– ALTERNATIVES TO RESISTANCE? Comparing Depoliticization in Two British Environmental Movement Scenes

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Abstract
Processes of politicization and depoliticization are increasingly studied in relation to urban contexts, and cities have been depicted as incubators of social movements. What has been largely ignored is why, in some cities, forces of politicization or depoliticization are stronger than in others. To address this question, this article compares two British cities—Manchester and Bristol—which have historically been central hubs of environmental resistance, but currently face similar depoliticizing forces: austerity, anti-squatting laws, police repression and activists’ disillusion with environmentalism. Curiously, these conditions have had very different impacts on the two environmental scenes. In Manchester they have caused environmental resistance to become replaced almost entirely by non-confrontational ‘alternatives’. In Bristol alternatives have emerged that tend to be in synergy with environmental resistance. The comparison thus suggests that Bristol is more conducive to maintaining environmental resistance under depoliticizing conditions. Findings suggest that differences can be attributed to features of the physical urban environment, including city size. Historically, these differences were not decisive. Yet, after a period of dwindling environmentalist energy in the UK, the number of environmentalist hubs has been reduced. This has prompted a reputational snowball that increasingly concentrates environmental resistance in the one city that best insulates the environmental movement from broader depoliticizing forces.

Introduction
Manchester and Bristol share a history as central hubs for radical environmental activism in the UK, going back at least until the early 1990s (Doherty et al., 2007; Diani, 2015). Yet both currently face similar depoliticizing forces depicted across and beyond the country: austerity, anti-squatting laws, police repression and activists’ disillusion with environmentalism (see, e.g. Mason, 2014). Curiously, these conditions have had very different impacts on each environmental scene. In Manchester, they have caused environmental resistance to become replaced almost entirely by non-confrontational ‘alternatives’ like grassroots food or energy initiatives. In Bristol, such alternatives have been proliferating as well, but in synergy with environmental resistance. Consequently, despite similar histories and challenges, Manchester has seen a much stronger depoliticization of its environmental scene. This article explains these different pathways using a comparative approach and explores the complex relation between alternatives, resistance and depoliticization, thereby seeking to contribute to the growing body of literature on the link between cities and social movements (Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017).

Notwithstanding the importance of rural activism, social movements have long been so closely associated with the city—in their origins, constituency, arenas or goals—that the connection between the two has often been taken for granted. Yet recognizing the importance and complexity of this relation, authors have recently started to analyse it in more depth. They show that cities can act as incubators with an abundance of mobilization...
resources and networks where dense interactions between diverse groups of people foster the recognition of injustices and the imagination of change (Nicholls, 2008; Uitermark and Nicholls, 2013; Nicholls and Uitermark, 2016). According to Miller and Nicholls (2013: 455), ‘The principal problem social movements must confront is how to build the relationships that enable political mobilization. Cities are where the conditions that foster these relationships are most frequently found.’

Few scholars, however, have compared cities to assess why some foster this kind of politicization far more clearly, while depoliticization appears to be a more dominant force in others. The emphasis has been on case studies of cities with a distinctively activist character, describing the urban qualities that relate to activism in them (see e.g. Nicholls and Uitermark, 2016). Few studies have compared activist cities with cities that share many of the same qualities but have distinctly lower levels of activism. Grappling with these differences raises temporal as much as spatial questions (Routledge, 2010). At different points in time, the balance between politicizing and depoliticizing forces shifts. The real question therefore is why, during certain periods, this balance shifts more strongly in one direction in some cities than in others, or why politicization prevails in some while depoliticization dominates in others.

This article addresses this question and thereby speaks to persistent concerns about the ‘depoliticization’ of society. While some (e.g. Dalton, 2017; Norris, 2011) depict a rise in political protest and the emergence of a ‘social movement society’ (Meyer and Tarrow, 2002), others argue that society has in recent decades become increasingly ‘post-political’ (Mouffe, 2005; Žižek, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2014). Even if political participation is spreading, it is increasingly constrained to reformism and less about presenting a radical challenge to the neoliberal status-quo (Swyngedouw, 2005; 2009; Blühdorn, 2013). By comparing politicization and depoliticization in different cities, we can better grasp how urban contexts shape the local expression of post-politics, and how local movements deal differently with challenges like repression, austerity and co-optation. The article builds on these established models to ask why they work out differently across cities. Drawing on the work of Paul Routledge (2010; 2017) and others (e.g. Dikeç, 2001), I argue that spatial characteristics of cities are key in making some cities more resilient to the challenges outlined above. This competitive advantage can set in motion a reputational snowballing by which these cities become increasingly dominant hubs. In particular, synergies between relatively strong resistance and alternatives make for dynamic ‘movement scenes’ (Leach and Haunss, 2009) that attract resources from other cities.

In what follows, I first give a more detailed account of how, from a theoretical point of view, politicization and depoliticization may sometimes be understood as shifts from resistance to ‘grassroots solutions’ or ‘alternatives’. Next, I discuss the way in which scholars have understood cities as incubators for social movements and resistance, as well as spaces for depoliticization. I then present my argument for a comparative approach to understanding spatially and historically differentiated patterns of politicization and depoliticization within and between cities and introduce the comparison of Manchester and Bristol. I focus on the grassroots environmental movement because it is one of the defining movements in these cities and one in which depoliticization has taken place most profoundly (Swyngedouw, 2009; Kenis and Lievens, 2014; Blühdorn, 2017). Finally, I discuss the study’s main findings and conclusions.

**Politicization and depoliticization in the city**

Discussions of politicization and depoliticization have typically drawn from critical (urban) theory that distinguishes ‘the political’ from the ‘post-political’, where depoliticization indicates an evolution from the former to the latter (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2013; Swyngedouw, 2014). Notwithstanding important variations, most interpretations depict the political as a moment in which the political status quo is challenged at a fundamental level—the ‘post-political’ is the systematic foreclosure of
that moment (Mouffe, 2005; Žižek, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2009). Activism, then, can also be political or post-political, with the former creating ‘the moment in which a particular demand is not simply part of the negotiation of interests but aims at something more, and starts to function as the metaphoric condensation of the global restructuring of the entire social space’ (Žižek, 2000: 208). In line with the aims of the article, I focus on the ways in which the political has been operationalized to distinguish post-political from political environmental activism, and to depict politicization and depoliticization in the city.

The political and post-political in environmental activism have been defined on the basis of three main dimensions: ideology, theory of social change, and forms of action (de Moor et al., forthcoming). First, authors have assessed whether environmentalists are informed by radical political ideas, like a transformative critique of capitalism, or by mainstream ideas of ecological modernization that fit comfortably within business as usual (Urry, 2011; Schlembach et al., 2012). Some of them observe a broad shift from the former to the latter, which Blühdorn (2013) defines as post-ecologism (see Kenis and Lievens (2014) for a comparison of post-ecologism and post-politics). Others depict the rise of the climate justice and de-growth movements that contain radical critiques of capitalism as indicating parallel but opposite developments (Chatterton et al., 2013; Swyngedouw, 2014).

Second, some define environmentalism as political or post-political on the basis of activists’ theory of social change and, in particular, of their embrace or rejection of agonism as a form of citizenship (Mouffe, 2005). Some groups like Transition Towns may be motivated by political ideas (Urry, 2011), but their insistence that social change will emerge from collaboration and consensus around a broadly agreed notion of sustainability and that oppositional strategies are counterproductive, makes their theory of change post-political (Chatterton and Cutler, 2008; Kenis and Lievens, 2014; Kenis, 2016). Properly ‘political’ groups embrace agonism as a necessary means to social change. By extension, the third dimension of the political/post-political distinction covers whether an embrace of agonism will lead to strategies that emphasize the use of contentious forms of action or resistance, including political protest, civil disobedience and direct action (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2013; Kenis, 2016). While contentious action is not the only way to express agonism, the depoliticization of institutional politics does make the protest arena a privileged space. Note, however, that contentious actions are used to express a ‘scientized’, post-political interpretation of environmental problems just as well (Schlembach et al., 2012).

One of the most commonly depicted ways in which these dimensions of the post-political are seen to manifest themselves in environmentalism is through a shift from more direct forms of resistance to grassroots ‘alternatives’ for sustainability (Kenis, 2016; Alkon and Guthman, 2017). Some alternatives are described as void of properly political ideas (Kenis and Lievens, 2014). Other groups, like the abovementioned Transition Towns, use alternatives to promote solutions rather than opposition (Chatterton and Cutler, 2008; Kenis and Lievens, 2014; Kenis, 2016). And some alternatives-oriented groups do underline the importance of agonism, but experience that alternatives and contentious action present trade-offs when pursued within a single organization (de Moor et al., forthcoming). Therefore, the spread of alternatives has commonly been considered a main indicator of depoliticization.

This analysis is in line with more general discussions of depoliticization as a process by which movements are co-opted as service-providing extensions of the government (Mayer, 2013; Blühdorn, 2017). According to Uitermark and Nicholls, depoliticization, or policing as they call it using Rancière’s term, occurs when:

civil society becomes part of a seamless web of governance rather than an uncontrollable site of multiple resistances … One sign that this is happening is that actors put less effort in organizing constituents and focus instead on managing concrete social problems in cooperation with state administrators (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2013: 976).
The distinction between alternatives and resistance, and their relation to politicization and depoliticization makes sense intuitively—as contentious activities that directly challenge authorities versus the ‘co-production’ of solutions. Yet, conceptually, the picture is more complex. First, some have argued that the distinction between alternatives and resistance is at best blurred. Asara (2017) contends that there is little consensus on the definition of resistance, except that it involves opposition, which, in Gramscian terms, implies counter-hegemonic action, closely linking it to notions of the political (cf. Mouffe, 2005). Yet, while resistance typically triggers images of contentious action, or what Snow (2004) has defined as ‘direct resistance’, challenges to authority can also take the form of ‘indirect resistance’, thereby including certain alternatives. In 1973 Gene Sharp’s classical work on nonviolent action already identified various types of alternatives as resistance through ‘intervention’. More recently, Eric Olin Wright (2010: 228) depicted alternatives not as opposed to conflict, but as ‘interstitial strategies’ that pursue ‘the incremental modification of the underlying structures of a system and its mechanisms of social reproduction that cumulatively transform the system’. For instance, alternatives can be organized as commons that challenge the commodifying nature of capitalism (see e.g. Chatterton, 2010; Chatterton et al., 2013).

Though complex, however, the distinction that many make between resistance and alternatives is not unfounded. Some question whether even those alternatives with radical intentions are likely to deliver a genuine threat to the status quo. Olin Wright (2010: 231) paraphrases this common concern as follows:

While many of these efforts at building alternative institutions may embody desirable values and perhaps even prefigure emancipatory forms of social relations, they pose no serious challenge to existing relations of power and domination. Precisely because these are ‘interstitial’ they can only occupy spaces that are ‘allowed’ by capitalism. They may even strengthen capitalism by siphoning off discontent and creating the illusion that if people are unhappy with the dominant institutions they should just go off and live their lives in alternative settings.

He goes on to criticize this view for overlooking that other strategies have seldom proven to be much more impactful, but he agrees that the interstitial strategy commonly underlying alternatives has shortcomings and ought to be complemented by others. This need is sometimes recognized by activists and we do often find that alternatives relate positively to more direct forms of resistance, constituting synergies between them that may increase their impact (Alkon and Guthman, 2017; de Moor, 2017). Harvey (2012) notes, for instance, that networks engaged in producing alternatives often form the social bases through which communities become politicized and can sustain more direct forms of resistance. Conversely, Smith and Stirling (2018) argue that systems under pressure, for example from direct resistance, are more likely to adopt alternatives, thus advancing the latter’s ‘diffusion’. Yet, as discussed above, such positive relations do not always occur because of strategic, ideological or practical trade-offs.

In sum, it is conceptually difficult to distinguish alternatives from resistance, and to the extent that alternatives are motivated by radical, interstitial ideas, it is not obvious to define their emergence as depoliticization. Yet alternatives often lack such ‘political’ motivations, and their focus on solutions is sometimes accompanied by a denunciation of the ‘negativity’ of resistance. Moreover, even if some alternatives do pursue radical goals, on their own they are often considered unlikely to put regimes under sufficient pressure to generate radical change. Arguably, their radical potential increases in synergy with more direct forms of resistance. Alternatives can thus signify depoliticization in two ways: first, they can lack radical intentions; second, they can replace rather than complement direct resistance. Cases that do both can, of course, be
associated with depoliticization most clearly. While the (lack of) alternatives’ radical intentions has been fairly well studied, there is a clear need for further investigation into why alternatives sometimes replace, and sometimes emerge in synergy with, direct resistance (hereafter ‘resistance’ for short).

**Cities and politicization/depoliticization**

Recent work on cities and social movements shows that urban context is a useful starting point to address this question. In particular, I explore the idea that cities moderate some of the more general depoliticizing forces, such as the post-political condition, increasing (police) repression, and the related spread of austerity politics (Mouffe, 2005; Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). The latter may sometimes create grievance, but it also diminishes resources for mobilization or may push groups to become co-opted as service providers. These factors are roughly equal across places that nevertheless show differentiated patterns of politicization and depoliticization. We must therefore ask: Which conditions moderate the impact of these forces? What urban conditions insulate social movements from depoliticizing forces? And where are movements more exposed to them? This is where the recently growing literature on cities and social movements comes in particularly useful.

The link between cities and social movements has long been studied by scholars working on the intersection of urban studies and social movement research (e.g. Pickvance, 2003; Nicholls, 2008; Uitermark, 2012; Mayer, 2013; Andretta et al., 2015; Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017), drawing in particular on the pioneering work of Henri Lefebvre (1968) and Manuel Castells (1983). Yet only recently has the urban become seen as ‘a means to an end rather than an end in its own right’ (Miller and Nicholls, 2013: 453; see also Routledge, 2010; Uitermark, 2012).

Routledge (2010) notes that the urban should not be privileged over other scales or spaces, but, as centres of power and capitalist development, cities often provide key places of resistance. Moreover, in them we find spaces where exclusion and injustices are directly experienced (Nicholls and Uitermark, 2016). At the same time, through the density and diversity of social relations in cities, individual grievances can be translated into universalized understandings of systemic injustices whilst cities also provide many of the resources needed to mobilize around identified injustices (Chatterton, 2010; Nicholls and Uitermark, 2016; Dikeç and Swyngedouw, 2017). In cities, groups with strong ties develop political understandings, collective identities and solidarity, whilst weak ties between groups ensure the circulation of resources and the ability to develop more massive collective challenges (Gould, 1995; Nicholls, 2008). Cities are therefore seen as the ‘relational incubators’ of social movements. Cities that are particularly successful in playing this role can become ‘activist hubs’ (Nicholls and Uitermark, 2016) by perpetually generating and attracting more activism.

If politicization has an important urban dimension, then, unsurprisingly, efforts at depoliticization do so too. That is, ‘policing’ through ‘governmental technologies, rationalities and arrangements … developed to align subjects with the state … become especially important where contentiousness might bubble from the grassroots, as is the case in cities’ (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2013: 975–6).

Yet these arguments still do not tell us much about why processes of politicization and depoliticization may unfold differently between cities. Indeed, many of the arguably politicizing characteristics of cities discussed above, such as that large cities are most likely to contain key resources, are found within and without distinct ‘rebel cities’. Such explanations may therefore explain why certain social movements tend to originate in cities rather than in the countryside, but they tell us little about why some cities are more important in this regard than others.

More comparative studies of similar cities with varying patterns of politicization and depoliticization are therefore needed. Plenty of studies have, of course, compared
social movements between cities (e.g. Doherty et al., 2007; Diani, 2015), but few have tried to explain those varying patterns. Some analyse multiple cities’ effects on social movements, but do not systematically compare them to explain differences (Novy and Colomb, 2013; Uitermark and Nicholls, 2013; de Moor, 2016). Those that have done emphasize the impact of political opportunity structures on depoliticization and demobilization through the impacts of repression and co-optation (Eisinger, 1973; Pruijt, 2003; Nicholls and Uitermark, 2016). They argue that cities will try to pacify radical elements of society by incorporating them into the state apparatus by providing funding and institutional access, thereby turning them into service providers or advisory organizations. Groups ultimately become dependent on these resources, which limits their capacity to challenge those authorities that have now become their patrons. This is also a well-known pattern in literature on environmental movements (Giugni and Grasso, 2015). Nonetheless, these explanations are insufficient in the present comparison. Environmental groups in Bristol and Manchester both face co-optative forces—anything, Bristol, with its stronger resistance scene, more than Manchester. Additional explanations are therefore needed.

A promising avenue for looking beyond these socio-political factors, therefore, is to take into account the spatial and material dimensions of the urban environment (Dikeç, 2001; Routledge, 2010). Dikeç and Routledge advance the notion that there are four key spatial dimensions to urban activism. First, the space from which people act offers the material conditions for mobilization. Indeed, cities’ layout, size, density, etc. have strategic importance for organizing and sustaining collective action, and therefore ‘should be known’ by activists (Routledge, 2017). Second, activists make space, such as through squatting, to support their organizing and the development of social relations on the basis of emotional responses, trust, solidarity, and cooperation (e.g. Chatterton, 2010). Within these spaces, key activists can perform their relational work to ensure the convergence of struggles, for instance by organizing meetings or using the space as a communication hub (Cumbers et al., 2008). This, third, is the crucial infrastructural work that allows movements to act in space, such as through public forms of protest. Finally, as activists act upon space, they impose their identity on it, thereby appropriating it for their needs. In particular, empowerment follows as activists come to be more and more in place, developing a territorialized identity.

Such spatial elements differ strongly between cities. Therefore, they are more likely candidates to explain the differences between cities, especially within countries, than factors like repression or austerity. Again, this is not to say that factors like the post-political condition, austerity and co-optation are irrelevant—quite the contrary. Following Routledge (2010), we can expect these factors to unfold as mediated by cities’ spatial and material characteristics. The study presented here is not the first to explore these ideas, yet it is one of the first to assess this argument from a comparative point of view to explain variations in politicization between cities (Thörn (2012) showed earlier that spatial characteristics interact with political opportunity structures in affecting urban movements’ longevity). I will argue that the complex relation between alternatives and depoliticization is shaped by the spatial qualities of the urban context in which alternatives emerge, because these factors moderate the impact of the abovementioned general challenges on environmental movement scenes.

**Politicization and depoliticization in Manchester and Bristol**

In studying Manchester and Bristol, I focus on participatory rather than professional groups as their presence tells us more about conditions for grassroots political organization than the presence or absence of professional NGOs does. After a brief history of activism in Manchester and Bristol, I discuss how data was collected. I then present an analysis of depoliticization in Manchester and present the case of Bristol to identify urban characteristics that generate distinct pathways of depoliticization.
— A brief history of two British environmentalist hubs

Manchester and Bristol both play important roles in the modern history of radical politics in the UK: Marxism and the suffragist movement have roots in Manchester, and Bristol played a central role in nineteenth-century abolitionism. Without drawing any direct lines between these movements and more recent environmentalism, it is clear that both cities have long proven to be conducive to social movements. During the 1990s both cities became hubs in the national environmental resistance scene, which emerged first around anti-road campaigns and became linked in a loose national network of environmental direct action (EDA) groups as ‘Earth First!’ (Doherty et al., 2007).

Between 1995 and 2000, Manchester annually saw 20–40 EDA events, particularly occupations, blockades and demonstrations (ibid.). These campaigns targeted air pollution, new roads and, most notably, the expansion of Manchester Airport. Manchester activists also participated in numerous EDA events elsewhere in the UK. This community built on an existing local countercultural scene and a longer history of direct action. While Doherty et al. noticed a decline in EDA activism around 2000, Manchester remained an environmentalist hub. Earth First! remained a dominant presence in its environmental scene, until in 2006 it made room for an active local Camp for Climate Change group called Manchester Climate Action (Schlembach et al., 2012). This and affiliated groups remained active until 2011, particularly around anti-airport activism. After 2011 environmental resistance largely disappeared from Manchester, despite attempts to continue EDA against fracking under the banner of Reclaim the Power.

Bristol has followed a similar path, but has seen a smaller decrease in environmental resistance in recent years. While Diani (2015: 32) stresses that Bristol has a history of moderate rather than contentious politics, he also depicts ‘a small but very active community of radical activists independent of any formal organization’ (see also Purdue et al., 1997; Brownlee, 2011). During the period of Diani’s research (2000–3), this community was responsible for organizing radical action in Bristol. Since then it has come to be seen as a defining element of environmental action in Bristol. The groups responsible for EDA there resemble those in Manchester, with Earth First! being a key force since the 90s, until the local Camp for Climate Action group took over around 2006. Around 2011 this was, in turn, replaced by anti-fracking groups like Reclaim the Power, which is still highly active in Bristol alongside many other groups like Rising Tide.

— Methods and data

The project underlying this article began in January 2017 with an ethnography of two alternatives-oriented groups in Manchester—the Kindling Trust working on local food, and Carbon Co-op working on energy and retrofit—whose everyday workings I observed as a volunteer for four months. This research revealed that most individuals who had previously been involved in EDA in Manchester had stopped activism, left town or, most importantly, now worked almost exclusively for the studied alternatives (for details see de Moor et al., forthcoming). To better understand this trend, I decided to compare recent trends in the Manchester environmental scene with those in Bristol, which still had a reputation for having a vibrant resistance scene.

Scholars have commonly relied on protest event analysis or membership data to compare contentious action over time and between places. Yet such formal approaches are not very effective in analysing informal grassroots activism. This study therefore relies on the accounts of experienced and centrally located activists who are well positioned to assess trends in activism in both cities. While the interview method may introduce certain (e.g. retrospective) biases, the triangulation of accounts by numerous and diverse witnesses off-sets some of these biases, thus yielding a picture of general trends with a good degree of confidence. Throughout 2017 and 2018, I conducted 43 interviews with experienced activists in both cities. Through snowballing, I identified
activists whom their peers considered to be central in environmental alternatives and resistance during part or all of the three abovementioned periods covered in this study: the ‘Earth First! period’, the ‘Climate Camp period’ and, most recently, a period characterized by anti-fracking and alternatives. I focused on those who have engaged with both resistance and alternatives, as these individuals were likely to have the best point of view from which to identify shifts between the two. Many interviewees were, moreover, familiar with both the Mancunian and the Bristolian environmental scenes and could comment on differences between the cities based on personal experience.

The appendix provides details on the date, location and length of the interviews, the periods covered by interviewees’ activism and their involvement in alternatives and/or resistance. This overview demonstrates that interviewees were well-positioned to comment in recent trends in both environmental scenes. In Manchester I conducted 19 interviews with 16 individual activists who had previously been central to the above-mentioned EDA groups, many of whom now worked for the Kindling Trust and Carbon Co-op. No activists could be identified who were still strongly involved in organizing EDA. In Bristol I interviewed 23 activists and one scholar. In Manchester, two had mainly been involved in alternatives, four in resistance, and ten in both; experience went back to the Earth First! period for nine, to the Climate Camp period for four, and two started more recently. In Bristol, three had mainly been involved in alternatives, nine in resistance, and nine in both; experience went back to the Earth First! period for five, to the Climate Camp period for six, and six started more recently.¹

Most interviews were recorded and transcribed. Four took place in informal settings where recording would have been inappropriate so I took detailed notes. To prepare for, or follow up on, interviews I collected background information on organizations and events mentioned by interviewees. In particular, I collected information from the groups’ websites and social or indie media to obtain details of past events or campaigns, mission statements, and collaborations or allies. Data were closed and open coded using NVivo software.

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Depoliticization within Manchester’s environmental scene

Though accounts vary as regards timing, all interviewees agree that Manchester was once a hub for environmental resistance but no longer is. Many interviewees regret this development because, even though their alternatives have radical intentions, they argue that resistance remains an indispensable part of a dual strategy for social change: one aims at stopping ‘environmental bads’, the other promotes ‘environmental goods’. Environmentalists offer a consistent set of explanations for the shift from resistance to alternatives, which resonates with more general accounts about depoliticization in the UK. They commonly mentioned generational attrition. As activists get older, their motivation, feelings of efficacy and biographical availability for resistance drops. Yet this is a recurring pattern that predates the current trend (Doherty, et al., 2007). The real question is why younger generations have not taken over.

Interviewees stress that, more recently, the ‘traditional activist lifestyle’, which relied on welfare benefits, social housing and squatting, has become impossible. Under austerity, these resources have become much harder to obtain, and squatting has lost its viability as well with laws dating from 2011 that make the occupation of residential buildings illegal.

Moreover, the anti-squatting laws have also had implications as they have restricted opportunities for setting up activist spaces. The Basement, which closed in 2007 due to water damage, is considered by many to be Manchester’s last successful social centre. Because of booming property prices, non-squatted social centres have become increasingly difficult to organize in sufficiently central locations where they

¹ Not all interviewees reported their full activist biography, so these numbers are estimates.
could function as informal meeting spaces. Some argue that Manchester has lacked the skills necessary to run social centres. This disappearing infrastructure has, in turn, created feedback loops as reduced activist resources limit groups’ ability to organize infrastructure. This is consistently referred to in order to explain why environmental resistance in Manchester has disappeared.

On top of that, social movements have in recent years faced increased police repression, including undercover infiltration of activist groups. Moreover, sharp increases in tuition fees are believed to have politically deactivated students, who have traditionally made up an important part of the activist scene. Those who are still active have moved away from environmental issues. The remaining energy for resistance in Manchester is directed to social justice issues.

While one interviewee insisted that co-optation had affected more formal NGOs in the city, it did not emerge as a key explanation for the depoliticization of EDA groups. Manchester’s local political opportunity structure is commonly depicted as particularly unfavourable. The Labour Party has long occupied almost all council seats, and its unrivalled position makes it insensitive to challengers, while its institutional participation opportunities are described as tokenistic (Haughton et al., 2016). The history of disappeared EDA groups is not one of co-optation but of disbandment and of shifting to alternatives. Groups like Kindling Trust and Carbon Co-op occasionally engage in public consultations, but they pride themselves on being able to do so without hiding their radical principles because most of their resources are independent of the council.

Most interviewees regret that, as individuals and groups, they currently lack the capacity to organize resistance campaigns. In the long run, they envision a synergetic relation between alternatives and resistance. First, they describe alternatives as a coping strategy for environmentalism in hard times. Because practical projects around food and energy are able to attract funding and generate revenue, they provide jobs for activists and so offer a solution to some problems caused by austerity. By extension, they hope that, by scaling up, alternatives can eventually generate surpluses that could be directed to oppositional campaigns. One activist said, ‘I think the power is in both [resistance and alternatives], and both working together ... I had a vision for [our project] ... It would be: we’re creating jobs, we’re generating income, we had a surplus. That was going to support young activists or lobbying or movement building’ (interview 12, June 2017).

Plans to realize this have not yet materialized as groups continue to struggle for funding and capacity. Indeed, one of the most depoliticizing aspects of alternatives noticed during observations was the amount of time required by funding applications and project management. Moreover, even if the aspired-to surpluses existed, the groups would struggle to combine the contradictory demands of diffusing alternatives and developing a strong resistance-oriented identity. As one activist argued, ‘If we’re trying to influence the uptake of solutions, then being seen as the opposition ... isn’t particularly productive’. Hence, beyond capacity, these groups also run into more fundamental contradictions that seem to disable synergetic relations between alternatives and resistance within single organizations (this dilemma is discussed in detail in de Moor et al., forthcoming).

There are some exceptions to the decline in environmental resistance in Manchester. In 2013 a campaign emerged around the intended fracking site of Barton Moss in Salford (Greater Manchester), which involved direct action and civil disobedience (Jackson et al., 2019). Around the same time, a protest campaign emerged against the felling of several trees in Manchester’s Alexandra park (Haughton et al., 2016). However, local activists explained that these campaigns were carried out by a mix of local residents with no background in activism and activists from outside Manchester. The degree of continuity between these campaigns and earlier environmental resistance is very limited. Individuals involved in Earth First! and Manchester Climate Action did set up a local Reclaim the Power group against fracking, but argue that with a core of only two to three individuals the group’s capacity has remained limited. None of these
efforts have caused the return of sustained environmental resistance, and so they are exceptions that prove the rule.

The spatial conditions for resistance in Bristol

Interviewees describe similar patterns of depoliticization in Bristol. Here too, many describe, and often regret, an increasing shift from resistance to alternatives. Many alternatives-oriented groups are also organized by former resistance-oriented activists. Unsurprisingly, activists in Bristol also ascribe depoliticization to factors like austerity, anti-squatting laws and repression. Co-optation appears to be of limited importance here as well, despite Bristol's more open political opportunity structure (including a more diverse council with strong Green Party representation and being Europe's 'Green Capital' in 2015). Activists described cooperation with the city as frustrating and typically short-lived, because the city's environmentalism is seen as tokenistic and its collaboration style as dominating.

Because of these similarities, I will focus on what sets Bristol apart. Specifically, unlike those in Manchester, interviewees in Bristol are often still involved in resistance, or can at least identify others who participate in groups that are still very active in environmental resistance. Activists consider environmental resistance to be historically low, but comparatively high. As one interviewee explained, EDA groups have 'kind of stayed consistently in the city for many years and are continuing to do direct action. They still go and shut shit down like pretty regularly and are really involved in a lot of anti-coal stuff, a lot of anti-fracking stuff' (interview 42, March 2018).

So, why has resistance in Bristol maintained more of its original momentum despite exposure to the same 'depoliticizing' forces? Two qualities of the physical urban environment seem particularly relevant. The annotated maps of Manchester and Bristol in Figures 1 and 2 serve to illustrate these points.

First, Bristol has been able to sustain its activist infrastructure more continuously than Manchester has. Maintaining social centres has become more difficult in both cities because of anti-squatting laws and gentrification. Yet in Bristol, activist spaces have remained open more continuously in central locations and have offered sufficient informal meeting space. This, notably, included the Kebele social centre, which (renamed BASE from 2018) still provides a hub for Bristol's strong anarchist scene. BASE is co-operatively owned, which protects it from the forces of gentrification and anti-squatting laws. Other alternative spaces, like Hamilton House, do face financial difficulties related to gentrification but, as of the period of data collection, still embodied Bristol's collective memory of radicalism and had been able to continue playing their incubator function.

This includes the non-material side of the activist infrastructure—i.e. the social networks of (experienced) activists that ensure continuity in activism by giving inductions to newcomers, taking care of communication between groups and individuals, providing care for activists who go through intense experiences and constituting the living memory of the movement, thereby facilitating reflexion and learning. In short, the spaces embody the social fabric that provides continuity within the activist community. In Bristol, the existence of this social fabric is commonly depicted as a key factor in sustaining its resistance, and it is commonly linked to the activist spaces. By contrast, in Manchester the lack of this social fabric is depicted as one of the main reasons for the collapse of resistance. Notably, those setting up new social spaces in Manchester, such as the Partisan Collective, aim precisely to address this caveat, and it will be worth considering its impact on future developments.

Of course, the importance of activist infrastructure has long been recognized in literature on social centres, including in the UK (Chatterton, 2010). A second and more surprising difference is that Bristol has certain basic material qualities—in particular its size—'from which', to use Dikeç's term, sustaining resistance is easier
than in Manchester. Bristol’s urban area is significantly smaller than Manchester’s (144 km² as compared to 630 km²), and the neighbourhoods where most activists live, such as Easton and St Werburgh’s, are located centrally and close to each other. Consequently, activists more easily run into one another and more easily constitute a dominant presence in certain parts of the city. This facilitates organizing and mobilization and helps create a sense of collective identity and critical mass. Certain public spaces, including the ‘J3 roundabout’ on the main cycling route that connects activist neighbourhoods to the city centre and main train station, become important meeting spaces. The same goes for nightlife. As one Bristol activist concluded: ‘your socializing is political here. You just go to the pub and you bump into loads of people and inadvertently shit happens’ (interview 42, March 2018). Here, not only are existing ties strengthened, but new ties are established as well.

Such village-like conditions have of course been found in radical neighborhoods in much larger cities than Bristol, for example in Paris, Barcelona, or Berlin. Indeed,
Manchester too has had pockets with high concentrations of activists that may have felt like insurgent villages. Still, activists experience the overall size of the city in which the neighborhoods are embedded as consequential. One Mancunian activist explained:

There’s just less of that direct-action campaigning ... Manchester is a funny place. I think this is one difference to Bristol, it is just of size. Bristol is a smaller place so people get to see each other more. There’s also places, both individual venues like Kebele, but also areas like Easton or wherever else where people meet each other and bump into each other and go around each other’s houses. Manchester is a much bigger size. And although those kinds of campaigning or radical communities have tended to live around South, South Central Manchester, you’re part of a much bigger place, and so there’s less places to bump into each other (interview 18, April 2018).

A Bristolian activist made a similar comparison, adding that Bristol, due in part to its smaller size, makes for a more nourishing environment:
I really like Manchester as a city, but it's big. I grew up in Birmingham. They're just like heavier, harsher, industrial cities ... [Bristol is] a nice place to live. There's green spaces. We can take care of ourselves maybe a little bit better than we would in some places and we can maintain connection informally a lot easier (interview 42, March 2018).

Activists thus stress that smaller cities have organizational benefits. Moreover, Dikeç highlights the importance of acting on space, so that activists shape cities to their needs and imbue them with their identity. Activists’ ability to achieve this, it appears, relates to city size as well. To get the feeling that one’s radical community is a dominant presence in the city, it is not enough to be a dominant presence in just a few pockets. In Bristol, when crossing between various residential neighbourhoods as well as into the city centre, activists are constantly reminded of the importance of radical communities—if not by running into fellow activists, then by the alternative spaces and graffiti that mark the city. One Bristolian activist explained:

The kind of political imaginary of Bristol includes spaces of possibility which enable people to think that other things are possible, that other ways of being and doing are possible. So, some kinds of street art plays into that, some posters, sticker campaigns, like street graffiti. Because the centre is very dense, you see a lot of that on a daily basis. You bump into people. So, there are these kind of, continual reminders which reinforce a sense of possibility (interview 29, November 2017).

This experience was depicted as empowering by some, because it confirms one is not alone in wanting to change society radically. Manchester’s radical communities have shrunk much over time but, even when they flourished, stepping outside was to enter a much larger city where radical environmentalists had a much less significant presence. Clearly, Bristol's more compact size enables activists to feel that to an important degree the city is theirs, in contrast to their Mancunian counterparts, who sometimes indicate that they have always felt more out of place. One Mancunian interviewee added that Manchester's environmental scene had been one of outsiders and had never been able to become rooted in the city’s socialist political culture. By contrast, Bristol's liberal political culture had arguably provided a more natural habitat for environmentalists.

In sum, as activists in both cities face considerable challenges, their coping abilities have been tested. In Manchester, due to disappearing meeting spaces and its size, both formal and informal meetings became a challenge, thus complicating mobilization and organization to the point that activism dwindled. As remaining energy was invested in alternatives, resources to organize direct resistance largely disappeared. In Bristol, enduring social centres and the compactness of the city ensured that basic infrastructural dynamics underlying activism, including formal and informal meeting, could continue.

However, these spatial differences have historically not been decisive. Manchester has always been larger than Bristol, and after its main social centre closed in 2007, its environmental resistance scene still continued for years. The question that emerges, therefore, is why these differences have become more decisive in recent years.

— An attractive reputation

To answer this question, we need to look beyond cities as isolated entities, approaching them rather as connected and as embedded within a national context. The more general patterns of depoliticization and the decline of environmentalism in the UK already described have implications for the number of activist hubs that can be maintained. Activist hubs require a critical mass, so if the overall energy available in a system reduces, so must the number of hubs. Under these conditions, previously
indecisive differences, such as Bristol’s spatial advantage, become decisive, creating a flow of activists to this one place.

This sets in motion a snowball effect by which a place’s reputation becomes magnified, attracting more activist energy and so on. Bristol’s spatial advantages, together with its reputation of being an ‘interesting’ city to live in with a vibrant alternative culture and numerous employers in the academic, creative and NGO sectors, may have provided its initial advantage (Purdue et al., 1997; Reed and Keech, 2019). In turn, this has become inflated by setting in motion Bristol’s reputational snowball. Most Bristolian interviewees described that they, as well as many activists they know, were attracted to Bristol’s reputation. This is most clearly exemplified by one activist who was a central figure in Manchester Climate Action, and whose move to Bristol was depicted as both symptomatic and responsible for a drop in Manchester’s environmental resistance and Bristol’s continuity.

Alternatives, synergy, and the sustainability of resistance

The way Bristol has managed to retain and absorb environmental resistance has also shaped the impact of the proliferation of alternatives it has seen. We saw that, in Manchester, there is still a motivation to engage in resistance, but for the reasons discussed above, a limited capacity to transform this motivation into mobilization. This obviously constrains the realization of synergies between alternatives and resistance that environmentalists envision, and so the emergence of alternatives becomes more readily interpretable as depoliticization. In contrast, because alternatives and resistance exist side by side in Bristol, synergies can emerge between the two, which has been to the benefit of both, and therefore further contributes to Bristol’s activist reputation.

Through Bristol’s activist spaces, we see the emergence of weak ties between Bristol’s alternatives and resistance scenes. These ties facilitate several synergetic relations between them. Activists have many opportunities to move from alternatives to resistance and back, which ensures that participatory resources are shared between the two scenes. Alternatives have functioned as gateways into resistance, and through resistance, many activists have developed a desire to develop alternatives. For instance, in 2011 a Tesco supermarket in Stoke’s Croft became the target of a local campaign against gentrification and capitalism. For some participants, the campaign created an interest in alternative food systems. In turn, in 2014 local food growers became engaged in a campaign against a road planned on a fertile piece of land used for allotments and other growing projects called the Blue Finger. In 2015 this campaign escalated into direct action when protesters occupied the trees that were to be cut down to make place for the road. While the growers initiated the occupation, they called in the help of the local EDA community, who helped them set up and sustain the occupation. Growers relied on ties they had with groups like Rising Tide. Through this episode, many who had previously been exclusively involved in alternatives became and stayed involved in resistance. As one key organizer of the occupation explained:

I think what’s happened is that quite a lot of people were radicalized or bumped across the activist spectrum through their experience. So, I think very early on we had like two people who are up for getting arrested in the group ... But every single person who spent a night’s sleep in the trees then said they were willing to do it. That there was something about actually going up in the tree, spending a night in the trees that they’ve changed and they didn’t come back the same (interview 40, February 2018).

The campaign ultimately failed to stop the road development. Nonetheless, the case demonstrates how environmental resistance groups played a significant part in defending grassroots initiatives. The growers had a mobilization demand that the
resistance community could supply. Consequently, the campaign injected new blood into the EDA community.

When asked to speculate on whether the environmental movement in Manchester would be able to pull off a similar campaign if one of their projects was threatened in a similar way, interviewees imagined they could, pointing to their EDA experience. At the same time, they also recognized that their capacity is already stretched by their projects, and that they would not know which allies within Manchester they could call upon. Notably, one interviewee suggested they might have to call on England’s wider EDA community, in particular the community in Bristol.

These emerging links between alternatives and resistance create several additional benefits. Oppositional activists describe their involvement in alternatives as important for their mental well-being as being engaged in ‘positive projects’ is a welcome variation to the ‘negative’ and often stressful nature of resistance.

It seems to me that it’s important to actually have your finger in both sides of it ... Our backs are to the wall very much in coming to the resistance in terms of big wins. They don’t come very often. And so it feels important in terms of my own psychology and morale to do some creative things as well ... So, it doesn’t feel as though they exist side by side. It just feels as though they’re an integrated part of a whole to me (interview 25, November 2017).

For some, being involved in alternatives even provides them with a livelihood, so that they can spend unpaid time in resistance. They also see alternatives as sources of legitimacy and expertise. Campaigners can point to grassroots initiatives to argue that there are viable alternatives, and groups’ practical experience with alternative food and energy systems exposes systemic flaws that can function as sites for resistance. In turn, the alternatives work with the resistance groups to defend their alternatives from external threats, such as in the case of the Blue Finger occupation. Likewise, community energy groups link up with anti-fossil fuel activists to campaign against funding cuts in their sector.

These links were enabled by the many informal meetings between likeminded people in Bristol. These are not only enabled by the described spaces and material qualities, but also by many initiatives that span the alternatives-resistance divide. The Blue Finger occupation was enabled in part by links between food growers and EDA participants who were both involved in Bristol’s ‘Shift Course’ that trains participants to become drivers of sustainability in society. Interviewees referred to numerous other cases of meetings or coalitions that made such links possible. Many interviewees also played a role as brokers between the resistance and alternatives scenes.

Thus, while alternatives and resistance form somewhat detached scenes that sometimes view each other with suspicion, it is clear that plenty weak ties and synergies exist between them that help advance both. This in turn further contributes to Bristol’s ‘magnetism’ and centrality in the national environmental movement. In contrast, in Manchester activists involved in alternatives recognize the potential of such synergies as well but find few opportunities to realize them.

The causes and consequences of spatially differentiated politicization and depoliticization

This article shows that the characteristics that set Bristol apart from Manchester are subtle and have historically not caused a marked difference in activism between the cities. Until recently, both cities functioned as national hubs for environmental resistance. It appears that differences have become inflated more recently as the capacity to maintain multiple hubs has declined as a result of more general challenges faced by British social movements, such as austerity, anti-squatting laws and repression, as well
as the additional ones faced by environmentalists. Under these circumstances, fewer hubs for environmental resistance can be maintained, causing the subtle advantages that are considered to have armoured Bristol's activist scene against some of these challenges, to become decisive in attracting environmental activists from other cities. This trend has set in motion a reputational snowball by which the city attracted more and more activists, increasing its attractiveness, and so on.

The two spatial characteristics that appear most decisive in shaping differentiated patterns of depoliticization are the continuity in Bristol's activist infrastructure and the city's spatial characteristics—in particular its size. The infrastructure provides continuity in activism, despite the mentioned challenges. And it is Bristol's compactness that, even if activist energy is dwindling, holds likeminded people in a sufficiently dense concentration to create a critical mass that can sustain an active resistance community and enables frequent informal contacts that are experienced as empowering. This, in turn, allows for the abovementioned synergies between resistance and alternatives to take effect, which further helps both scenes to sustain themselves.

This concentration of activism in one place raises several critical questions. Whilst spatial concentration appears to be a vital asset for a movement in decline, it also creates marked vulnerabilities. Within Bristol, firstly, it accelerates the well-known gentrification pressures that can cause spaces of resistance to collapse (Harvey, 2012). Secondly, the rapid inflow of people wanting to participate in environmental resistance has at times shifted the balance between energy invested in the infrastructure that sustains activism and the campaigns that draw upon it. One interviewee explained:

I used to resist that everyone wanted to come to Bristol because ... we were deskilling other parts of the UK ... We had infrastructure in place and active groups and a really, like, do-it attitude ... Maybe the infrastructure ... wasn't as strong a foundation as we needed it to be to handle that new energy ... When people were drawn to the city, there's this excitement and there's this kind of youth rebellion which is amazing, but people don't always recognize the hard, boring work that goes on in sustaining community, ... networks and ... infrastructure (interview 42, March 2018).

As this quote suggests as well, the concentration of activists in Bristol has implications beyond the city. Most campaigns organized by Bristolian groups take place outside Bristol. A case in point is Reclaim the Power. Bristol had a strong involvement in the anti-fracking campaign at Preston New Road, which is located close to Manchester and therefore provided a mobilization opportunity for Mancunian environmentalists. On the issue, an environmentalist from Manchester commented that ‘I feel like Bristol has more of an activist scene ... Maybe that's OK. Maybe that's important rather than to spread ourselves out too thinly’ (interview 14, February 2018). However, others do worry that current environmental challenges are too great to be left to one city and that, in the absence of local groups organizing resistance, valuable participatory resources are left unused.

These findings have five main implications for the wider scholarship on depoliticization, cities and social movements. First, they confirm the importance of several elements identified in previous case studies, such as the availability of social spaces where relations of trust can be built and collective action can be organized (Andretta et al., 2015). It raises the question, however, why this kind of infrastructure can be maintained longer, more consistently or more centrally in some cities than in others.

Second, the current study has also identified explanations that have been overlooked so far. In particular, the physical qualities of a city like its size and the layout of its neighbourhoods have so far been largely neglected. Bristol's compactness increases the density of activists, which facilitates informal meetings and a sense of
Collective identity and empowerment. The size of cities may thus come with a trade-off. Existing studies have suggested that large cities are more likely to harbour important relational (and other) resources (Nicholls and Uitermark, 2016)—the larger the better. However, this study suggests that compactness has key benefits as well. There appears to be a sweet spot between a minimal size that ensures the presence of resources, and a compactness that facilitates their use and spread through the empowering experience of everyday interactions with fellow activists.

For now, this observation raises more questions than it answers. Previous research has shown patterns of politicization and depoliticization in smaller and larger cities alike. Hence, under what conditions are smaller or larger cities more favourable? The present study suggests that a smaller city may be more favourable for movements at the lower ends of a cycle of collective action. As radical and environmental activism face challenges across the UK, Bristol’s compactness appears to offer shelter. By contrast, at the peak of a mobilization cycle, larger cities may provide more resources in absolute terms that allow mobilizations to grow largest, additionally offering an appealing backdrop as centres of power. Future research is required to explore this hypothesis further.

Third, this study also finds that certain previously proposed comparative explanations in some cases fall short. Specifically, commonly considered political opportunity structures did not come out as relevant in this comparison. Repression was experienced in very similar ways in both cities. Co-optation was relevant in both, but in comparative terms did not have its commonly expected effect. Though Bristol’s more favourable political context would be expected to lead to greater co-optation, I found it to be the more radical environmental scene. Because this study has not been designed to test the relevance of co-optation, these findings should not be interpreted as falsification. Yet a possibility worth exploring in future research is that the way in which facilitative political contexts foster moderate environmental groups may not crowd out but spill over into radical activism. The synergies between alternatives and resistance described in this article underline the potential of this explanation.

Fourth, echoing previous work on convergence spaces that connect local and trans-local struggles (e.g. Cumbers et al., 2008), this comparison shows that we cannot fully understand how cities function as incubators if we approach them in isolation. This study has shown that Bristol’s reputation has played a vital role in turning it into the central hub it currently is. Its limited depoliticization is thus directly related to the pull factor it exerts in drawing activists away from other places, like Manchester. As discussed above, this should be seen against the backdrop of a nationally shrinking environmental movement that no longer has enough resources to sustain a critical mass to form hubs in the same number of cities.

Finally, this research provides important insights into the link between the proliferation of alternatives and its meaning for depoliticization. In many recent studies the two have been depicted as closely related to each other (Kenis, 2016), or even as synonyms (Mayer, 2013; Uitermark and Nicholls, 2013). This article shows however that the meaning of this link strongly depends on the urban context in which alternatives emerge. In the case of Manchester, we see that the proliferation of alternatives corresponds with the demise of environmental resistance. By contrast, in Bristol the proliferation of alternatives may signal some move away from resistance, but in no way does it do so in any absolute sense. Rather, Bristol is still home to various active resistance-oriented groups that have various types of synergetic relations with alternatives. While the rise of alternatives has been a depoliticizing zero-sum game in Manchester, in Bristol alternatives and resistance combine to something that can more accurately be described as politicization.

This raises the question of whether, when alternatives and resistance exist side by side in a city, synergies always occur or whether conditions apply. Answering this
question requires additional case studies of cities where both alternatives and resistance exist and comparative analyses to further explore the conditions for synergies to emerge. A further venue for future research is to explore whether, as a result of recent waves of environmental resistance led by Extinction Rebellion, we will see a regrowth of activist hubs and a reversal of some of the depoliticization processes described in this article.

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References
## Appendix—Details of interviews with activists

### Table 1  Interviews with Manchester-based activists

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<thead>
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<th>No.</th>
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<th>Duration (minutes)</th>
<th>Involvement and Experience of Interviewee (anonymized)</th>
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