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**“Institutional Thickness” and Local Economic Development:
Insights on Local Governments’ Role from the Case of Birmingham**

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**“INSTITUTIONAL THICKNESS” AND LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:
INSIGHTS ON LOCAL GOVERNMENTS’ ROLE FROM THE CASE OF BIRMINGHAM***

Caterina Ferrario**

ABSTRACT

Within the theoretical and empirical debate on local economic development, a relevant issue is whether local governments have a role to play in the promotion of local economies. The *institutional thickness* paradigm identifies the necessary conditions for a successful local economy with reference to the features of the institutional milieu, but is not explicit about whether local governments have a specific role in favouring them. This paper uses the analysis of an empirical case which shows the features described by the institutional thickness paradigm (both as regards its assumptions – concerning the pattern of institutional relationships – and its conclusions about local economic performance), to investigate the specific role that a local government has played in promoting them and thus, if the conclusions of the paradigm are valid, in favouring local economic development. Moving from the specific to the general, the case study aims at providing some insights into the role of local governments in local economic development. It also develops a methodology for the operationalisation of the *institutional thickness* paradigm, which is the basis for the analysis done.

Keywords: Institutional thickness, institutionalism, embeddedness, partnerships, civic leadership, governance

JEL classification: O1; O18; O43; R0

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1. Introduction: *Institutional Thickness*, Urban Governments and Local Economic Development

Endogenous institutional conditions are increasingly recognised as a significant determinant of a territory's economic growth opportunities and achievements (Granovetter, 1985; Grabher, 1993; Sabel, 1989, Storper, 1993). According to some authors, an *institutionalist* approach to the issue of local economic development is a key to a better understanding of the growth processes and outcomes in localities (Raco, 1999; Amin, 2001). Such an approach combines the search for the conditions for local economic development with an acknowledgement of the role of local institutions, local governance and local organisations in shaping, influencing and creating those conditions.

Amin and Thrift (1994a, p. 11, 13) maintain that certain institutional conditions enable local economies to flourish, by allowing localities to “pin down” global processes and become “centres of representation, interaction and innovation” in the contemporary context of globalisation. Amin and Thrift (1994a, 1995) propose a conceptualisation of these institutional conditions that are crucial for local economic success and they introduce the phrase “institutional thickness” to describe their presence in a locality:

“Success, in terms of holding down the global (local embeddedness) and thereby generating self-reproducing growth – cannot be reduced to a set of narrow economic factors. This is not, of course, to claim that economic factors are unimportant (...) it is to claim that social and cultural factors also live at the heart of economic success and that those factors are best summed up by the phrase ‘institutional thickness’”. (Amin and Thrift, 1994a, p. 14)

Four non-economic factors are embodied in the concept of “institutional thickness”: *a strong local institutional presence, high levels of local organisations’ interaction, the development of structures of domination and/or patterns of coalition, and the development of local organisations’ mutual awareness of being involved in a common enterprise* (Amin and Thrift, 1994a, p. 14). Therefore, institutional thickness is composed of “interinstitutional interaction and synergy, collective representation by many bodies, a common industrial purpose and shared cultural norms and habits” (Amin and Thrift, 1995, p. 102).

The value and power of the multi-dimensional concept of “institutional thickness” derives from the clear recognition and categorisation of the local institutional conditions that favour economic development. This taxonomy of non-economic factors possesses also analytical and explanatory value, and it has been applied to some cases of urban and regional governance (e.g. Hudson, 1994 – on old European industrial areas; MacLeod, 1997 – on Lowland Scotland; Raco, 1998 – on Sheffield and Cardiff; Bowler, 1999 – on agricultural development; Keeble et al., 1999 – on the Cambridge Region; Sydow and Staber, 2002; Wood, 2002). In particular, MacLeod (1997) and Raco (1998) have used the multi-faceted concept of “institutional thickness” as a theoretical framework to structure their description and analysis of the local institutional milieu in three British areas.

However, while the initial conceptualisation by Amin and Thrift is rich in descriptive details, they provide no methodological insights into how the theoretical intuition can be operationalised in empirical applications, to become a tool for local economic development

analyses. There is therefore a danger that Amin and Thrift's clear and univocal theoretical conceptualisation loses its power if applied in different contexts through differing operationalisations of the same concept. A univocal operationalisation seems a necessary step to further develop this approach and its empirical power.

The power of the "institutional thickness" concept can be preserved and enhanced through the development of a clear methodology for its application. In order to do so, it is necessary to revert to the original formulation of the concept (Amin and Thrift, 1994a) and derive a set of indicators to measure and describe each of the four features embodied in the concept of "institutional thickness".

This is the first aim of this paper, which will propose a set of indicators to detect, measure and describe the presence of the four constitutive features of "institutional thickness". It will then apply them to a specific area, the city of Birmingham (UK), to show both their consistency and empirical potential to contribute to the identification of a specific role for local governments in promoting urban economic development. The city of Birmingham has been selected for this empirical test according to a double criterion: an area of recent economic development and an urban area. As the "institutional thickness" paradigm identifies institutional conditions favourable to economic growth, it seems appropriate to apply it to an area that has shown a recent trend of economic regeneration and growth. The choice of an urban area responds to the aim of showing the "institutional thickness" paradigm's potential to contribute to the analysis and debate on the factors for urban economic development, and in particular to the debate on urban governments' role.

The role of urban governments in promoting urban economic development is a significant policy issue and, even if not explicitly accounted for by the "institutional thickness" paradigm¹, the second aim of this paper is to show that this approach provides a perspective for a better understanding of how local governments can promote economic development, as they are undoubtedly part of the local institutional framework. To the extent that local government can promote "institutional thickness", their role in economic development is justified and, at the same time, also specified: they should pursue a role of governance, and not only one of direct production or incentivisation, and should focus on promoting and favouring a specific institutional milieu.

Therefore, the *Institutional Thickness* paradigm will provide a theoretical framework of reference and an organising concept for an empirical investigation of how local governments can positively impact on local competitiveness and economic growth. The analysis will be articulated in four sections: a presentation of the *Institutional Thickness* paradigm, a proposal for its operationalisation, an application of the operationalised paradigm to the city of Birmingham, and a conclusion on local economic performance. Having identified a city that reflects the paradigm's assumptions, final considerations will be drawn on how the local government contributed to Birmingham's "institutional thickness". The analysis, moving from the specific to the general, aims at identifying relevant insights into the role of local governments in promoting local institutional thickness, and, consequently, local economic development, if the paradigm is correct.

¹ The term paradigm is adopted here to refer to the causal nexus suggested by Amin and Thrift between the presence of some clearly defined institutional conditions and the possibilities of local economic development.

The analysis is based on a qualitative empirical investigation aimed at describing the institutional milieu in Birmingham and at identifying the role played by the city council. Semi-structured interviews with 20 senior representatives of major local organisations, conducted in the period July-November 2004, have been a source of primary data and information, referred mainly to the period 1984-2004. The information collected has been triangulated with official publications, internal documents and web sources, in order to achieve a better and more solidly grounded picture.

2. The Institutional Thickness Paradigm

Rather than only to purely economic factors, Amin and Thrift (1994a) ascribe differing local economic performances also to the degree to which a territory is capable of embedding entrepreneurial activities, through a series of organisational, cultural and social conditions – which are synthetically defined as *institutional thickness*. According to Amin and Thrift, a territory is characterised by *institutional thickness* when it shows four main features. These provide the basis for the empirical analysis which follows.

2.1. A Strong Institutional Presence

The first feature of a locality capable of embedding entrepreneurial activities and of achieving economic success is a *strong institutional presence*, given by the existence *in loco* of a multiplicity and variety of organisations, such as firms, financial bodies, chamber of commerce and industry, business services organisations, unions, local and regional authorities, central government agencies, development agencies, innovation centres, marketing boards. Some of these organisations provide collective representation, physical services, or both (Cooke and Morgan, 1993).

2.2. High Levels of Mutual Interaction

The second refers to the nature of organisations' relationships, and is the existence of *high levels of mutual interaction*, in the form of regular contacts, both formal and informal, and at various organisational levels; and in the form of cooperation and information exchanges. These should produce, over time, "a degree of mutual isomorphism" (Amin and Thrift, 1995, p.102). Furthermore, the forms of organisations' interaction may generate social norms and habits, thus creating a particular "social atmosphere" (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999, p.513) and relations of trust (Raco, 1998, p.978).

2.3. Structures of Domination and/or Patterns of Coalition

The third feature refers to the power dimension: there should arise specific *structures of domination and/or patterns of coalition*, which help the "socialisation of costs and the control of rogue behaviour" (Amin and Thrift, 1995, p.102) and "to minimize sectionalism" (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999, p.513). The structure of relationships is likely to reflect the relative power and power-base of the different organisations, their dimension and type of resources (short/long term budgets), their local financial significance, and their financial

stability, their organisational and financial independence from external factors (such as national-level decisions).

2.4. Awareness of Being Involved in a Common Enterprise

Finally, local organisations should develop the *awareness of being involved in a common enterprise*, as expressed by a common agenda, which local organisations at the same time develop and depend upon (Amin and Thrift, 1994a). The definition of a common agenda is favoured by the ongoing interactions, is influenced by the specific patterns of domination and relative power and, in turn, it “reinforces local legitimacy and relations of trust” (Raco, 1998, p.978). Finally it is this “widely held project which serves to mobilize the region with speed and efficiency” (Amin and Thrift, 1994a, p.15).

Therefore, the *institutional thickness* paradigm suggests that the conditions of sustained economic growth depend on the local organisations’ network but are not guaranteed by the existence of such a network *per se*; rather the crucial factors are the features of the interrelation *processes* and the consequent “institutionalisation” of the local economy. As Amin and Thrift (1992) suggest, *institutional thickness* is “composed of interinstitutional interaction and synergy, collective representation by many bodies, a common industrial purpose and shared cultural norms and values. It is a ‘thickness’ which continues to stimulate entrepreneurship and consolidate the local embeddedness of industry. It is, in other words, a simultaneous *collectivisation and corporatisation* of economic life, fostered and facilitated by particular institutional and cultural traditions which appear to have been central to the generation of success within ‘neo-Marshallian’ nodes in global networks”. A well-established economic and political institutional structure, the volume and quality of information flows and the development of strong socio-economic interrelations are also highlighted by Cooke and Morgan (1995) as key features of what they define as “intelligent regions”.

However, there is evidence that institutional presence and interaction in a territory does not always guarantee economic success. It can, in fact, become a constraint to change, innovation and growth, as shown by Glasmeier (1994), with reference to the case of the Swiss watch industry and its craft-based institutions and traditions. From a different perspective, Hudson (1994) provides a counterexample by arguing that institutions and institutional relations are well developed in the North East of England, but the region cannot be defined as economically successful. Finally, Raco (1998, p.979) suggests that the M4 corridor is a successful local economy where however a condition of “institutional thickness” cannot be envisaged.

Amin and Thrift recognise that there is still “some way to go before the ultimate power of the new institutional paradigm can be assessed as an *explanation* of geographically uneven development” (1994a, p.19). However, they equally maintain that “as the basis for securing local innovative capability it is entirely indispensable” (1995, p.108). In conclusion, the *institutional thickness* paradigm seems to show one way to competitive advantage, which is not the exclusive one, but is surely relevant, especially in modern service economies, where a location attractiveness is less linked to natural resources’ endowments, and where the local institutional milieu can in effect favour, attract and link economic activity to a specific location: “in those industrial contexts which are heavily reliant on the production of

knowledge, innovation, and information for competitiveness, institutional thickness can have a decisive influence on economic development” (Amin and Thrift, 1994a, p. 16).

3. Institutional Thickness and Local Government: the case of Birmingham

As developed by Amin and Thrift (and subsequent contributions), the idea of *institutional thickness* does not contain any reference to a methodology for its empirical application, to an extent that the concept of “institutional thickness” has been criticised on the grounds that it is a “black box” (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999), that hides the nature of the institutional relationships, which is indeed significant for policies’ effectiveness. Some empirical content needs to be given to the concept in order to develop it further. The following analysis will focus on how to operationalise and empirically apply the paradigm: a set of qualitative and quantitative indicators will be identified, in order to assess, describe and to some extent measure each of the four dimensions that describe a territory. These are derived from existing literature and empirical studies using the concept of the *Institutional Thickness* and are then applied to the case of Birmingham. An initial paragraph introduces some background information on Birmingham.

3.1. Birmingham: economy and economic governance

Birmingham, and its region, the West Midlands, is the manufacturing heart of Britain. Birmingham’s economy, up to the 1970s used to be strongly dependent on the manufacturing sector. With the crisis of this sector, the Birmingham economy faced a rapid and significant downturn in the 1970s-1980s, as summarised by the double-digit unemployment of those years (table 1). At the same time, the city also experienced severe social problems and urban decay, as evident from the poor state of the city centre, which, far from being a factor of city attractiveness, was in very poor condition, a liability rather than a city asset (Barber, 2001).

Birmingham City Council (BCC) is the biggest local authority in the United Kingdom, with about 50 thousands employees and a budget of around 2 billion pounds (BCC, 2004). Faced with the rising economic and social problems of the city, in the early 1980s BCC took a proactive and interventionist role (BCC, 1984), which is considered to be one of the key factors for the urban renewal and economic renaissance that the city of Birmingham has experienced in recent years (Barber, 2001).

BCC identified the city centre as the key factor for Birmingham regeneration and took a driving role in urban renewal through direct investments, but also acted to attract private investments. The International Convention Centre – ICC– underwritten by the City Council, is considered the milestone and turning point in Birmingham regeneration and a catalyst for private investments (Barber, 2001), which contributed to the change of the local economy structure, as shown in figure 1.

Year	No. unemployed Birmingham	% unemployment Birmingham	% unemployment UK
1974	17,401	3.2	2.3
1975	27,046	5.0	3.7
1976	39,536	7.3	5
1977	38,433	7.1	5.3
1978	36,014	6.7	5.1
1979	34,607	6.4	4.8
1980	40,029	7.9	6.4
1981	74,867	15.8	9.5
1982	92,200	21.9	11
1983	94,665	22.6	11.5
1984	89,117	21.4	11.5
1985	89,690	21.6	11.7
1986	91,882	22.2	11.7
1987	84,346	20.5	10.3
1988	71,002	17.4	8.1
1989	53,156	13.1	6.1
1990	46,044	11.4	5.8
1991	56,380	14.0	8.2
1992	70,684	17.5	10.2
1993	76,001	18.9	10.3
1994	69,775	17.3	9.3
1995	60,403	15.0	8.6
1996	56,848	14.1	8
1997	44,100	10.9	6.8
1998	38,439	9.5	6.3
1999	38,084	9.4	5.9
2000	35,573	8.8	5.4
2001	32,558	8.0	5.1
2002	30,258	7.5	
2003	31671	7.80	

Table 1. Unemployment in Birmingham and in the UK, 1974-2004 (source ONS/BEIC)

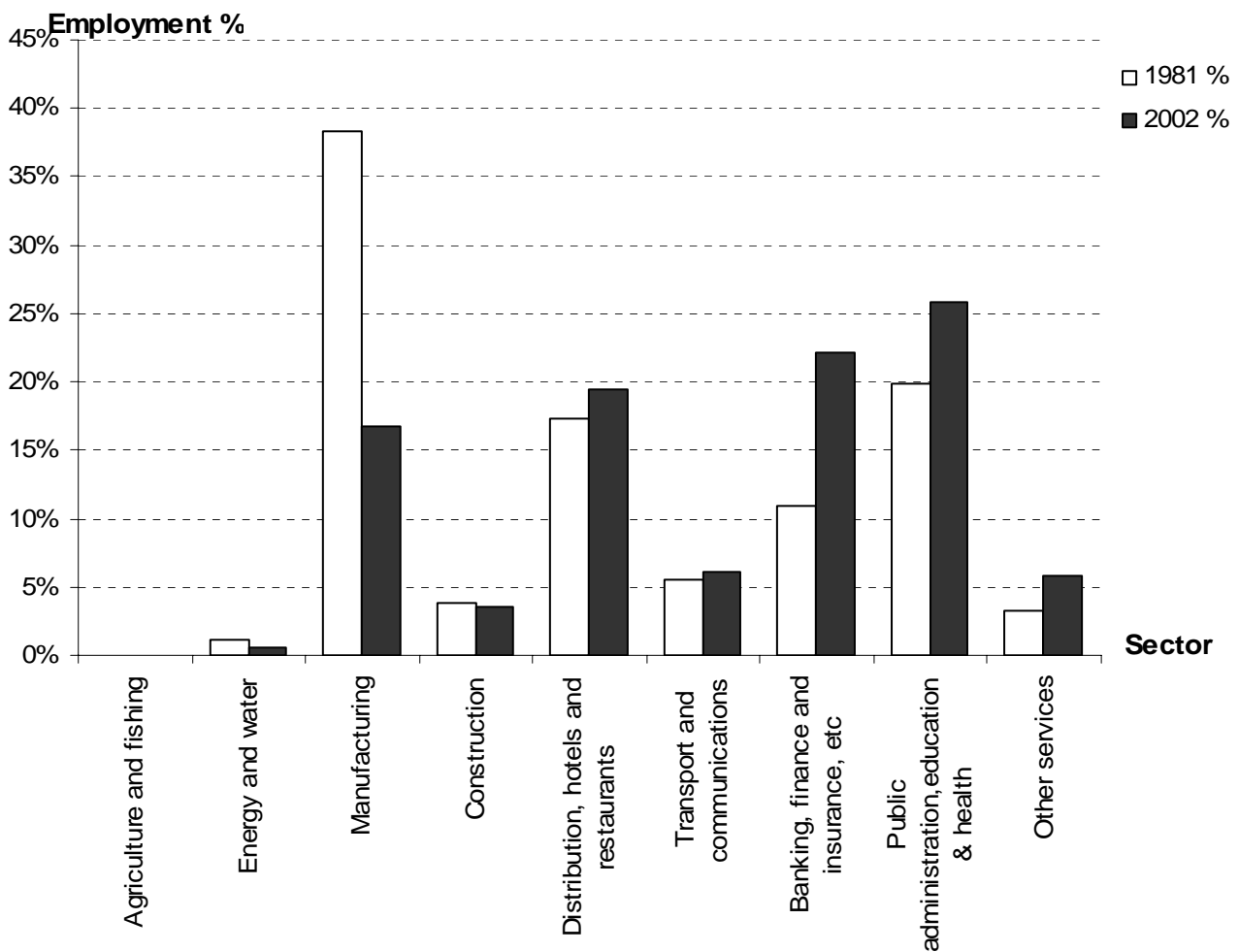


Figure 1. Employment by sector in Birmingham, 1981 and 2002 (Source ONS 1981 Census of Employment; 2002 Annual Business Inquiry)

BCC role reflects the paradigmatic change in urban policy described by Harvey (1989) as a shift from *managerialism* to *entrepreneurialism*: the city council prevailing focus became the promotion of local economic development and employment growth, rather than services' provision. However, the city council has always recognised that economic development is a mean rather than an end in itself, and it serves the objective of improving the quality of life of its citizens (BCC, 1984 – and subsequent economic strategies). Therefore, BCC policies do not show a strong, clear-cut shift from social policy to economic policy, as theorised by Jessop (1997, 2002) when he describes the four major changes that urban policy has undergone in recent years.

Birmingham not only has achieved economic regeneration, but it also shows the features described by the institutional thickness paradigm as concerns local economic governance. It is therefore a significant case to analyse the specific role of the local authority (BCC) in the institutional scene, as regards the promotion and sustaining of institutional thickness.

The focus of the analysis is the twenty-year period 1984-2004. As any periodization, this is the result of an arbitrary choice, as historic phenomena resist rigid time frames and are

permeable over time. However, 1984 is the beginning of an unusual twenty-year period of Labour rule in Birmingham, after a tradition of regular alternations between the Conservative and Labour Party (this period ended with the local elections of June 2004, which resulted in a new governing coalition composed of the Conservative and Liberal Party). This is far from meaning that these twenty years have seen an homogeneous approach to economic development policy, rather discontinuities have taken places, the major one being the election, between 1993-1999, of Theresa Stewart as Council Leader, with an agenda focused on social and community issues rather than economic regeneration. However the period starting in 1984 is characterised by the identification of economic development priorities which, although with varying intensity and marginal adaptations, have been the constant underlying theme of economic development policies over the whole period.

3.2. Institutional Thickness and Local Government in Birmingham

As previously stated, there appears to be a need for a clear operationalisation of the concept of “institutional thickness”, in order to allow a robust empirical application and its further development. In the following, a number of qualitative and quantitative indicators are proposed and applied for each of the four constituent features of the institutional thickness concept, in order to detect, describe and measure the degree of institutional thickness of Birmingham. Birmingham City Council’s role in promoting and facilitating the described outcome will be highlighted.

3.2.1. A Strong Institutional Presence

The first of the four characteristics that define the multi-dimensional *institutional thickness* concerns the local organisational framework, and is a *strong institutional presence*, which can be measured through five parameters: density, commitment, ownership, spatial scale and accountability (Bowler,1999; MacLeod,1997; Raco,1998). Overall, in Birmingham there is a *strong institutional presence*, and the most significant organisations involved in economic development activities in Birmingham are summarised in table 2.

The *density* indicator refers to the number of local organisations involved in local economic development and with an agenda of local economic governance. Table 2 depicts the bodies involved in the definition and delivery of the economic development strategy and shows that in Birmingham they are in high number and variety: it is hard to imagine a gap in the list.

A measure of organisations’ *commitment* to local economic development, described as total or partial, is provided by the percentage of organisations’ budget dedicated to economic development activities. In Birmingham, for little more than one third of the organisations listed, the *commitment to local economic development* (LED) is an exclusive one, while the others pursue a plurality of objectives (table 2).

Birmingham organisations show differing *ownership* structures, along the public-private spectrum (table 2). There are *public bodies* (Government Office for the West Midlands – GoWM; the Regional Development Agency, Advantage West Midlands – AWM; BCC), *public-private bodies* or *partnerships* (City Strategic Partnership – CSP; Birmingham Economic Development Partnership – BEDP), *private representative bodies* (Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry – BCCI, Birmingham Forward – BF) and *other private bodies*, some of which might be partly owned by public organisations (Marketing

Birmingham – MB; the NEC Group – NEC). Quantitatively, there's a prevalence of public organisations, reflecting a significant commitment to local economic development of both national and local governments. However, private sector involvement is also significant, either alone or in partnership with public organisations, primarily BCC. The ownership status has a significant influence on the nature of organisations' priorities, autonomy and also financial capabilities.

Birmingham organisations show also differing *spatial scales* or territorial dimension of activity, along the central-local spectrum. There are *national organisations*, with a policy focus on the entire national territory, *regional organisations*, acting on a regional scale, and *city organisations*. In Birmingham, organisations with a specific focus on the city economy prevail over those with a regional approach, but the latter have increased in recent years, with, for example, the establishment in 1999 of the Regional Development Agency (as a result of a national devolution/regionalisation agenda and to some extent as a result of the EU regionalist approach). The spatial scale of organisations' activities can affect their commitment to local priorities and their focus of interest: whether national, regional or local.

Finally, following Raco (1998, p.979), as regards the *accountability* status, in Birmingham, there are *localist organisations*, acting at the local level but not locally accountable, i.e. established by the central government (GoWM, AWM), *local organisations*, which are locally created and reflect local interests (BCCI, BF, MB, NEC) and *local government bodies*, directly responding to the local electorate (BCC). In Birmingham, local organisations prevail over localist ones, but the latter have been increasing. The accountability status is a relevant factor in affecting organisations' focus on local economic development.

Organisation	Ownership	Territorial Dimension	Accountability	Commitment to LED
Accelerate	Private	Regional	Local	Total
Advantage West Midlands	Public	Regional	Localist	Total
The Birmingham Alliance	Private	City	Local	Total
Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry	Private	City	Local	Partial
Birmingham City Council	Public	City	Local Gov.	Partial
Birmingham Economic Development Partnership	Public-private	City	Local	Partial
Birmingham Forward	Private	City	Local	Partial
Business Link	Public	City	Localist	Total
City Centre Partnership	Public-private	City	Local	Partial
City Strategic Partnership	Public-private	City	Local	Partial
Connexions	Public	City	Localist	Partial
Government Office for the West Midlands	Public	Regional	Localist	Partial
Graduate Advantage	Public	Regional	Localist	Partial
Jobcentre Plus	Public	City	Localist	Partial
Learning and Skills Council	Public	Regional	Localist	Partial
Marketing Birmingham	Private	City	Local	Total
The NEC Group	Private	City	Local	Partial
RegenWM	Public	Regional	Localist	Total
University of Birmingham	Private	n.a.	Local	Partial
Birmingham Research Park	Public private	City	Local	Total
University of Central England	Private	n.a.	Local	Partial
Aston University	Private	n.a.	Local	Partial
Aston Science Park	Public-Private	City	Local	Total
West Midlands ARTS Council	Public	Regional	Localist	Partial
Birmingham International Airport	Public-private	Regional	Local	Total
Brussels Office	Public	Regional	Local	Partial
MARCH	Private	Regional	Local	Partial
Birmingham Heartlands – wounded up 1998	Public-Private	City	Local	Total
The Birmingham Centre for Manufacturing (till 2002)	Public-private	Regional	Local	Total
City Pride (till 2003)	Public/private	City	Local	Partial

Table 2. Most significant organisations involved in economic development in Birmingham (n.a.= not applicable).

Table 3, derived from the data presented in table 2, summarises the institutional scene in Birmingham.

<i>Ownership</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Spatial Dimension</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Accountability</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Commitment to LED</i>	<i>%</i>
Public	37%	National	-	Localist	30%	Total	37%
Private	33%	Regional	37%	Local	70%	Partial	63%
Public-private	30%	Local	53%				

Table 3. Selected indicators describing the main features of the institutional framework in Birmingham - with reference to LED.

3.2.2. High Levels of Mutual Interaction

The organisations’ relationships and attitude for regular formal and informal contacts can be measured through four indicators: themes for collaboration, number of formal partnerships, intensity of other forms of collaboration and interaction, time in operation (Bowler, 1999).

Collaboration for economic development in Birmingham is structured around six main issues: urban improvement and regeneration; business and professional services support; marketing and attraction of investments (and tourism); training and skills development; community development; economic strategy definition, and coordination². Most local organisations declare to be collaborating with one, or more, other organisations for the definition and delivery of economic development activities. With the words of one of the interviewees: “there is always a lot of work behind the scenes: meetings, informal contacts and networking” (1/9/04). In Birmingham institutional collaboration takes a variety of different forms, along the whole spectrum identified by Sullivan and Skelcher (2002; p.43).

In some areas, the organisations with a major stake have formally constituted a *partnership*, to oversee and coordinate activities (table 4). This has happened for economic strategy (BEDP); marketing (MB); business support (Aston Science Park – ASP; Birmingham Research Park – BRP); urban improvement (City Centre Partnership and Birmingham Heartland – BH, till 1998). Finally, two partnerships with a general scope of coordination and oversight are the CSP and, until 2003, City Pride - CP. Partnerships are the most formal type of relationships and imply cooperation and information exchanges, are based on relations of trust and can lead to the development of common norms and habits. In Birmingham there is a well established tradition of institutional collaboration³, which can be traced back to the early 1970s BCC-

² These themes are derived from an analysis of the major objectives contained in BCC economic strategies between 1984 and 2004, and confirmed by evidence from interviews.

³ This is widely recognised: “Birmingham is a city built on partnerships” (respondent, 22/9/04); “Birmingham has a sort of ‘let’s solve this together’ attitude” (respondent, 1/9/04); “Birmingham has always been very good as regards public-private relationships. It has always been a very pragmatic city. Partnerships have always had a place in Birmingham. There is a way of saying that ‘the city of a thousand trades has become the city of a thousand partnerships’” (respondent, 8/9/04). Furthermore, according to some respondents (10/9, 17/9 and 22/9/04; and also Aulakh et al., 2002, p.33), this is the result of a specific civic culture that has characterised Birmingham for centuries, and often linked to personalities and families, rather than to organisations.

BCCI collaboration to build and manage the National Exhibition Centre and later to build and manage other main event facilities (the ICC and the National Indoor Arena). This tradition is confirmed by the belief that: “Partnership working may be flavour of the month with the government, but it’s old hat in Birmingham” (The Birmingham Post, 2002).

Issue	Partnership	Partners
Business Support	Aston Science Park	Aston University, Birmingham City Council
Business Support	Birmingham Research Park	University of Birmingham; Birmingham City Council
Marketing	Marketing Birmingham	Advantage West Midlands, Birmingham Airport, Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Forward, MARCH, NEC Group
Marketing; urban improvement and regeneration	City Centre Partnership	Birmingham City Council, Mall Pallasades; Birmingham Forward; Pavilion Central; MARCHE; Marketing Birmingham; NEC Group; Argent Group; Bullring; City Living Forum; Birmingham Post and Mail Ltd.; Marks and Spencer
Marketing; urban improvement and regeneration	NEC Group	Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Urban improvement and regeneration	Heartlands Urban Development Corporation (till 1998)	Birmingham City Council; Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and five private building companies (Bryant, RM Douglas, Gallifords, Tarmac and Wimpey)
Economic strategy	Birmingham Economic Development Partnership	Birmingham City Council; Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Business Link; Learning and Skills Council
Overall	City Strategic Partnership	Advantage West Midlands; Birmingham City Council; Birmingham Community Empowerment Network; Birmingham Race Action Partnership; Birmingham Voluntary Service Council; Centro; Chamber of Commerce; Government Office of the West Midlands; Jobcentre Plus; Learning and Skills Council; Optima Community Association; South Birmingham Primary Care Trusts; University of Birmingham; West Midlands Police; West Midlands Regional Cultural Consortium
Overall	City Pride (till 2003)	Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Race Action Partnership, University of Birmingham, West Midlands Police, et al.

Table 4. Formal partnerships in Birmingham and their institutional aims.

Local organisations interact also *informally* around the identified themes (table 5). Reasons for interactions vary from exchange of information, advice, common projects and financing issues (administering grant aid and funding).

Issue	Main Interacting Organisations
Urban improvement and regeneration	Advantage West Midlands; Birmingham Economic Development Partnership; Birmingham City Council; City Centre Partnership; City Strategic Partnership; Government Office for the West Midlands; NEC Group; Regen-WM
Business support	Birmingham Economic Development Partnership; Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Birmingham City Council (Locate in Birmingham); Business Link; City Strategic Partnership; Graduate Advantage; Job Centre Plus; Learning and Skills Council; Universities
Professional services support	Birmingham Economic Development Partnership; Birmingham Forward; Birmingham City Council (Locate in Birmingham); City Strategic Partnership; Graduate Advantage; Job Centre Plus; Learning and Skills Council; Universities
Marketing and attraction of investments (MB, 2002)	Advantage West Midlands; Birmingham City Council; Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Birmingham Forward; City Centre Partnership; City Strategic Partnership; Marketing Birmingham; MARCH; NEC Group; Universities
Economic strategy	Advantage West Midlands; Birmingham City Council; Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Birmingham Economic Development Partnership; Business Link; City Strategic Partnership; Government Office for the West Midlands; Learning and Skills Council
Training and people development	Birmingham City Council; Birmingham Chamber of Commerce and Industry; City Strategic Partnership; Connexions; Job Centre Plus; Learning and Skills Council; Universities

Table 5. Institutional interactions for each of the relevant issues related to the promotion of local economic development.

The pattern of exchanges and collaboration is generally described as intense and fruitful. Networks are generally acknowledged to be clearly focused, effective, and far from the risk of becoming “talking shops”. Collaboration is considered to have helped the clarification of organisations’ roles and responsibilities, to have created synergies that have improved policies and programmes and to have increased organisations’ complementarity rather than frictions: “In the past we had duplicated a lot, but now we are moving away from that. ... We are quite clear about roles and responsibilities...rather than being in competition, we are now quite complementary to each other” (respondent, 13/9/04). The risk of dispersion and inefficiencies due to excessive growth in the number of organisations’ and partnerships has been acknowledged (respondent, 8/9/04), but there is a feeling that major organisations have been able to focus their activities on the most significant networks: “There’s a coming back to those partnerships that can really make a difference. There were too many. There continues to be too many, but at least major organisations are focusing down and will be able to work together and coordinate” (respondent, 22/9/04).

Finally, the *time in operation* of local organisations is an indicator of the stability of existing networks and their evolution over time. In Birmingham most organisations, networks and partnerships have existed for a while (table 2.5). However, recent increases of both organisations and partnerships are mainly due to central government devolution and regionalisation agenda. There’s a common feeling that native networks are more effective and respond better to local needs than approaches imposed by the central government (respondents, 11/8/04, 13/9/04). Nonetheless, BCC has always extended its commitment to partnership-work to new central government initiatives, such as CP (1993) and Local Strategic Partnerships in Birmingham called *City Strategic Partnership* and recently renamed *Birmingham Strategic Partnership*)⁴.

⁴ Whether this was a result of an effort to please the often “hostile” central government, is an open issue, however it is undoubted that BCC was fully committed to the success of these initiatives (Aulakh et al., 2002).

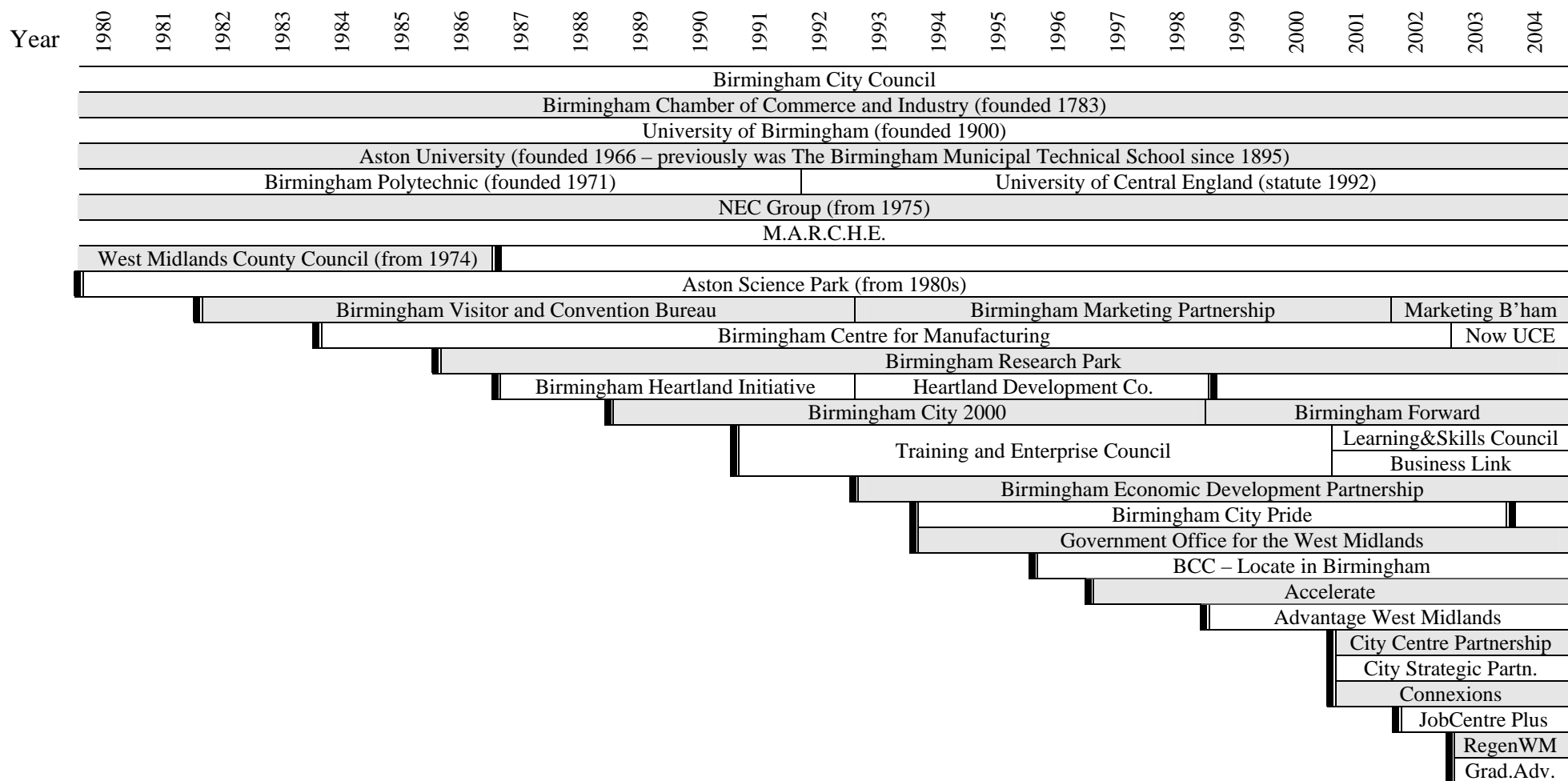


Table 6. Timeline of Birmingham institutional actors.

In conclusion, the institutional scene in Birmingham shows *high levels of organisations' mutual interaction*, and, in particular BCC role in the institutional framework, unanimously described as positive, has been manifold. It has initiated an attitude for partnerships in the city, through the promotion of both formal partnerships (ASP, BEDP, BH, BRP, CCP, CP, CSP, MB, NEC) and informal collaborations (BCC takes part to all significant networks active in economic development – table 2.4). BCC has promoted and supported joint-initiatives, including regular meetings with major representative bodies (BF, BCCI) held under “Chatham House rules”. It also actively participates, sometimes to an extent described as “dominant” over other organisations (Aulakh et al., 2002, p.44).

Partnership has not only been a key word in BCC policy documents, but an actual practice since the early 1980s. Their development was essential for the delivery of the economic regeneration agenda: “BCC wouldn't have been able to do it on its own, especially with a Conservative National Government” (respondent, 9/9/04).

3.2.3. Mutual Awareness of Being Involved in a Common Enterprise

The development of a common agenda can be identified through the existence of a *clear and shared local identity* and *clear and shared local priorities* (Bowler, 1999; p.268). In particular, the existence of a strong sense of local identity is a factor of cohesiveness, motivation and can provide “some added symbolic shape to political economic life” (MacLeod, 1997, p.307).

As concerns a clear and shared *local identity*, Birmingham is commonly viewed as a big industrial city that has converted itself into a modern, post-industrial city with a clear service sector orientation, but which also retains its industrial vocation. The prevailing perception is that the city has changed and improved more than it is normally acknowledged from the outside. Therefore, the city has to be equally successful in communicating its achievements (respondents, 1/9/04; 22/9/04). A matter of concern is also the discrepancy between the achievements in the city centre and the persistence of deprived neighbourhoods, which are addressed by the recent strategy of devolution and “flourishing neighborhoods” (CP,2002).

The clear and shared identity has been built through a process that has been ongoing for almost the last 20 years, and has departed from the second element that defines a common agenda: *clear and shared local priorities*. The economic crisis of the early 1980s appeared to local institutions of such enormous dimensions, that no local actors' could individually tackle it. In this framework, BCC was a “first-mover” and developed a vision and strategy for the city (BCC, 1984⁵). It then involved the major local players to share and refine it. The result was a commitment to work together towards its realisation. For example, as regards the objective of city centre revitalisation, the City Centre Challenge Symposium, the so-called “Highbury Initiative” (which took place three times, in 1987, 1988 and 2001), both helped to clarify the common vision and strengthened the partnership approach in policy definition and implementation. The Highbury initiative is generally regarded as a milestone for the regeneration

⁵ The city council 1984 Economic Development Committee statement on the “Priorities for economic development in Birmingham” identified a need for a strategic approach to economic development, and for a permanent organisational structure within the city council to address these issues. The details of the 9 priorities (aid to industry, local enterprise, new technology, land and buildings, industrial promotion, training, inner areas policy, wider needs, organisation response) have changed over time, but their identification has been a significant step in local economic development policy, and economic development policy has evolved around them since 1984.

of the city and the vision that emerged was that of “repositioning” the city, as a “meeting place” in the centre of England. In this respect, three local players were particularly significant:

- the City Council, that had identified the need for the repositioning of the city and already in 1984 defined a clear policy approach to economic development (in terms of objectives and programmes).
- the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, that recognised the need for a diversification of the local economy and a repositioning of Birmingham, and worked to this end with the other partners, especially with BCC, through the NEC.
- Birmingham Forward, the association representing the service sector in the city, which has strongly supported the diversification of the city economy and the strengthening of the local service sector, also through a strong collaboration with partners to improve the attractiveness of the city.

One particular remark concerns the local identity (a modern, service oriented city with a reduced but rooted industrial sector, where people are proud to live and work) and the local priorities (repositioning the city in the world economy as a “meeting place”). These to some extent “vague” concepts are likely to have facilitated the involvement and commitment of all local actors, as none could be against such an agenda. At the same time, this “vagueness” seems to be counterbalanced by the clarity of content that the major local players have been attributing to these concepts during the years. So the local agenda appears at the same time vague and specific. Sufficiently vague to involve everyone and allow policy adjustments to changing conditions, necessarily specific and concrete for the main local actors to take actions and deliver results.

3.2.4. Structures of Domination and/or Patterns of Coalition

An insight into the final feature of institutional thickness, the relative power of the various local organisations, can be derived from two kinds of indicators: *formal competencies* and *local actors’ perceptions*.

Formal competencies are a significant factor in determining each organisation’s powers in the reciprocal interactions. Authorisations and licensing powers, significant financial resources for a specific objective, or a significant role in providing and distributing funds to other organisations are indeed crucial factors in favouring an organisation’s pivotal role.

Formal competencies are however only an indicator of the “potential” power of an organisation, and there might be major discrepancies between an organisation’s formal and informal powers. Therefore, *local actors’ perceptions* are a second source of information on the local power structures, and they help to clarify whether formal positions correspond to actual powers.

A prevailing view is that in Birmingham there are many important and powerful organisations, which are willing to collaborate with each other but not ready to give up their role and position and act in a secondary role. Organisations such as BCCI, BCC, AWM, Learning and Skills Council – LSC and local Universities are all well endowed with resources, clear institutional role, ability to deliver, representativeness and recognition, to an extent that their subordination to other agencies is difficult to envisage. However, these attributes are less applicable to other minor agencies. Therefore the institutional framework in Birmingham might be described as having a core of organisations and other “off-the-core” organisations.

Among the “core” organisations, however, a sort of *primus inter pares* role is recognised to BCC, for various reasons. BCC has competencies in most of the policy areas relevant for economic development, and, more significantly, has shown ability to work in partnership and deliver in those areas, thanks also to its “technocracy of bureaucrats and planners” (MacLeod, 1997, p.301) widely acknowledged as competent (various respondents: 1/9/04; 4/10/04; 5/11/04). Furthermore, it was a pioneer of the partnership approach, it has a seat in almost all local partnerships and promotes their effective working. Even if there is sometimes a feeling that BCC is not able to “let it go” (IDEA 2002, p.2), when it comes to passing on responsibilities to other agencies, there is also a recognition that in recent years partnership working has improved, thanks to the ability of *all* partners to redefine roles and responsibilities. Furthermore, BCC significant financial resources favoured its delivery of programmes, but also its higher contribution to partnerships (e.g. running expenses of CP, CCP, CSP secretariat). Finally, its ability to exploit opportunities of EU funding have enhanced its ability to deliver, but also favoured joint targets and facilitated partners’ access to additional sources of finance⁶.

In conclusion, the *power dimension* in the local scenario is to some extent an evolving one. In the economic agenda, physical regeneration, while still important, is becoming less a priority and other issues are growing in significance – resembling a shift from an emergency situation and need for extraordinary interventions to a more stable situation requiring more established policies. Physical regeneration necessarily saw a relevant role of BCC, responsible for physical planning, land use authorisations, and major schemes promotion. While BCC is generally involved also in other development policies, in other fields a pivotal role might be played by other organisations (for example, in training the LSC has a major role, or in business support BCCI and Business Link). Furthermore, new powerful economic actors have emerged in recent years (such as AWM, LSC), reducing the centrality of BCC role.

4. Conclusion: the Role of Birmingham City Council and Local Leadership

The *Institutional Thickness* paradigm suggests that local economic growth is favoured when a territory is endowed with a rich set of institutional features. A significant policy issue regards whether, and if so how, local governments should promote institutional thickness for the purpose of local economic development. The case of Birmingham has provided some insights. The analysis has shown that Birmingham possesses a high degree of institutional thickness. The city has also achieved a good economic performance in recent years, and it therefore shows features that reflect both the paradigm hypothesis and thesis.

Evidence from the case study shows a prominent role of BCC in the institutional scene: it is the biggest local organisations, it has favoured and is engaged in institutional relationships and partnerships, it has promoted the development of a common local agenda and has been in the frontline in delivering it, it is surely one of the “core organisations”.

For these reasons, BCC role can be described as one of leading the institutional milieu. While the growth of organisations and institutional relationship might have happened without any specific intervention of BCC, this is less true as regards the development of a common agenda and the balance of powers. BCC has promoted the development of a shared local agenda, through an initial formulation, institutional exchanges, in formal and informal occasions, and a recognised

⁶ In the period 1984-2002 EU funding to the city council (ESF and ERDF) amounted to a total of about 373 million pounds (BCC, no-date)

charismatic propulsion by the Chair of the Economic Regeneration Committee (1984-1999) and subsequently Leader of BCC (1999-2004), Sir Albert Bore, focused on delivering a development agenda which has remained significantly clear since its initial formulation in 1984. Despite Bore prominence, his leading role has been supported, and favoured by a wide number of BCC officers and councillors that have all embraced the same vision and worked in different position towards the same objectives.

The importance of BCC is not only in the promotion of institutional thickness, but also in guaranteeing that it conforms to the plurality and complexity of a big city, as BCC is the only democratically elected, representative and accountable body. While there is evidence that BCC policies have tried to take the multiple interests and needs into account (BCC, 1984 – and other strategies), the actual extent to which it has achieved a balanced approach within the economic development agenda and with other priorities is often questioned, and, in particular, the criticism to BCC “single sightedness” for physical regeneration led in 1993 to the election of Theresa Stewart as leader, with an agenda more focused on social rather than economic regeneration issues.

BCC has surely led thanks to the fact that on top of the economic development agenda was the physical regeneration of the city, an issue over which it had a significant regulatory (and property owner/developer) role to play. However, its ability to use its competencies effectively, for the benefit of the city, its capacity to deliver and its visionary role have been essential in transforming a “potential” position of power into a recognised actual and effective leadership of Birmingham economic development.

Finally, BCC leading role is not exclusively linked to the physical regeneration agenda, as proved by the fact that despite the declining priority on physical regeneration (which is however still ongoing), BCC is still heavily involved across the whole spectrum of economic development, and its involvement is surely crucial in balancing different interests. The recognition it has gained is undoubtedly a significant factor that contributes to its continuing primacy in the institutional scene.

In synthesis: “BCC does enable others and lead. And this is largely down to the individual efforts of Albert Bore: he is a charismatic leader, very well respected by all sorts of businesses which you might not normally expect to lean with the political party he represents. But somehow he could lead Birmingham, because he has been in power for quite a number of years, during which major and radical changes have happened. And going back to the Highbury initiative, he showed a very good track record of working jointly with the private sector. That sort of things showed that the city council was able to talk with everybody, to think where the city was and where it should go, and then they actually did it (e.g. Bullring; ring road demolition). This gives people the confidence” (respondent, 1/9/04).

The emphasis on the role of BCC within the power dimension, should not prevent from acknowledging that other partners attitude towards institutional networking has been crucial in allowing BCC in its role of leading, defining an agenda and driving it. Where this attitude is rooted in, is surely an interesting issue to investigate further, but there is a widespread consensus on its existence, among public as well as private partners.

The evidence on BCC central role in promoting and shaping of local networking supports the conclusion that council’s leadership is an important element in driving and focusing institutional collaboration. Furthermore, the city council, as the only local democratically elected and accountable body, has an important role to play in guaranteeing that development priorities work

for the benefit of all. The issue of leadership, not sufficiently taken into account by the institutional thickness paradigm, enriches and details the role of local governments and appears to be a critical factor in completing the *institutional thickness* taxonomy.

The significant role of Birmingham City Council and the specificity of Birmingham institutional framework further emerges from a comparison with other empirical studies based on the Institutional Thickness paradigm. As regards *organisations' relationships*, in Birmingham there is evidence of a strong tradition of partnership work and of a significant ability of major organisations (among which BCC) to construct an agenda for local economic development (and to involve and commit new localist organisations to it). By contrast, the case of Sheffield (Raco, 1998) shows a tradition of bilateral relationships that gave way to wider partnerships as a result of the creation of new localist organisations and of Sheffield City Council failure to develop a coherent strategy. Furthermore, as regards the *local agenda*, in Cardiff (Raco, 1998) different organisations pursued differing objectives. Birmingham's organisations, while pursuing their own institutional objectives, have shown a significant commitment to a wider objective of "repositioning" the city. Furthermore, in contrast with the case of Cardiff, Birmingham City Council has kept a central role in the local *patterns of coalitions*. However, there is a perception of a shortcoming in Birmingham's ability to communicate its results and promote its image, perhaps a result of a less strong *local identity* than that of Lowland Scotland (MacLeod, 1997), but surely also of failures in the Birmingham marketing strategy. However, compared to Lowland Scotland, Birmingham shows not only quantity of organisations but also quality of institutional relationships.

Two final considerations regard the theoretical bases of the *institutional thickness* paradigm.

As regards the actual determinants of institutional thickness, significant contributions maintain that the institutional milieu is often the product of a multiplicity of factors, well beyond local organisations' strategies and actions, which shape and influence it: the dominant political economy paradigm and local economic structures (Harvey, 1982, 1989), global economic trends and national policies (MacLeod and Goodwin, 1999; Jessop, 2002), and local history of institutional relations (Raco, 1998). The institutional milieu is not simply the endogenous product of local organisations' interactions: exogenous factors may have an important influence too.

In addition, further investigation would be useful in order to assess the extent to which *institutional thickness* can actually favour a performing local economy. With reference to the case study, a counter-factual analysis of what would have happened to the Birmingham economy, had not BCC and the other local institutions worked together as they had, is impossible. However it can be maintained with a good degree of certainty that some major schemes and redevelopments would not have happened (ICC, the breaking of the concrete collar, Bullring redevelopment). If there is no evidence to conclude that Birmingham would not have grown economically, there is enough to maintain that it would have become a significantly different city. Furthermore, on the issue of *institutional thickness* relevance for local economic growth, the evidence collected from interviews to local players generally points to a positive correlation between institutional collaboration and economic development, but this is however far from being a scientific proof.

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