gosh, I can’t believe this, there is STILL a problem getting women from ethnic minority backgrounds involved in politics, it’s still a big part of my life to increase diversity in politics.” Thus, for both Bokhari and Ahmad representation was about both being a role model and a pioneer. Once they were elected they felt they could assist by opening doors for others for whom access to legislative representatives might otherwise remain closed.

As well as ethnic and gender diversity being seen as positive, and as a necessity to the match the diversity of the city, for these representatives a lack of diversity was seen as not just exclusionary but also as inhibiting the lived experience of the city. Assembly member Sem Moema (Labour) argued that representativeness matching London's ethnic diversity mattered in city-wide agencies such as Transport for London (TfL). This, explicitly, was required to balance the preferences of dominant groups, such as white men, who are not usually seen as an identity group but whose interests, for Moema, shape policy making. She specifically referred to the overrepresentation of "white men who cycle in Lycra" in TfL working groups. A consequence of this, she argued, was that they largely ignored the needs of other cyclists in the city, for example the fact that most of London's cycling infrastructure are arterial routes commuting from wealthier areas into central London, rather than more local routes. Similarly, in her role as Chair of the Fire, Resilience and Emergency Planning Committee Clarke (Labour) felt that the consequence of over and under-representation within the London Fire Brigade (LFB) was damaging to policy making. In the wake of the Grenfell fire she wanted the LFB to do more to create a community risk management plan involving stakeholders and residents across London. For Clarke the lack of Black and ethnic minority representativeness leads to gaps in knowledge of how and when during the annual cycle fire is used culturally, creating the risk that the Brigade could be unprepared and unresponsive to local community needs at appropriate times.

These attestations of identity representation move across the personal and the political, individual and group identities, and the act and visibility of representatives and representing. These cut across the cultural and administrative or institutional representations of the city. They combine concerns about legislative and policy priorities, alongside a worry about 'who speaks' [and who is seen to speak] or leads on particular topics, as well as who they are individually. Across the Members we spoke to there was some variation in emphasis on one side or the other. Members who were from racially minoritised communities, as well as those who were women, more often made the link between self and political identities, and its impact – both positive and negative – on policy. This burden of representation puts the onus of members from 'under-represented' communities to feel obliged to stand for their ethnic group, they literally do or are placed in the position of doing 'public identity work' as Saward (2010) suggests. This can become restrictive if they come to be seen narrowly as a 'black politician', rather than a politician who happens to be black. While minority ethnic

representation in governing bodies is not a silver bullet to end institutional discrimination it emerged as an important motivating factor for a number of AMs in seeking the position and in exercising their responsibility within the GLA.

The touted positive impact of greater minority ethnic and gender representation within representative legislative bodies was related to serving as role models, as means of access for others and as aiding city-wide agencies to serve a broader range of local constituencies more effectively. A tension that became evident in our interviews was whether representatives have the right to speak for those whom they do not ethnically or socio-economically represent. It emerged especially in the context of housing activism on estates (Watt and Minton 2016). For a Labour representative, middle-class lease holders had benefitted from being able to buy Right to Buy on estates in East London on the open market and then effected a kind of closure by pressing their own interests in preserving green spaces for gardening on estates at the expense of building new infill housing. A Green Party AM suggested that while activists arguing against such developments on estates are often dismissed for being highly educated and middle class, these groups have more time and organising capacity for activism than others, and do speak for more than just their own socio-economic milieu. This type of conflicted representation illustrates the intersection of identity representation among the Assembly Members and to whom they might choose to listen to.

Scales of governance and city geographies

The second range of claims we identified and discuss are centred on city geographies, and it is here that the “London” they speak to or of becomes more evident. The object they address, the city, appears at different scales and spaces, both in parts (and which ones) and as a singular entity. The London Assembly is made up of 25 members but some are elected as London wide representatives, while others represent specific combinations of boroughs. The ways that some boroughs are combined for electoral purposes into quasi-region blocs of the city is an oddity of electoral geography that creates clusters without a core. For instance, a North east corner consists of the boroughs of Waltham Forest *and* Hackney *and* Islington. While these are neighbouring [although other neighbours are placed elsewhere] they contain a high degree of internal differentiation, as well across them. These uneven geographies and electoral arrangements create a challenge for representatives: they may talk in terms of having ‘a patch’ but from one end to another it can be like crossing a country rather than just

a part of the city. Almost any of the constituencies reflects this diversity but to take one further example the City and east London constituency that is represented by Labour Assembly member Unmesh Desai stretched from Dagenham which borders Essex to inner city Bethnal Green bordering the City of London. Thinking of the city not as a whole but in parts may therefore be better conceived as 'parts of parts', a spatial mosaic that looks like patterned ground, or a kaleidoscopic form. that Beveridge and Koch (2024) regard as a growing mismatch between 'shifting spatial practices...and representations of space inscribed in rules and norms of democratic governance'.

The members we interviewed consisted of both regional and London-wide representatives. Yet all of them talked of the city as the patch or party they represented or knew best and, generally, the city as a whole only appeared when prompted (as we discuss in the next section) and in relation to pan-London institutions and issues, such as policing (except another oddity of London here is that the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) which does come under the Mayor is not responsible for the City of London, which has its own police force). All AMs saw policing a London-wide institutional problem and this stretched across the left-right political divide. Labour and Conservative party members noted that violence, organised or otherwise, moves across boroughs and separate jurisdictions within the city, so required a strategic city level response that borough authorities and local police could not deal with by themselves. In view of concerns about knife crime and gangs in the city, Assembly members across the board were able to express support for the Mayor in setting up a city-wide violence reduction unit. Due to chronic underfunding of local authorities AMs saw the need for a London wide response dealing with the lack of local youth services, This was not just a Labour/left concern but also shared on the right, following some initiatives in this field by Boris Johnson during his time as Mayor. The other side of policing, the well covered issues of racism and sexism as an institutional challenge for the MPS was another area of agreement across parties, with a common feeling that the type of independent overview the Assembly could provide was needed for any meaningful reform to be possible.

While Assembly members across parties agreed on the London-wide implications of policing and the need for an over-arching city governance, opinion was more split on a London-wide planning strategy implemented or led by the GLA. Conservative AMs Andrew Boff and Shaun Bailey expressed concern that the broad strategic planning and development goals of the GLA could override local agendas for development. This appeal to local needs was

in contrast with all Labour representatives who strongly expressed the need for an overarching planning authority to develop a strategic development framework for the city as whole. They argued this was necessary for critical development infrastructures that cut across boroughs and needed to be understood at the scale of the city. This reflects a key difference across party lines. The Conservatives appeal to 'local' needs, while Labour members take a 'city wide' view. They see and represent the city in quite distinct ways, one more 'bottom up' and 'patchwork', the other more 'top down'. The scalar divergence here may be a matter of political inclination but it is impossible to separate these visions of the city from simple political arithmetic. So, when Johnson was Mayor of London from 2008-16 he was renowned for big picture projects, or follies that made the city into a '*nincompoopolis*' (Murphy 2017). For some the grand visions of this period paralleled the 'grand projets' of Parisian Mayors such as Jacques Chirac (Enright 2023). At that time Conservative assembly members in London went along with Johnson's plans, while Labour members were critical of the nature of the actual projects as well as the specific places they were planned for, i.e. they made claims for local autonomy. While we found that the Conservative representatives tended to emphasise the importance of the borough councils on local issues, they simultaneously agreed the GLA should have more power over London-wide issues, asserting the primacy of city-level decision making. The difference was in what they saw as a 'city wide' issue.

Localist politics also featured in other ways, although what members take to or represent as 'the local' is open to some variation. For some this meant an individual London borough, but for members with geographical constituencies covering three boroughs the local often meant a specific site. While some of the AMs who represent geographical constituencies speak more to borough specific issues, most London wide AMs tend to drift towards speaking for the city more than the slice they happen to live in. In other words, the former tend to represent the city as a collection of parts, the latter feel more able to speak for an idea of London as a whole.. We found a few exceptions to this trend. Some AMs had two elected positions, serving as both borough councillors and on the London Assembly. These AMs speak of the conflicting agenda that can arise between local and city-wide issues in large local planning developments, that might be approved by the GLA within a city-wide planning framework over fierce local opposition. For instance, Desai (Labour) spoke about how his local councillor role entailed managing the fallout of a GLA decision that was locally

unpopular. In this situation his main issue was that the local councillor role was primary in addressing concerns about the new development, with as many mitigation measures as possible while the development still moved forward. Urban development is a key problem for almost all AMs. While the Mayor enjoys some power of planning through strategic development plans for Greater London that can override local planning processes, all holders of the office since 2000 have called for greater and wider powers to shape the city. Housing has become one of the many pressure points (Edwards 2016). The LCC built London's first municipal social housing in 1889 but while it and the successor body, the GLC had significant jurisdiction over public housing in the city, the GLA does not, with the Mayor relying on working with local boroughs to deliver housing targets, of which only a proportion are what are known as 'affordable' properties, aimed at people on lower and modest incomes.

Conversely, the need for pan-London governance, integration and consistency across the city was more evident from AMs from Liberal Democrat and Labour representatives. For them the GLA, and the Deputy Mayor for communities especially, played an important role in ensuring both consistency across London Boroughs in policy implementation as well as knowledge sharing. In the latter they included the joint London Councils group, a cross party body made up of the city's 32 borough councils. This too reflects the patchwork nature of London governance and administration, that covers a Mayor, an Assembly, local authorities and coordinating bodies across all of them. Even the 'city-state' of London fails to conform to any singular narrative of representative democracy. Managing the sustained emergency of the Covid-19 pandemic was an area where this coordination was critical for AM Bokhari. Other policy issues where multiple Labour and LibDem AMs called for a coordinated response across London were in refugee and asylum-seeking support, and in the implementation of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTN). While LTNS are a London-wide initiative, AMs criticise the lack of consistency in implementation across borough borders. These issues and differences underline the way the local and the global (the city in this case) are never separate, as well as having intervening levels and cross-cutting connections.

In one area related to scales of governance we did find that all AMs converged - bemoaning their powerlessness within the GLA itself. The London Mayor exercises some control in the form of executive power in supporting or overturning local decisions on large planning developments, in implementing city-wide public health initiatives such as the London Ultra-Low Emission Zone, and in fundraising for policing through a supplement on

local council tax bills. The London Assembly is a scrutiny and advisory body, elected to inspect the running of city-wide agencies and issues such as policing, transport and fire services, as well as the Mayor's decisions and initiatives. AMs can question these agencies and advise the Mayor but they have no capacity to introduce initiatives or frame new policy approaches. AMs from all parties, and from both borough and London-wide positions, expressed concern that they had been democratically elected to represent various constituencies, but felt they had little real power. This was most pointed from Conservative AM Boff when he said that the Mayor was "effectively a planning committee with the membership of one person, himself."

Making and remaking the city

The semi-structured interviews invited AMs to reflect on the city as an inclusive place. The prompt for this was to ask them if they felt the city was welcoming, or how it could be or become so. Across the board AMs felt London was a city where all could arrive and make a life. At the same time they each felt there was significant scope for improvement. Their responses combined quite 'nuts and bolts' thoughts, alongside larger ideas about urban infrastructures, voice and visibility, meeting housing needs, and responsibility for new arrivals. Analytically we found that this issue led representatives to invoke imaginaries of an inclusive city that we see as a claim about the potential of the city.

Asking whether the city is welcoming leads representatives, perhaps unsurprisingly, to think about new arrivals into the city and how it can or does accommodate them (Hunag and Liu 2018, Neis et al 2018). This occurred across all parties, though the linking of migration and housing, but the accommodation of difference and the sense of London as a diverse, multicultural city was stressed mainly by Sian Berry (Green). She articulated a form of cosmopolitanism in the need to acknowledge and accept other viewpoints. More commonly - and crossing party lines - a thread across party lines was socio-economic status, though the link to social class was expressed in quite different ways. For Bailey (Conservative), in London "you are far more likely to have a friend from a different economic [background], or religion, class or social class than most places in the world I've been to or lived in or experienced." He argued this applied across social strata, implying that the perception of London's socio-economic diversity was complex even when living amongst economic diversity. For Labour AMs on the other hand, class was associated mainly with housing type and proximities. For

Moena (Labour) a positive effect of Right to Buy was the mix of incomes now present on many estates; for Clarke (Labour) London's haphazard development creates diversity through proximity so that, "you'll have an HMO [house of multiple occupancy] in one house, single family house next door, block of flats over there, it's the whole thing in every community, you've got well-off in every community and poverty and everything in between."

Assembly members from all parties commonly interpreted inclusivity in relation to housing needs, a key pressure point within the city. Clarke (Labour) noted housing as "basic for the ability to participate in the city, it's fundamental," and Ahmad (Labour) and Bailey (Conservative) shared this view. They all saw stable residence as the foundation on which every other aspect of welcoming is built. Without that it matters little whether one is consulted about new developments, has access to economic opportunities, or feels represented by city-wide agencies. However, there were conflicting visions about whose and what needs should count, across both party and geographic lines. Bailey argued for accommodating families while multiple Labour AMs stressed total amounts of housing, regardless of size. Berry (Green) wanted to prioritise quality of outdoor space for existing residents over new housing construction. Across London geographies different representatives produced differing visions: Desai, representing East London, said that housing development should move both into East London and satellite communities, Moema, representing Hackney, argued for infill housing, Berry, representing Camden, wanted to reclaiming street space for housing, and Ahmad, representing Southwark and Lambeth saw the regeneration of existing estates as the main priority.

Both Labour and Conservative representatives highlighted London's expensive and weakly regulated housing as a major obstacle to the city being inclusive. While Conservative members sometimes decry the Mayor's housing targets and are not always open to the development of new homes in their parts of London, we found there was a measure of agreement and quite practical focus on how to handle this problem. Two Labour AMs advocated for infill housing across London, capitalising on open space to create the density needed to provide sufficient accommodation for the city's population. They touted the affordability benefit of financially mixed infill development. Similarly, Conservative AM Boff made the case for a GLA-led focus on research into pre-fab housing. At a city-wide scale he argued this could be a more efficient way to build desperately needed new homes more cost-effectively than through traditional private development driven channels. Underlining the

pointedly practical measures from AMs on this issue, Boff specifically criticised the Mayor for advocating grand ideas of housing development without providing specifics for how it could be achieved, saying, “he’s [the Mayor] not putting in the groundwork, he’s more obsessed with the public image and issuing press releases about worthy things, and we just wish he’d get on with solving the problem.” Positing pre-fab as a practical solution, Boff argued for direct policy implementation rather than promoting speculative ideals.

A Labour AM, Clarke, was more concerned with the private rented sector. She advocated a registry of landlords, to hold them accountable for the exploitative and potentially unsafe conditions in rental properties across London. Clarke argued that while the Mayor sought sweeping rent control initiatives across the city, boroughs could relatively easily implement a landlord registry coordinated across the city by the GLA. While not solving the problem of high rent in its entirety, she thought this would diminish the capacity for landlords to employ usurious practices in rent and maintenance. In contrast, Berry (Green) recognised the challenges of housing facing all Londoners but took a bolder view in envisioning how city-wide governance could address this challenge. The agenda advocated by the Greens argues for a car-free city, including taking over roads and through routes for more green space and homes. This radical programme also incorporates a proposal for planning and development strategies that are entirely community led. The vision posits that the city-wide governing body could implement the closure of major roads but that the use of the newly acquired space would come from participatory ground up planning initiatives, responsive to the needs of local communities. Berry’s proposal saw planning as something that should be bottom up, generated from local ideas too frequently ignored in current planning process across the city. Both Clarke and Berry argued that developer interests too frequently overrode citizen participation, and that better implemented consultations with accountability to local voices was critical. As noted earlier, the question of who is speaking for local communities is not straightforward, especially when residents have conflicting agendas for housing redevelopment, infill, or regeneration. Yet they all share the idea that dwelling in the city is a key issue that underlines its capacity to be inclusive (Authors 2023).

New arrivals to the city were the other major facet of city life, but only for the Liberal Democrat, Green, and Labour representatives; notably neither of the Conservative assembly members we spoke with brought this up. For those that did, what taking care of new arrivals meant varied by representative. Bokhari (Liberal Democrat) said:

You know we've had Brexit for god's sake, we're literally closing the borders, and we can't just say 'London is Open' when we've got a government that is literally stopping that from happening. I know we are welcoming in words, but I don't think we are in action...If you talk to some of the Afghan and Syrian refugees I talk to, they wouldn't say we're welcoming in this country, they've been stuck in a hostel or a bed sit for over two years now, some of the children haven't been to school, their mental health is just disastrous, and I don't think one of them would say we're welcoming, they're just dropped here and that's it.

This response implies an obligation on the city to accommodate those who need accommodation most. Berry's (Green) interpretation was providing a place where new arrivals could both move and then stay through various life changes, while Bokhari (LibDem) saw it as ensuring the right to work and access to work for new arrivals, Another view, from Desai (Labour) was that it meant creating new housing communities that also provide supporting infrastructure such as jobs, transport, schools, and health services. What we see here is a consensus about London as a city of growth. While this meets housing demand, it is noteworthy that there is almost no sense in which these London representatives look beyond London to consider regional or even national development, reinforcing the view of London as a hegemonic city-state. Only the Green party member (Berry) expressed any reservations about building more and more housing.

The other sub-themes that cropped up in this area were connected to transit and mobility in the city, and to voice and presence. On the former, Bailey (Conservative) supported the recommendation that the TfL should not become entirely cashless, even though a cash fare is more expensive than a contactless or Oyster card fares. Despite this, he argued that it mattered to the relatively small unbanked or elderly minority within London's population, so his concern here was the exclusion of a group of people who need public transport the most, restricting mobility and inclusivity. It is notable that a Conservative AM should voice this in view of the Mayor's oft-repeated appeal to his father's occupation as a bus driver and his initial promise to freeze fares. For Desai, mobility and affordability was also key to an accessible and inclusive city. Thus he supported the view that the hours during which residents over 60 should be able to use their freedom pass on public transport be extended.

Finally, we noted that the Green and Conservative representatives also saw the need for the city to present itself and be seen as open to different people. For them the key to being a representative was to listen to their constituents. When they talked about what the city should be like their exemplar was either themselves or how they thought the representative role should function. A stress on voice in politics was particularly acute in engendering a sense of fairness as Boff (Conservative) outlined when he said that “what people get resentful about is when they feel like they the local people aren’t involved in the decision making, aren’t even being listened to. If you can persuade people that even if they are against something, that their neighbours were for it, people will shrug and say, ‘at least I was listened to, I got my day in court.’ People want to be heard.”

How do these varied approaches and themes express the making and remaking of the city? As elected representatives AMs are both the producers and products of narratives of the city. While the themes they articulate are stratified by geography, party politics and gender their representations do something – they shape the depiction of the city as it is and it could be. The differences across party lines are mainly in the policies and strategies proposed to achieve their vision of the city. Whether they present bigger visions or propose practicable solutions what they say imagines a city that could be or become more inclusive if it enabled mobility, has better housing availability and was better at handling the arrival and settlement of new arrivals. While piecemeal solutions may seem uninspiring even small steps can build a broader vision or ideal. Grander visions are harder to realise or enact in the complex political geography of London and the city as part of the UK, though thinking beyond the ‘ways things have always been’ is a role and a space that AMs can perform precisely because they are restricted in what else they can do by their structural position within the GLA. Thus, the limited scope that AMs have to implement change limits their representative repertoire in some respects while expanding it in other ways.

Conclusion

We interviewed members of the London’s democratically elected Assembly as a route to link two ways of approaching the idea of representation - the cultural/creative and the institutional/administrative. Through analysing the narratives of political representatives we have argued that the forms of claiming they make include and encompass both forms of representation. This is perhaps clearest when we prompted them to articulate their sense of

the city, as it is and as it could be. We found that representatives from the major parties (Labour and Conservative) tended to identify measures built on actionable agendas, the Green representative produced a bolder but more speculative vision. However, as these representatives operate primarily as advocates as they have limited scope to see their visions into reality. Thus their representative repertoire is structurally an imaginary. They sometimes appeal to localism, where their connection to a borough or a patch of London can give them more room to connect their ideas and role to a particular place. In the two other forms of claiming identified we noted that identity claims are evident from the liberal and left members more than the right-wing ones, and much more from women than men. What united all members was in policy areas such as policing and housing requiring pan-London governance. Yet this city scale becomes harder to maintain when it comes to planning and various forms of claiming localism and autonomy are invoked. So a patchwork city is mirrored in a patchwork of visions and domains, where the city they speak of can be both 'whole' and 'part'. The city is both a place and a collection of places and this can shift across issues as well political denominations.

By combining different senses of representation, we followed the argument that it matters more what representation does rather than what it is. Just as the city is emergent rather than fixed in cultural representation, our work indicates elected representatives make up the work of representation by doing it, even as their ways of doing it may shift across personal identities, policy issues and scales. By treating representation as a practice we have identified several ways in which it is deployed deliberately to connote and denote what the city is. The focus of the research tends, probably inevitably, to emphasise the city as a governmental rather than an everyday category, though as Beveridge and Koch (2024) also suggest, this does not have to mean that the democratic potential of the city is vacuous. The formal politics of the Assembly may lack the glamour of 'street' politics, but our dual use of representation indicates representative repertoires available to elected officials. The structural and institutional context of the in Assembly as a city-wide authority gives the members some prominence in the politics of the city, yet the same structure limits what they can do. The formation of London government created a toothless body, making the polity of the city into an institutionalised democratic deficit. While this can make politics seem an (empty) performative, the work of representation makes claims of what the city is and what

it could be. In attending to this as a practice we argue that representing London is both an on-going achievement and an impossible task.

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