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# **Trouble at the top: the construction of a tenant identity in the governance of social housing organisations**

by Quintin Bradley

CUDEM Centre for Urban Development and Environmental Management

School of the Built Environment, Leeds Metropolitan University

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## Contact details

Quintin Bradley

Leeds Metropolitan University School of the Built Environment, Faculty of Arts and Society, The Northern Terrace, Queen Square Court, Civic Quarter.

Leeds LS1 3HE

+44 (0)113 8121964

q.bradley@leedsmet.ac.uk

## **Abstract**

The project of citizen governance has transformed the social housing sector in England where 20,000 tenants now sit as directors on the boards of housing associations, but the entrance of social housing tenants to the boardroom has aroused opposition from the chief executives of housing companies and triggered regulatory intervention from government inspectors. This paper investigates the cause of these tensions through a theoretical framework drawn from the work of feminist philosopher Judith Butler. It interprets housing governance as an identificatory project with the power to constitute tenant directors as regulated subjects, and presents evidence to suggest that this project of identity fails to completely enclose its subject, allowing tenant directors to engage in 'identity work' that threatens the supposed unity of the board. The paper charts the development of antagonism and political tension in the board rooms of housing companies to present an innovative account of the construction and contestation of identities in housing governance.

## **Key Words**

Housing governance, tenant participation, identity, tenant directors, housing policy

## Introduction

The contemporary project of 'citizen governance' in England holds particular significance in a housing landscape that has been shaped by forty years of tenant participation policy (Simmons et al 2007a). The enlistment of tenants into housing governance is a key strategy in a wider hegemonic project to restructure welfare state services and all regulated social landlords with more than 250 homes are required to recruit tenants onto their boards of directors (Housing Corporation 2006). In becoming board members, tenants are charged with providing the sound and prudent stewardship of housing companies, and are expected to adopt a universal identity that is defined in statute and enforced through organisational culture. The discourse of citizen governance can be seen, then, as an identificatory project that has the power to constitute tenant directors as obedient subjects who are moulded and fashioned by regulatory norms.

This project of identity has articulated tenant demands for involvement in decision-making to the strategic creation of a 'new social settlement' (Malpass 2005: 167) but has rejected their aspirations for operational change in the organisation and delivery of housing management services (Derricourt 1973), their interest in participatory democracy and their concern for wider community issues (Murie et al 2007). As a result the regulatory project of citizen governance fails to completely enclose its subject allowing tenant directors to engage in 'identity work' that threatens the supposed unity of the board and makes reference to these excluded and repudiated traditions of tenant participation.

The aim of this paper is to explore the construction of the identity of tenant director on the boards of social housing companies and to investigate the manner in which that identity might be amended or subverted. To that end it applies the work of feminist philosopher Judith Butler to analyse the regulatory forces at work within housing governance and to provide this paper with a robust theoretical framework through which to critically assess its research

with tenant directors. Judith Butler's radical constructivism draws on Michel Foucault's theories of the subject and power, Louis Althusser's understanding of ideology, Nietzsche's denial of the subject's agency, and the insights of post-colonial theory to question the ontological intuitions through which identity is traditionally understood. Instead of a sovereign subject free to construct a sense of self and negotiate a social identity, Butler describes a subject brought into existence by the power of discourse; she theorises an identity that is constituted through regulation and understands agency as the gap between intention and outcome. Her work provides a new research framework through which the discourse of housing governance can be understood as a productive force and in which the constitution and destabilising of identities among tenant directors can be analysed without recourse either to voluntarism or determinism. Butler's work has considerable application to any analysis of power (Chambers & Carver 2008), and has as a result been applied beyond the world of gender studies (see Gregson & Rose 2000, Davies 2006), and noted as an insightful analytical tool for housing research (Gabriel & Jacobs 2008).

This strong theoretical approach is applied to research into the identity construction processes of tenant board members in focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews that took place over a period of three years from 2007. The findings are drawn from six focus groups facilitated at national and regional tenant conferences involving over 90 tenant directors from housing associations, stock transfer companies and arms-length management organisations across England, supplemented by ten semi-structured interviews with tenant directors of eight housing companies in West Yorkshire. Many of the tenant board members were, or had been, members of local tenants organisations and were, in this way, representative of the majority of tenant directors on housing organisations set up since the early 1990s (Malpass & Mullins 2002). They shared the characteristics of tenant directors in Liz Cairncross and Martyn Pearl's (2003) study; women were in the majority and nearly all were aged over 50. The focus groups participants were self-selected from those attending the tenant conferences while the interview participants were chosen to include at least one member from each stock

transfer or arms-length management organisation in three neighbouring metropolitan boroughs. This selection enabled the research to provide additional focus on housing companies operating the constituency model of board recruitment, in which tenants make up a third of the directors. The ten interviewees were revisited two years after interview to provide an update on their board membership. While the geographical grouping of these tenant directors might suggest caution in generalising from their narratives, the aim of the semi-structured interviews was to follow-up themes that had developed in the focus groups and the overall sampling strategy was conceived to attain a broad geographical spread of housing organisations. Undertakings of anonymity were given to all tenant directors involved in the research in response to concerns that they might be subject to disciplinary action from their boards if their published comments were felt to be critical. This meant that the names of all social housing companies and place names also had to be omitted from the text.

The research aim was to investigate the 'identity work' of tenant directors, defined in social movement theory as the process by which collective identities are created, expressed, and sustained (Regner et al 2008), and to this end a matrix of questions to analyse the 'identity talk' of focus group participants and interviewees, as the primary form of identity work, was constructed from definitions of collective identity drawn from the work of Alberto Melucci. According to Melucci (1989: 35), there are three dimensions present in the construction of a collective identity: the formation of cognitive frameworks concerning the goals, the means and the strategies of collective action; the development of group relationships through processes of communication, negotiation and decision-making; and the emotional commitment of participants to the collective and to each other. This classification of collective identity into three distinct processes provides a strong framework for the analysis of any resignification activities of tenant directors and clear criteria against which they can be assessed.

The results of this research are not intended in any way to be a definitive statement; indeed this is very much a work in progress and the findings

presented here should indicate only that the study of tenant agency in governance promises to enrich our understanding of housing policy. This paper begins by situating tenant governance within an analysis of the power relations involved in tenant participation in order to introduce the application of Butler's theories to housing organisations as institutions that attribute identity. It next examines how the identity of the tenant director is constituted by the discourse of governance and points to the ambiguities and tensions that are embedded in its construction and that provide space for the enactment of different articulations. Working with Butler's theory of the performative, the paper then charts the development of antagonism and political tension in the boardrooms of housing companies through an analysis of the research findings to present an innovative account of the construction and contestation of identities in housing governance.

## **Power, identity and tenant governance**

Citizen governance has been presented as offering transformational change in the organisation of the welfare state by putting the consumer 'in the driving seat of the public services they use' (Cm 6630 2005: 3). As part of a hegemonic project to restructure welfare, citizen governance has been applied to bring a consumer voice into public services to help transform the universalism of the welfare state into a flexible and personalised operation (Bauman 1998).

Housing as both the wobbly pillar and the cornerstone of the welfare state has provided Conservative and Labour governments with almost uncontested territory in which to experiment with this restructuring strategy and, at the same time, has offered in its capacity as a private good, a vital resource to sustain a re-commodified welfare system (Malpass 2008). As a result social housing has witnessed a more radical exposition of Albert Hirschman's (1970) pairing of 'exit' and 'voice' than most other public services (Boyne & Walker 1999). Alongside the imposition of the target-driven, budget-conscious New

Public Management, 'exit' has been exhorted through the privatisation measures of the Right to Buy, the transfer of council housing to registered social landlords, and the creation of quasi-markets offering 'choice' (HC 49-I 2005, Malpass 2005). But it has been through the public policy initiative of tenant participation that the forces of 'exit' and 'voice' have had most impact on the structure of social housing. A wide menu of participation opportunities is now offered to social housing tenants through the resident involvement strategies of their housing providers. As well as taking part in a familiar range of voice options through focus groups, panels, and satisfaction surveys, social housing tenants can take over the management of their estates, lobby independently through associations and federations and gain places on the management board of social housing companies (Paddison et al 2008).

Roughly 20,000 tenants are now housing governors, making up over 18 per cent of directors on the boards of English social housing organisations, and holding at least one third of directorships in the new stock-transfer companies and arms-length management organisations (Cairncross & Pearl 2003, TSA 2009). The attainment of positions of authority can be seen as offering social housing tenants the potential for empowerment, and opportunities to advance the concept of participatory democracy, and is associated with a voluntarist tradition that interprets tenant participation in terms of radicalised ideas of autonomy and self-determination represented in some theorisations of a tenants' movement (Grayson 1997, Sommerville 1998). The tenant campaigns for participation that first developed in the late 1960s have been portrayed as the radical political action of an urban social movement in a 'fight over the costs and conditions of existence in the living place' (Harvey 1982: 547). It is difficult though, as Liz Millward (2005a: 2) noted, to demonstrate continuity between this tradition of tenant action against landlords and the contemporary participation of tenants in their landlord's business where tenant governance serves to underpin a market strategy for social housing and aims to introduce tenants into their responsibilities as active citizens (Flint 2004).

Theorists have described the engagement of tenant organisations within participation structures as a process of 'incorporation' as if tenant agency

dedicated to a liberatory endeavour had been recuperated by regulatory agencies and its radicalism contained (Goodlad 2001, Paddison et al 2007). This interpretation is predicated on the illusion that tenants enjoy the ability to exist outside power relations, and that as individual agents they have the choice between being 'in and against the state'. Recent studies of power in tenant participation draw on applications of Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality to stress the regulatory effects of participation that constitute tenants as subjects. Scholars influenced by Foucault (Cruikshank 1999; Dean 1999, Marinetto 2003) interpret participation and empowerment as characteristics of governmental practices that rely on the agency of the governed to govern themselves. This is a theory of power exerted not over others, but through the actions of others, and exercised through their freedom. 'To govern like this is to structure the possible field of actions of others,' Foucault (1982: 221) explained and in their 2008 analysis of tenant participation through community ownership companies, Kim McKee and Vickie Cooper applied this theory to argue that, when taking up the liberatory possibilities of control or participation in decision-making, tenants operate within legislation, policies, budgets and behavioural criteria set down by government that structure the possibilities of their actions and set a fixed horizon on their achievements.

The theory of hegemony developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their 1985 work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* emphasises the way in which power operates to construct our everyday understanding of social relations and as such it has been applied alongside the theories of Foucault as a tool of analysis in organisational studies and housing governance (Willmott 2005, Böhm 2006, Bradley 2008). Housing organisations can be seen as structured around an order of discourse that defines the common sense of the institution and makes comprehensible the rules and systems, categories and conventions that describe their governance. Housing organisations are then understood as discursive networks of power and knowledge that attribute and regulate identity, impose meanings and norms, and constitute individuals within their field as subjects.

In her collaboration with Laclau, Judith Butler (2000, 2004) has focused on the productive power of discourse to attribute identities to individuals and groups and the means by which those identities can be contested. Butler adds considerably to Laclau and Mouffe's concept of hegemony by theorising this regulatory discourse as embodied in the subject, and expressed through day-to-day social practice. She explains how subjects are constituted and how identities are constructed using Louis Althusser's concept of 'interpellation'. Althusser (2001: 118) describes how a man walking away is hailed by a policeman as 'Hey you there!' and how the man turns, recognising himself in the call. In obeying it he is both given a social identity and called to order as a subject. As Judith Butler puts it: 'In its pursuit of social recognition and social identity, the subject is engaged in a willing embrace of the law' (1993: 244). This identificatory command offers subjects the benefits of belonging and awards them agency, at the same time as it embeds them in a system of regulation. It is a 'reprimand' that produces an obedient subject yet is also a welcome recognition granting social acceptance that the subject willingly embraces (Butler 1993: 121). The attribution of identities is an exclusionary process that defines normality by creating and outlawing the abnormal so that for every identity that is constructed there are those that are repudiated. The dominant discourse of organisations has what Judith Butler (1993: 3) calls a 'constitutive outside' where the shadows of its excluded identities are a constant reminder of the possibilities that have been foreclosed to impose order, and a constant threat of the return of antagonism. The imposition of identity through hegemonic discourse never completely encloses its subjects and allows the possibility of new articulations. As Ernesto Laclau (2007: 44) argued: 'The process of identification will be always unstable and penetrated by a constitutive ambiguity'.

Organisational identity, then, is constructed in an act of power that conceals itself in the experience of recognition so that the subject appears to be the agent of its own existence rather than the recipient of a call to order. Identity is always contingent at both the personal and political levels and none can completely enclose or fully determine the subject. The identity and homogeneity of the subject is an illusion, an articulated set of elements that

are constitutionally unstable and that rely on consistent repetition to maintain their naming power (Butler 2004: 341). The following section applies this theoretical approach to the discourse of citizen governance in housing companies to analyse the constructed identity of the tenant director and to understand the ambiguities embedded within its constitution.

## **The regulated role of tenant director**

The identity of the 'tenant governor' constitutes its subjects in an ambiguous and contradictory manner, reflecting the tensions between the processes of representation and those of strategic leadership in the project of citizen governance in housing (Simmons et al 2007a).

Tenants who become directors of social housing companies assume a regulated identity defined in statute, and the Companies Act 1985 and 2006 sets out their duty to act in the best interests of the company. Tenants take on a corporate identity in which all board members are assumed to be equal and all are tasked with the same aims and interests, predicated on the assumption that the power relations that reproduce inequality and injustice stop at the boardroom door. As the tenant chair of Bolton Homes, an arms-length management company, said: 'We don't like to be called tenant directors, we are all equal on the board' (Ellery 2008)

This principle of governance is founded on the myth of the eradication of antagonism (Laclau 1977). Board members are expected to unite in the pursuit of common values where the interests of the housing company take on a unifying principle that transcends all other influences. While the interests of the company may be open to debate and there are a range of models to guide the organisational culture of the board (Cornforth 2003), the governance of housing companies appears to act as an identificatory project that coheres around an agreed definition of company interests and board behaviour. Analyses of the identity narratives in organisational culture (Humphreys & Brown 2002), and particularly those of housing organisations (Clapham et al

2000, Darcy & Manzi 2004) promote the concept of a 'negotiated order' maintaining that organisational identity is the outcome of a process of bargaining between various factions within the institution. This pluralist approach denies the hegemonic authority of dominant discourses and their constitutive power to cite the norms and regulations of an identificatory project (Butler 1995). As Peter Malpass (2000) argues, a hierarchical order of governmental and market discourses is the constructive force in social housing companies where the dynamics of commodification and managerialism compete with those of social welfare and social control (Darcy & Manzi 2004). As 'captive consumers' (Chilton & Mayo 2007: 12), tenants are the regulated and contained products of an organisational structure they have slight opportunity to influence, and as directors, they are expected to conflate their own interests with the success of housing companies.

The gradual residualisation of the social housing sector brought about by government policy has left the poorest and most vulnerable in the worst housing. This concentration of people largely outside the active labour force and on very low incomes in one easily demarcated housing sector has allowed social housing to become a proxy for government anti-poverty strategies that adopt the concept of empowerment as the cure for welfare dependency (Sommerville 2005). The discourse of citizen governance exhorts social housing tenants to an act of responsible citizenship that will transform them into self-reliant consumers and grant them a semblance of equality within the confines of the board room, but as recipients of what is considered a welfare service, social housing tenants are by definition flawed consumers whose citizenship is contingent (Bauman 1998), and they remain subject to a range of disciplinary discourses, surveillance techniques and intensive management processes that are the consequence of their position in the housing market (Clapham et al 2000, Flint 2006).

Tenant directors are therefore a demographically distinct group on the management boards of housing companies and they appear to adhere to a specific set of values. Research by Liz Cairncross and Martyn Pearl (2003) revealed that tenant board members share the general profile of social

housing tenants in that they are more likely to be women, older, disabled and less likely to be working, or in white-collar jobs, than other board members. In comparison, their fellow governors are increasingly drawn from the ranks of highly educated, male professionals who are employed in senior management roles, and are likely to serve as directors for a range of companies and to operate as a local network of governance (Stoker 2004). Richard Simmons and colleagues (2007b) noted that those tenants who involve themselves in the project of citizen governance feel they have a strong collective stake in public services. They display a sense of ownership that spurs them to take a partnership role in governance and they also tend to be motivated by the values of justice and a belief in public welfare services, values that are not always those prioritised by the managers of public services (Birchall & Simmons 2004). Tenant directors on stock-transfer and arms-length management companies tend to be active organisers of tenants associations (Malpass & Mullins 2002) and are likely to show a strong commitment to their local area and to helping people; they demonstrate anger at injustice and are passionate about the rights of tenants (Millward 2005a, 2005b, Simmons & Birchall 2006). These are the service users who are often dismissed in participation processes as 'professional tenants' or 'the usual suspects' and whose voice is considered unrepresentative by public service managers (Barnes et al 2003). Outside of the boardroom, these tenants organise as 'subaltern counter-publics' to generate their own strategies for services and have increasingly struggled to attain an influence (Fraser 1997: 81). When they enter the board room they are required to leave behind the collective they once represented, dispensing with the loyalties and the specific values of their subaltern groups, to adopt the behaviour of directors who are demographically and culturally 'Other'. The identity that tenants are supposed to assume is the image of a director, reflected not in their own person but in the persona of the highly educated professional board member. As the post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994: 64) said: 'It is the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image.' Tenant directors see the image of their identity in the status and educational attainments of their fellow board members and define themselves, in comparison, through their failure to assume that image. Since they cannot

attain the standards required to be a director, they remain forever 'tenant' directors, 'almost the same, but not quite' as Bhabha (1994: 123) described, and they never acquire the equality promised by the role. The identification of the tenant director is defined in relation to the professional board member and the tenant is encouraged to mimic a symbol of domination as well as emulation. As representatives of a cultural and business elite, the professional board member may be 'not only the Other but also the Master', to apply Frantz Fanon's (1986: 138) post-colonial dialectic. The tenant director fails to attain the image of identification and in failure, reinforces its subjection and reaffirms its difference.

This contradictory and ambivalent identification subjects tenants to exclusion and abjection while at the same time admitting them into a normative role that disavows all difference. It constructs the identity of the responsible tenant governor, while it manufactures and repudiates the identities of the problem tenant and the welfare dependent tenant. It can be therefore usefully understood through Homi Bhabha's concept of the stereotype as the mode of representation of the colonial subject, an identification that arrests tenants in an unchanging fixation of difference and discrimination at the same time as it casts them as dynamic and productive. The construction of tenant identity produces a split subject, a consumer of marketised freedoms that nevertheless preserves within itself the denigrated phantoms that are associated with those who fail to take responsibility for their own welfare costs (Marsh 2004). The identity of the tenant subject is formed in dependency and constituted as an attachment to power, expressed as a desire for acceptance and recognition, and riddled with feelings of inadequacy and inferiority (Butler 1997).

Tenant directors are obliged to identify and to disidentify at the same time. They are recruited onto the boards of housing companies partly to legitimise the fragmented new landscape of stock transfer companies, arms-length management companies and merged and taken-over housing associations by rooting them in a defined sense of place and are often elected from defined constituencies (Malpass & Mullins 2002, Flint 2003). The constituency model,

which guarantees a third of board places for tenants alongside councillors and independents, and became the norm for stock transfer and arms length management companies, was adopted partly as a response to the criticisms of unaccountability levelled at associations when they replaced elected local government as the main provider of social housing after 1989, and partly also to win tenant support for stock transfer (Karn 1993, Mullins et al 1995). This model created an impression of electoral accountability around the new tenant directors and implied that they served in a representative role (Kearns 1997, Malpass 2000). Tenants are promised more influence over decision-making through access to a seat on the governing body and, as such the role continues to be promoted as the pinnacle of a ladder of participation opportunities offered by social landlords (Platt 1987) with Audit Commission research confirming that tenants vote for transfer, and support arms length management companies at least in part because they are being offered places on the governing boards of the new organisations (Audit Commission 2004a). Tenant demands for participation in the running of public services have been framed by the ideals of participatory democracy that inspired grass-roots collective action around the principle that 'the people themselves must assume direct responsibility for intervening in the political decision-making process' (Della Porta & Diani 2006: 240). The hunger for control that was the hallmark of the upsurge in tenant collective action in the 1970s and 1980s has been successfully articulated to the project of citizen governance (Derricourt 1973, Wood 1993), but tenants' desire for accountability, their commitment to representing the collective interests of a neighbourhood, and their concern for involvement in a wide range of community services have all been excluded from the identity of the tenant director. Yet the recruitment of tenants to the position of director is still associated with democratic theory as if the values of participatory or direct democracy had entered the decision-making processes of the boardroom (Audit Commission 2004a, Housing Corporation 2006).

Tenants are encouraged to see their objectives as identical to those espoused by housing organisations and are offered recognition in a regulated identity that is riddled with ambiguities and tensions. Their former aspirations for

equality and for greater involvement in operational decisions have become excluded identity narratives that still haunt the discourse of citizen governance and provide opportunities for agency and resistance. The next section begins to explore those opportunities suggested by Judith Butler's theoretical framework through an analysis of the 'identity talk' of tenant board members in focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

## **Resignifying the identity of tenant governor**

A number of regulatory and disciplinary forces have been brought to bear on the identity of the 'tenant governor' in recent years. This suggests that the ambiguities in that identity have enabled tenant directors to revive, within the constraints of their role, elements that have been repudiated from its definition. This section examines the resources available to tenant directors to challenge the power relations that constitute their subjectivity.

The exasperation of housing association chief executives with tenant board members who insist on bringing up 'estate-level issues' at committee meetings lead the Audit Commission in 2004 to recommend that tenant board members should be selected by interview, rather than election, to ensure their future compliance with the requirements of governance (Audit Commission 2004b). Board members and senior officers of housing companies routinely discourage tenant directors from taking an advocacy role at meetings, and are particularly concerned to prevent them raising specific cases or bringing unresolved complaints to the notice of the board (Platt 1987, Clapham & Kintrea 2000). In 2006 the largest housing companies argued that there was no role for tenant directors at all at board level and that their behaviour was a hindrance to the efficient business operation of social housing companies (Appleyard 2006). As a result, the review of regulation launched by the Housing Corporation and headed by Sir Les Elton argued that tenants would have a more valuable contribution to make on housing organisations with direct service delivery functions, rather than on strategic boards like the parent organisations of group structures (Elton 2006).

These attempts to discipline the behaviour of tenant directors confirm that their regulated identity is precariously liable to new articulations. The space in which tenant directors may be able to resignify identities is established by the failure of the dominant discourse to definitively 'name' the subject (Butler 1997: 33). This creates an unresolved tension between the identity attributed to the subject and the recognition it has accepted. Social movement theorist Alberto Melluci argues that the failure of this recognition sparks attempts by groups to 'reappropriate something that belongs to them because they are able to recognise it as their own' (Melluci 1995: 48).

Judith Butler's theory of performativity denotes this failure of hegemonic power to impose identity as a permanent injunction on the subject. To construct this idea of the performative, Butler drew on the concerns of linguist John L. Austin (1976) with the citational property of language to enact what it names and Jacques Derrida's (1988) observation that this action applies an iterable formula or code. Butler concludes that organisational identity is not something that subjects have; it is something that subjects 'do' in everyday activity. By citing the regulations of the organisation in everyday practice they reproduce and renew their identity and their subjection through 'a regularised and constrained repetition of norms' (Butler 1993: 95). But if identity must be constantly renewed and performed in daily life, the outcome cannot be completely determined in advance. The iteration of an identity may not produce an exact copy each time and has the potential to cite the possibilities that were excluded in its construction and that could lead to a resignification of its meaning. This is what Butler called 'the ideal of a possibility' (2000: 162) and it affirms the possibility that power relations can be subverted and challenged within an understanding of power as a constitutive force.

The most common expression used by tenant governors to convey their decision to join the board of a housing company is the metaphor of 'voice'. The use of 'voice' appears to be a typical ontological metaphor (Lakoff & Johnston 1981) using the process of 'speaking' and 'hearing' to convey the effect of 'influence'. A louder voice for tenants may be intended to signify that

they have more influence on housing decisions; getting a voice heard might mean that decision-makers change their plans as a result of what tenants have said. The metaphor is the building block of an organisation's belief system (Grant & Oswick 1996) and was seen by David Snow and Robert Benford (1988) as essential to the construction of collective action frames or the schemata of interpretation that enable people to understand new situations, events or actions in terms of what is already familiar and meaningful. 'Voice' has been promoted as an essential tool for bringing the semblance of competition to public sector monopoly services and in public choice theory has been conflated with 'exit', its twin in the work of political economist Albert Hirschman (1970), and with the presumed efficiency and invisibility of market forces (Paul 1992, Udehn 1996). As such, voice appears to be considered as a performative process that calls into effect the relations it names. In John Austin's (1976) examples, the performative can constitute the institution of marriage by declaring a couple 'man and wife', or bestow identity through the phrase 'I name this ship'. It doesn't describe a situation or an action; the performative makes something happen. In the same manner, the assumptions of public choice theory would have it that voice speaks and the management of an organisation rush to make improvements to the service, just as exit commands and managers hasten to win back their departing customers. In this way 'voice' operates as the constitutive power of a marketised housing service, and when a tenant director of a social housing company relates that he took up his post because 'I felt we weren't taken seriously, we didn't have a big enough voice,' he appears to be citing the normative expectations that regulate the discourse of citizen governance and put the consumer in the driving seat of public services.

On closer inspection, however, it might be argued that the performative action of voice signifies something more than a quasi-market relationship when put to work by tenant directors. Analysis of the focus group discussions and interview narratives discovers a performative voice citing notions of collective representation, collective action and participatory democracy. A tenant director of a social housing company who relates that he took up his post 'to ensure that tenants voices are heard at board level' implies more than the

process of speaking at a board meeting; here voice conveys an element of cultural change and the incursion of new agency into decision-making forums. Similarly the tenant board member quoted below is using 'voice' to refer to the views of a collective and the process of hearing to express a power imbalance between tenants and landlords:

*'Not having your voice heard was frustrating; I felt we weren't taken seriously enough. Because we didn't have a big enough voice there was no way for tenants to get their views through,'*

The speaker goes on to locate this collective explicitly in the idea of a tenants' movement, here expressed as a network of local residents associations all seeking access to decision-making:

*'Once the association was up and running I joined the board to get the voice of the association heard. Then I got in touch with other groups with the same problems getting their views heard at board level.'*

So tenants who apply the metaphor of voice to convey a market-like influence also use it to denote a collective that has certain things to say. They appear to use the performative power of voice to create the imaginary of a mass movement with defined interests, a sense of purpose and a dynamic of progress as this focus group excerpt suggests.

*E: It seems to me, umm, that now, whereas it was like trying to bring, tenants trying to get their voice heard, it seems to me as though the, uh, we're now bringing the landlords into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

*Moderator: So tenants are making the running?*

*E: I think so*

*Moderator: They're kind of in charge?*

*E:: I wouldn't say we were exactly in charge but we're letting them know, we know, we know our rights now and the land[ ] well, a lot of the landlords still don't really like it, but, umm, treat them gently and we'll bring them into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

The speaker does not believe that the development of tenant participation as 'voice' has triggered automatic improvements among housing organisations. Instead change is being brought about as a process of tenant struggle and participation is something that has been fought for and won. This narrative of struggle conveys an impression of shared purpose that links individual residents groups and implies continuity between the past and present, as a further excerpt from the same focus group shows:

*T: I see tenants as a movement*

*K: Mm, mm*

*Moderator: Yes? So why do you think that?*

*T: Well, well we, we want to change things, we want to benefit, that's what, what we're doing*

*S: If one person can't do it then..*

*T: We want to have a united front if*

*K: Yeah*

*T: If you want to change things*

Here the performative power of voice establishes the imaginary of a tenants' movement; a constituency of networked residents associations and activists with a shared tradition of purposeful struggle that tenant directors then seek to represent on the boards of social housing companies. But if the performative power of voice is being used to cite an imaginary tenants' movement, a movement identity with clear goals and strategies is not so easily assembled. The regulatory effect of organisational discourse puts directors under continual pressure to identify with the board as a whole and with the interests

of the company. These constraints mean that the emergent concept of a tenant identity never acquires clarity but retains its mythic quality. The tenants' movement is expressed by this board member only in emotive terms and as an assumption of shared values:

*It's just, it is I, I think it's, it's one big group, passionate group with a common goal to improve our homes the way we are treated by the government and also the community we live in*

Even when the concept of a tenant collective identity begins to acquire the outline of a social movement and achieves something near strategic definition, it is still blurred by the effect of the split subject who seeks acceptance from power-holders, as the conclusion of this focus group exchange indicates:

*A: If you want to call us a movement we've got to have a national strategy.*

*Moderator: And do you have a national strategy?*

*B: We have a national wish to have a national strategy.*

*Moderator: What would this strategy be?*

*B: To be consulted and not directed. To be considered at all times, to be part of the system automatically*

## **Marking the boundaries of a tenant identity**

All the tenant board members in this study had the initial objective in becoming directors of bringing about improvements to the housing management service in their neighbourhood. Like most tenants taking places on the boards of stock transfer or arms-length management companies, they

were active organisers of tenants associations and had been closely involved in negotiations over setting up the new organisations. A directorship provided them with access to the specialist staff and information sources unavailable to them in their role as tenant representatives, while it gave them the authority to initiate change in their relations with local staff teams, as this tenant director confirms:

*I've got the internal numbers for all the staff. I can just ring and shortcut the system and get to know why something's not happening – solve problems and give them a kick up the backside.*

At the root of these objectives, as the quote below shows, was an expressed desire to reverse the power relations of housing management and to privilege the experience and knowledge of tenants against the professional judgement of housing staff:

*The ones that are in charge they don't know exactly what's going on in that particular area or block, only they who live in that area can say what's going on and because a lot of people, a lot of tenants don't decide well, you know they're not just sitting down paying rent for it, they have a say. You have to keep on and on fighting for the rights of you and the people around you*

Tenant ambitions for empowerment or for a reversal of power relations appear to stem from frustration with the sometimes repressive practices of housing management and the disciplinary discourses that have traditionally adhered to social housing (see Haworth & Manzi 1999, Clapham et al 2000). This expresses itself among tenant directors through their assumption that a place on the board gives them supervisory authority over housing staff. In an attempt to reverse the relations of domination tenant governors make themselves into a resemblance of the authorities they blame for their subjection. The antagonism that surfaces appears to resonate with Bhabha's (1994:63-64) postcolonial analyses: 'The very place of identification, caught in

the tension of demand and desire, is a space of splitting. The fantasy of the native is precisely to occupy the master's place while keeping his place in the slave's avenging anger'. This split subject manifests itself in comments like these from tenant directors:

*M: Some of the staff, some of the new ones thought they knew everything. We had to jump on them like a ton of bricks. They were so arrogant.*

*C: Suddenly tenants are their bosses and some of them don't like it and some of them show it.*

*M: Sometimes you have to stand there and fight them because they can be so bloody arrogant.*

The antagonism that the project of citizen governance should have excluded from the boardroom returns through the ambiguity of the regulated identity of tenant governor. It establishes what Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier (1992) called the boundary markers that define the distinct identity of the group 'us', and declare it as an antagonist to the perpetrators of injustice or 'them'. These boundary markers appear in the interviews and focus group conversations through the use of the personal pronoun 'we' to create an impression of unity between tenant directors and to define them as a separate interest group on housing boards. One interviewee regularly used 'we' to denote tenant board members as a defined group, having their own codes of behaviour and their own leadership structures on the board, and she marked a discursive boundary through the contrasting use of the passive voice to refer to other groups on the board and the organisation's senior officers, as can be glimpsed in this short extract:

*We were given the rules of governance and just had to read them and we were able to comment but our comments weren't always taken on board.*

Boundary marking by tenant governors creates in symbolic terms what Aletta Norval (2000) calls a political frontier; it organises the space of the board room by charting new relations of power in putative lines of opposition and division. Two narratives by tenant board members express this political frontier clearly; both describe a moment of outright conflict when the interests of the tenants diverged from those of the housing organisation. In the first narrative, the board of an arms-length management organisation was presented with an officer recommendation to withdraw rent collection services from all neighbourhood offices. The account of a tenant board member provides a bitter commentary:

*Tenant board members thought it weren't right to close cash offices [ ] It was put to a vote and tenants were out voted. The majority wanted it stopping and we had to agree with it whether we liked it or no and we had to go out and tell our tenants it was the board decision although we didn't agree with it. They did say at the time that the people in the rent offices would be put out on the street [on the estates] but it never happened. It was a red herring.*

In the second narrative a social housing company proposed to demolish 450 structurally defective homes on the grounds that it was not cost effective to repair them. As in the first example, the officer recommendation was passed by a majority vote with all the tenant directors voting against demolition. One tenant board member recalled how the debate brought tenant directors together in their opposition to the plans:

*That was the one that got the quieter ones to found their voice. This was people's homes [ ] It was something like 11 to 7 for. Every tenant voted against.*

As a result of these moments of partition, when the unity of the board breaks into divergent interest groups, antagonism becomes the tool by which tenant directors may reinterpret their identity as board members. They are thrown

into a position where they must define themselves in opposition to the views of other directors and of senior managers. In these circumstances they can perceive their identity as beleaguered and embattled, and construct from the feeling of isolation a defensive strength. This articulation of power through conflict is apparent in the following quote in which a tenant director presents the aims of citizen governance as the overthrow of an elite and the constitution of a new order:

*I think about the future and it teaches us to start looking now at what we want to do in the future and what might be a good or bad thing and not as it has been in the past what the officers want to do. We're not going to let them fob us off by their experience and their words. We can understand it all and they can't fob us off as much. We don't accept it.*

As far as a strategy can be induced from these research findings, tenant directors appear to champion a housing policy where decision-making is devolved to the locality, and where it is executed in a deliberative relationship between tenants associations and estate management staff. If this were the case, it would suggest that the identity of tenant governor served as a means to an end, and that their goal in seeking tenant involvement in governance is to bring about change in the process of decision-making at the level of neighbourhood practice. The status, knowledge and contacts accrued by tenant directors are channelled to achieve operational change in the organisation and in the delivery of services, and in particular, as Hilary Wainwright (2000) observed, to assert a role for practical knowledge and user experience in resource management. This operational goal is not compatible with the responsibilities of the tenant board member in a governance structure that applies a rigorous separation of strategic and management functions. Attempts to resignify the regulated identity of 'tenant governor' to adapt it to an operational role are subject to disciplinary processes aimed at reasserting the normative strategic role.

Most of the ten tenant board members interviewed for this study in 2007 spoke of their aspirations to represent tenants and admitted they had become

directors in order to improve housing services in their neighbourhood. Two years later, six had left the board of their housing company, either as a result of a restructuring of governance that had reduced the size of the strategic board, or as a result of disagreements over policy where their desire to act as representatives, and to speak on behalf of a tenants' constituency had led them into conflict with the discourse of corporate unity. The board members who stayed behind with the company were castigated as 'nodding dogs' by one departing tenant director because of the accommodation they had made between the tenant imaginary and the board, in which the recognition granted by the status of director justifies further assimilation into the corporate regime; it is a complex juggling act, expressed in the quote below:

*I am aware that at the board meeting I am not a tenant, I'm a board member. But I don't see why the interests of tenants and the board should be mutually exclusive.*

As Judith Butler (1997) argued the constitutive power of discourse assumes a psychic form that incorporates a sense of dependency within subjects. Tenants who are used to abjection will readily find recognition in a constrained identity if that identity provides acceptance and promises to accord them equality and respect. For these tenant directors the respect offered them by the senior management of the housing company outweighed any limitations on their autonomy:

*S: I, I feel when I walk in that company I am on the same level as the housing staff and anybody else. I'm not any better, I'm not any worse, I'm not patronised.*

*K: No*

One tenant director, who was also a member of his borough Tenants' Federation, reported that he was regularly disciplined by the Chair and Chief Officer of his housing organisation for failing to regulate his split identity during board meetings:

*I've got to be careful on Board because here [at the Federation] we fight individually for a tenant but on the Board you fight for them all and I still haven't got that into my head yet because I still start shooting my mouth off about this tenant hasn't got this and this tenant ain't got that. [...] And then I get pulled to one side, 'you're fighting for all tenants not just one'.*

The requirement on him to discipline his behaviour in the boardroom forces him to consciously monitor his identity and to associate it with specific modes of symbolic behaviour. Yet his boardroom identity appears to be play-acting, and beneath the mask he retains a belligerent and stubborn loyalty to a tradition of collective action:

*This is where the two caps come in, you see, and you've got, oh its terrible, so I think oh well we're fighting for all of them, wait till I get in office tomorrow [Tenants Federation office] and I'll show them who I'm fighting for, you know.*

Tenant directors have been able to develop the ambiguities of their identity to reclaim exiled traditions of participatory democracy and political struggle but they are unable to adapt the citizen governance project to achieve operational decision-making. The following reflection by one interviewee encapsulates both the achievement and the failure of tenant governance:

*The bit I still don't see is the vision and direction of organisations being shaped by tenants [...] They think they'll be able to put the views of the community at the top table but it's not happening. It's a long drawn out process at board and you don't see this visible change. It's at the level of focus groups, and area panels and forums that things are changing and, the more that tenants drive that, you're going to get better services and eventually you might get that going right to the top.*

## Conclusions

This paper has presented a new framework for the assessment of the role of citizen governance in housing to provide an analysis of the 'identity work' of tenant directors and to present a critical examination of the regulatory matrix that limits their field of action at board level. While most accounts of tenant agency rest on the assumption of a sovereign subject, this analysis theorises the tenant director as a constituted subject whose actions are hobbled by dependency and desire for acceptance, and identifies agency as the possibilities of resistance presented in the ambiguities of productive power.

The project of citizen governance in social housing has constituted the tenant governor as an image of identity through organisational discourse and statute. This identification project produces a split subject and the tenant director finds both recognition and repudiation in a governance role; recognition of aspirations for decision-making authority and repudiation as a flawed reflection of the image of the director – a welfare dependent in borrowed clothes. Such ambiguity creates space in which tenant board members can resignify their regulated identity to allow concepts of collective representation, participatory democracy, and collective action to enter the definition of the tenant director.

The identity work observed among tenant board members focused on a subversion of the performative power of voice, as the key metaphor of citizen governance. Tenant directors resignify voice to carry a collective rather than individual identity and attach it to the imaginary of a tenants' movement with a history of contentious action. They utilise the norms of their regulation to cite into existence an imaginary collective identity of tenants and express this in terms of emotional commitment, and in outbursts of antagonism through the symbolic erection of boundary markers that demarcate the political space of the board room in conflict with the universalism of corporate identity.

The assertion of 'tenant identity' opens up a form of instability in the dominant discourse of housing governance. It creates an exclusionary dynamic that

articulates new power relations, champions direct experience against professional expertise, and evokes a return of excluded meanings and interpretations that articulate a troubling conflict at board level. This identity work is the subject of recuperative strategies by housing organisations to reinforce the regulated identity and to constrain the behaviour of tenant board members. While the discourse of citizen governance sees antagonism as a disruptive force that must be stifled, Chantal Mouffe (1993) argues that antagonism is the basis of pluralism and democracy, and that disagreement should be seen as legitimate and opposition tolerated. In this view the development of tenant identity work offers the potential for difference and debate, and marks the return of politics to the project of citizen governance.

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