The Localism Act in London: institutionalising urban divisions

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By decentralising planning powers to local communities, the British Conservative government claims that they are strengthening local democracy and protecting it from the mistakes of big government. In a map-based analysis of the effects of the Localism Act in London, Justinien Tribillon disputes this claim and underlines the reinforcement of urban economic divisions through a new parochialism.

"Good fences make good neighbours," goes an English proverb.

Introduced by the coalition government in December 2010, and having completed its third reading on 31 October 2011, the Localism Act received royal assent on 15 November 2011, opening the way to a profound shift in local policy for England and Wales. This development of neighbourhood planning in England and Wales is the beacon of the "Big Society" agenda launched by David Cameron in 2010. Designed to "fix" Britain – "broken" by the Labour party, its "Big Government" and the welfare state – "Big Society" offers an individualistic approach to policy, where the answer to crime, antisocial behaviour, economic depression, etc., is reduced government and more liberties granted to individuals and "local communities". As Drozdz (2013) puts it: "The Conservatives' stance links localism with the concept of 'Big Society', meaning the non-governmental bodies that make up civil society, including those from the private sector. In the current context of drastic public spending cuts, it falls to "Big Society" to act as a partial substitute for the state in the delivery of public services." The main changes with regard to local governance, according to the Conservative Party, are the suppression of the "entire bureaucratic and undemocratic tier of regional planning" (Conservative Party 2010, p. 74) and, in the words of Eric Pickles (2011), Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the creation of new rights for "communities" in order to "put back the power in the hands of local people". Both spatially and policy-wise, the Localism Act, by promoting the management of collective services at neighbourhood level (Drozdz 2013), represents a limitation of scope to individual local areas, with a tendency to ignore the bigger picture as being the realm of other local authorities, thus calling into question the foundations of society as well as regional and national solidarity. As Neighbourhood Areas are now being constituted and empowered, should we not be questioning how these entities and the groups they represent are formed: do they represent genuine diversity? Or do they instead reinforce boundaries – political, but also social – within the city?

In considering the implementation of the Localism Act in London, this article demonstrates that the coalition government's policy reinforces the exclusionary trend already at work in socio-economically homogeneous "neighbourhoods", while favouring the most socio-economically advantaged populations in London. It argues that the Localism Act, by encouraging "local communities" to constitute themselves as Neighbourhood Areas and drawing spatial boundaries around what they perceive as "their locality", enables social inequalities and urban divisions to be institutionalised in a "bottom-up" process.

Figure 1: Neighbourhood Areas within Greater London in September 2013
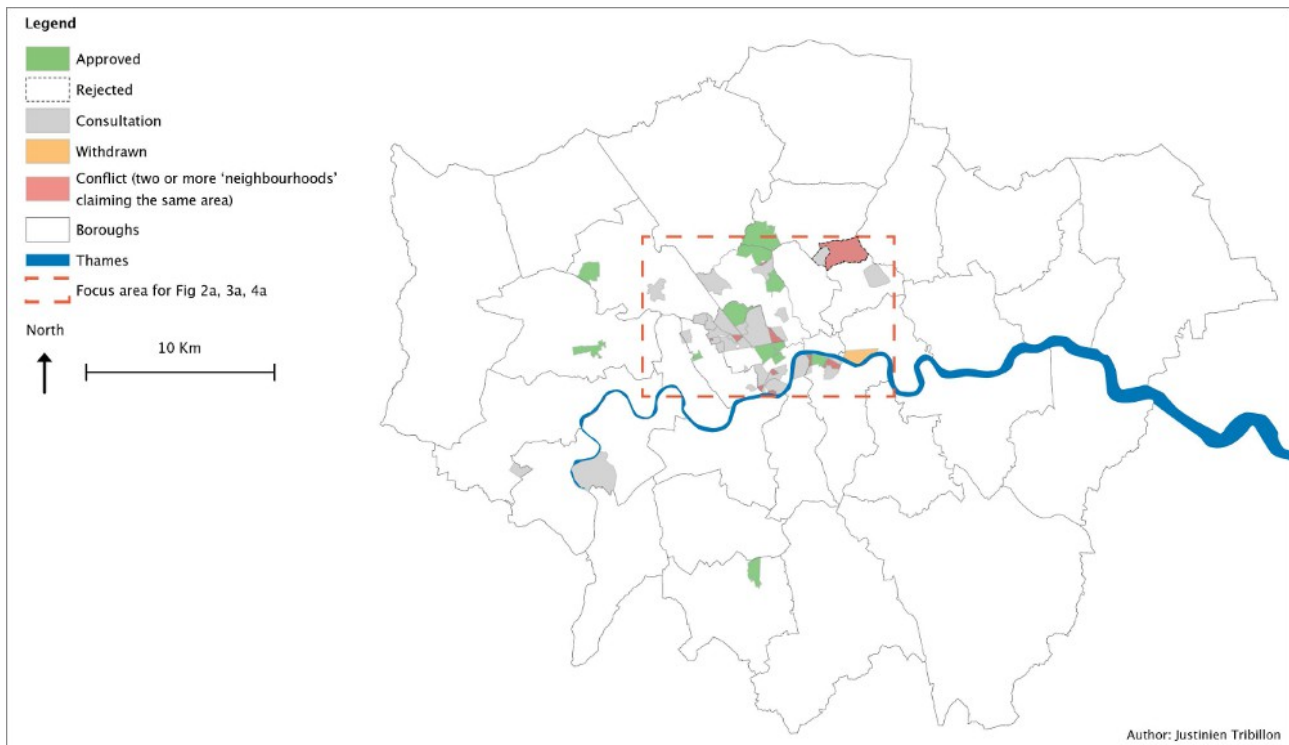
Setting up a Neighbourhood Area

In order to take advantage of the new law, a group of at least 21 people – residents, workers, or businesses – must approach their local planning authority (in London, one of the 32 boroughs or the City of London Corporation) and submit a Neighbourhood Area application. The boundaries of the Area must be drawn by the applicants and supported by a statement describing their relevance (Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012, section 5(1)(a–c)). Subsequently, or at the same time, the applicants must create a Neighbourhood Forum. Regimented by a constitution, the Forum is the managing body of the Area. It should be open to everyone within the Area's boundaries but it only requires a minimum of 21 people to make decisions regarding the Neighbourhood Area, no matter what the size of the area or the number of inhabitants. Unless the application breaches the planning legislation in some way, the local planning authority has virtually no power to stop it. The main mission of the Forum is then to elaborate documents – Neighbourhood Plans – that will impact planning decisions within the Neighbourhood Area. These planning documents must then be approved by a referendum. A majority is needed, but no minimum turnout is required. If the plan is passed, the local planning authority is compelled to enact it. It is up to the Neighbourhood Area to decide what they want to include in the planning documents: they might contain regulations on the height, size or aesthetic features of buildings within the Neighbourhood Area, create or amend commercial and residential zoning, conservation policies, transport issues, etc. Moreover, in certain cases, Neighbourhood Areas can grant planning permission for certain types of developments and also develop their own schemes without going through the standard planning procedures (Community Right to Build).

Fuelled by a Conservative vision of communities, the Localism agenda of the Cameron administration requires a process of "organic" or "bottom-up" self-identification of "neighbourhoods" and a clear demarcation of their borders in order to be approved as Neighbourhood Areas. This means that a necessarily subjective vision of the local urban area is transformed into a clearly demarcated administrative entity, which will impact the locality in the long run. Such a process could threaten an essential property of the urban environment: its diversity. Indeed, in creating these new entities via a "bottom-up" process such as this, will the leaders of the new "neighbourhoods" seek to embrace a broad range of individuals, or will they instead use the

law as a pretext to reinforce already existing excluding processes? Will they enforce spatial segregation based on ethnic and/or socio-economic factors – for example, by pricing out "undesirables"? These questions reveal the simplistic and naïve nature of the law, as it blatantly ignores the complexity of local contexts, and instead relates to "an (idealized) notion of an era when places were (supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities […] The counterposition is anyway dubious, of course; 'place' and 'community' have only rarely been coterminous." (Massey 1994, p. 147).

**Mapping the diversity of London's Neighbourhood Areas**

What are the common traits that bring Londoners together in a Neighbourhood Area?

Three indexes have been used to map London's diversity and compare it to existing Neighbourhood Areas: ethnic diversity by ward, socio-economic diversity by Lower Super Output Area, and the winner by ward of the 2010 mayoral elections.

Ethnic diversity by ward

The first index, calculated by the Greater London Authority (GLA) Intelligence Team, is based on Simpson's diversity index[1] and shows the degree of ethnic diversity by ward.[2]

Figure 2: Neighbourhood Area boundaries and the level of ethnic diversity in Greater and central London, calculated by ward

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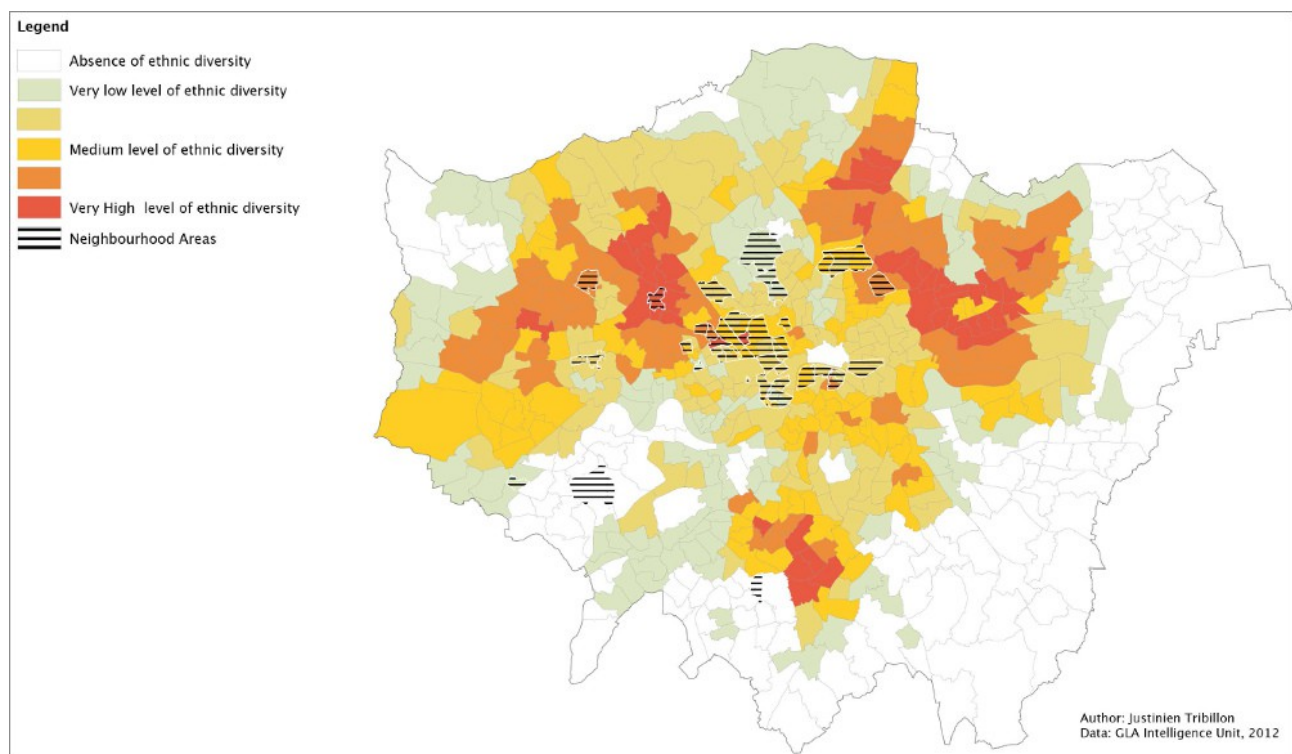
[1]Simpson's diversity index, originally used in ecology, measures the degree of diversity for individuals when classified into categories or types. Here, the GLA Intelligence Team's index calculates ethnic diversity by ward, and helps us to assess the level of diversity in each of the Neighbourhood Areas considered in this article.

[2]Wards are electoral and administrative divisions that are also used for statistical purposes. In London, wards have an average population of 13,078.
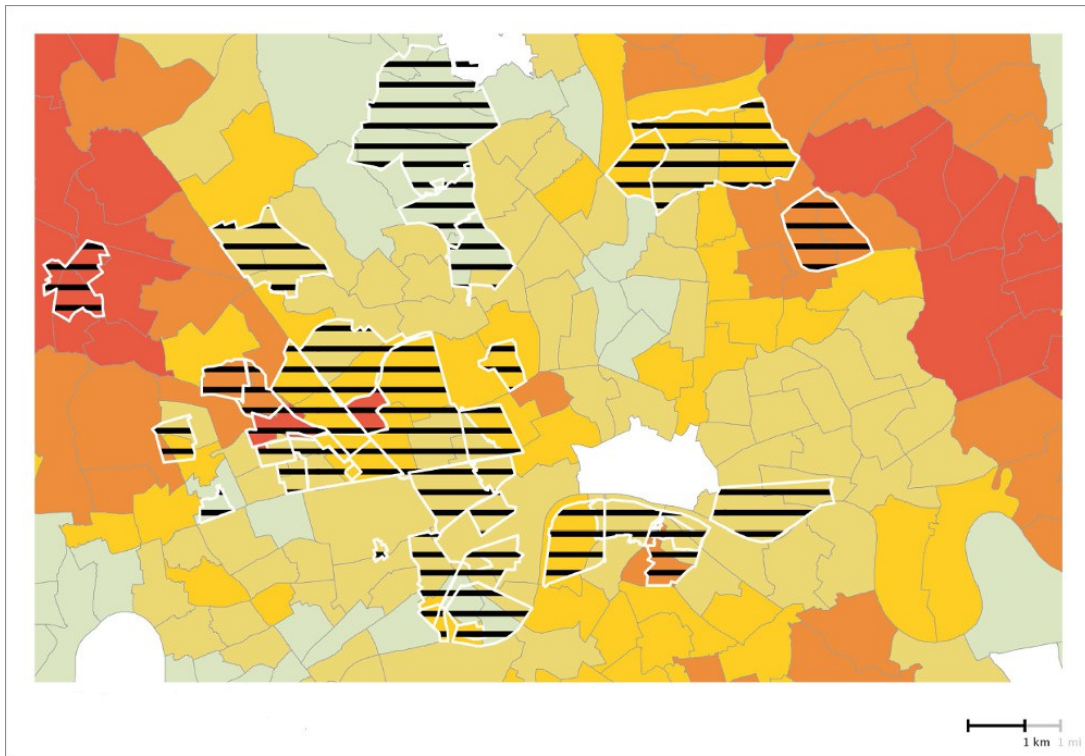
Figure 2 reveals a weak correlation between the level of ethnic diversity and the location of Neighbourhood Areas. Although it appears that they tend to be located in the least ethnically diverse wards, a significant number of these Neighbourhood Areas have also been created within zones displaying a medium to very high level of ethnic diversity. This indicates that Neighbourhood Areas are only weakly correlated to the level of ethnic diversity.

Socio-economic diversity by Lower Super Output Area

The second index, created ad hoc for this research, aims to calculate the socio-economic diversity in London by Lower Super Output Area (LSOA).[3] The Office for National Statistics (ONS) divides professional occupations into nine categories ranging from "Group 1: Managers, Directors and Senior Officials"[4] to "Group 9: Elementary Occupations".[5] The index calculates the ratio of "managers" to "elementary occupations" for each LSOA. By mapping these ratios, we obtain a map of socio-economic diversity in London, based on professional occupations.

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[3]Lower Super Output Areas are statistical units with an average population in London of 1,722.

[4]"Group 1: Managers, Directors and Senior Officials". The ONS gives the following definition of this group: "This major group covers occupations whose tasks consist of planning, directing and coordinating resources to achieve the efficient functioning of organisations and businesses. (…) Most occupations in this major group will require a significant amount of knowledge and experience of the production processes, administrative procedures or service requirements associated with the efficient functioning of organisations and businesses."

[5]"Group 9: Elementary Occupations". The ONS gives the following definition of this group: "This major group covers occupations which require the knowledge and experience necessary to perform mostly routine tasks, often involving the use of simple hand-held tools and, in some cases, requiring a degree of physical effort. Most occupations in this major group do not require formal educational qualifications but will usually have an associated short period of formal experience-related training."

Figure 3: Neighbourhood Area boundaries and the level of socio-economic diversity in Greater and central London, calculated by Lower Super Output Area (LSOA)
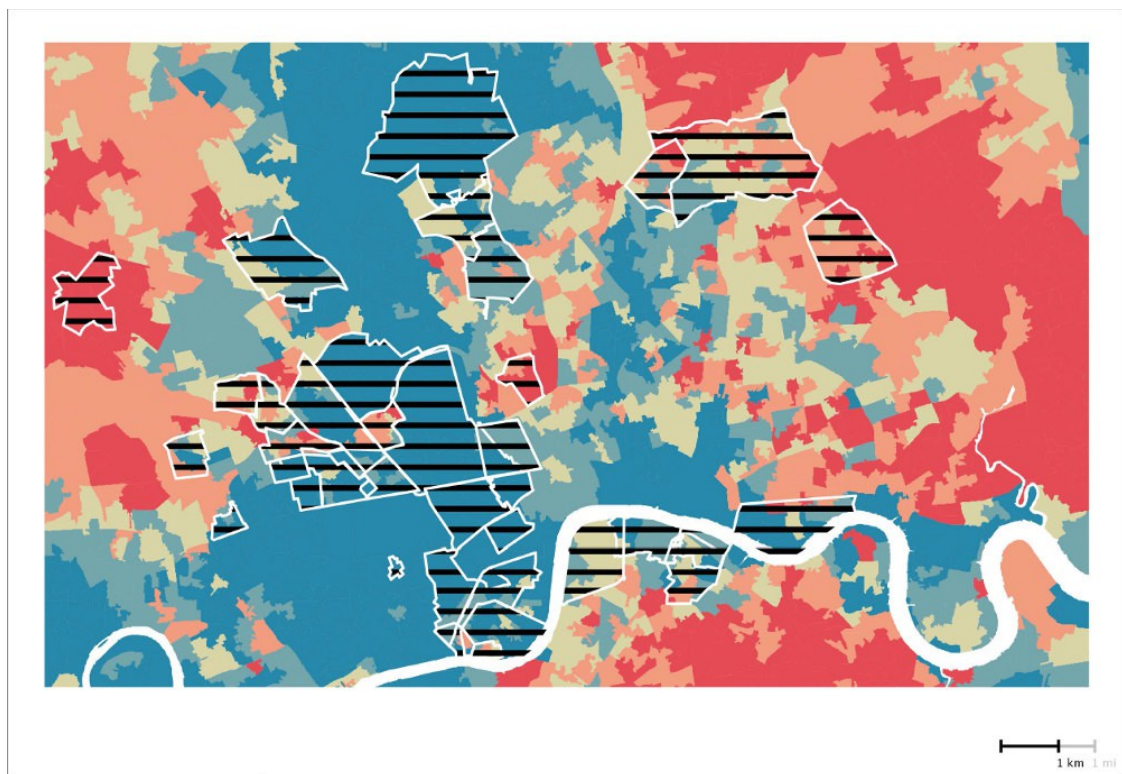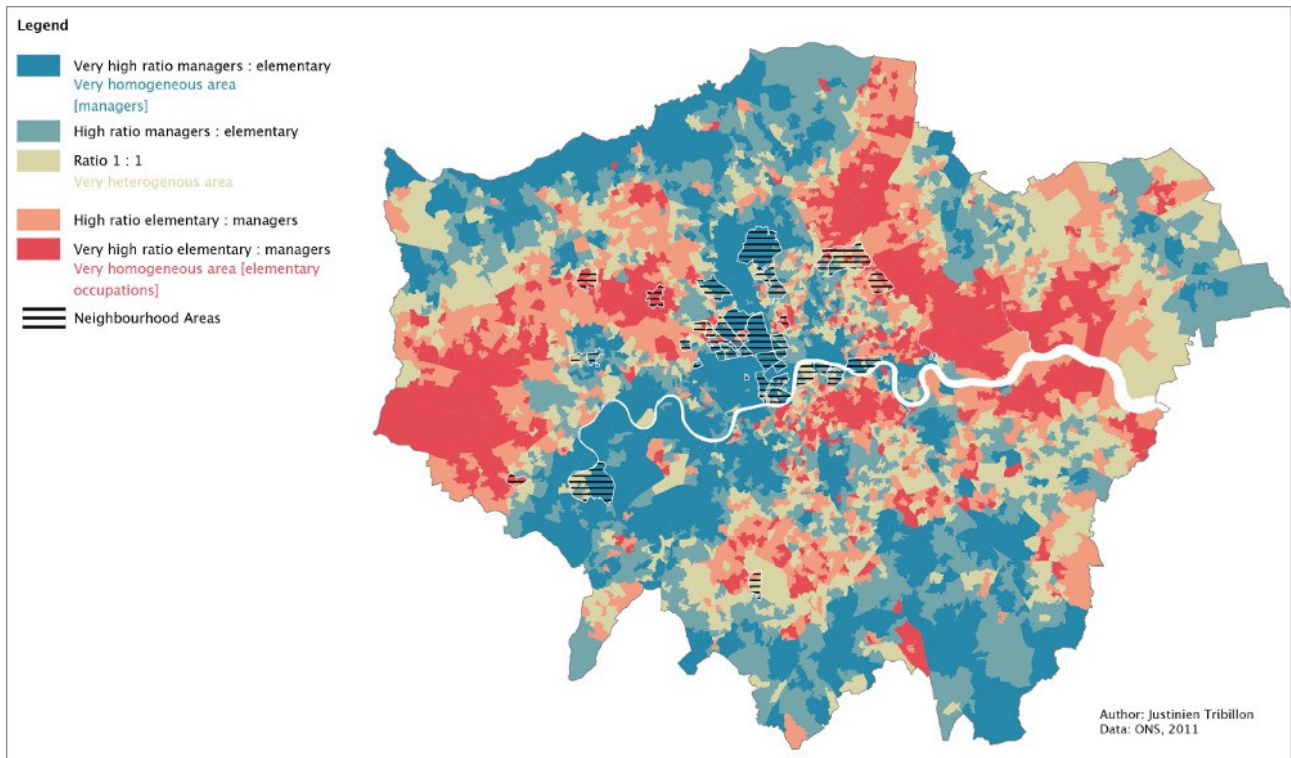

Figure 3 provides information about the socio-economic profile of the Neighbourhood Areas. Most of the applications for Neighbourhood Areas come from very homogeneous areas, where one group – either "managers" or "elementary occupations" – overwhelmingly dominates the other. Only a handful of applications show a balanced proportion of "managers" and "elementary occupations". More remarkably, 72% of the applications to be designated as Neighbourhood Areas emanated from areas with the most "privileged" populations, i.e. with a high to very high level of

"managers". Only 8 out of 47 applications (18%) were filed within areas composed essentially of "elementary occupations", while 11% came from heterogeneous areas.

Winner by ward of the 2010 mayoral elections.

The third index is the winner, by ward, of the 2010 London mayoral elections, which in most cases was a two-way contest between the candidates from the Labour Party (Ken Livingstone) and the Conservative Party (Boris Johnson).

Figure 4: Neighbourhood Area boundaries, and the winners of the 2010 mayoral elections by ward in Greater and central London
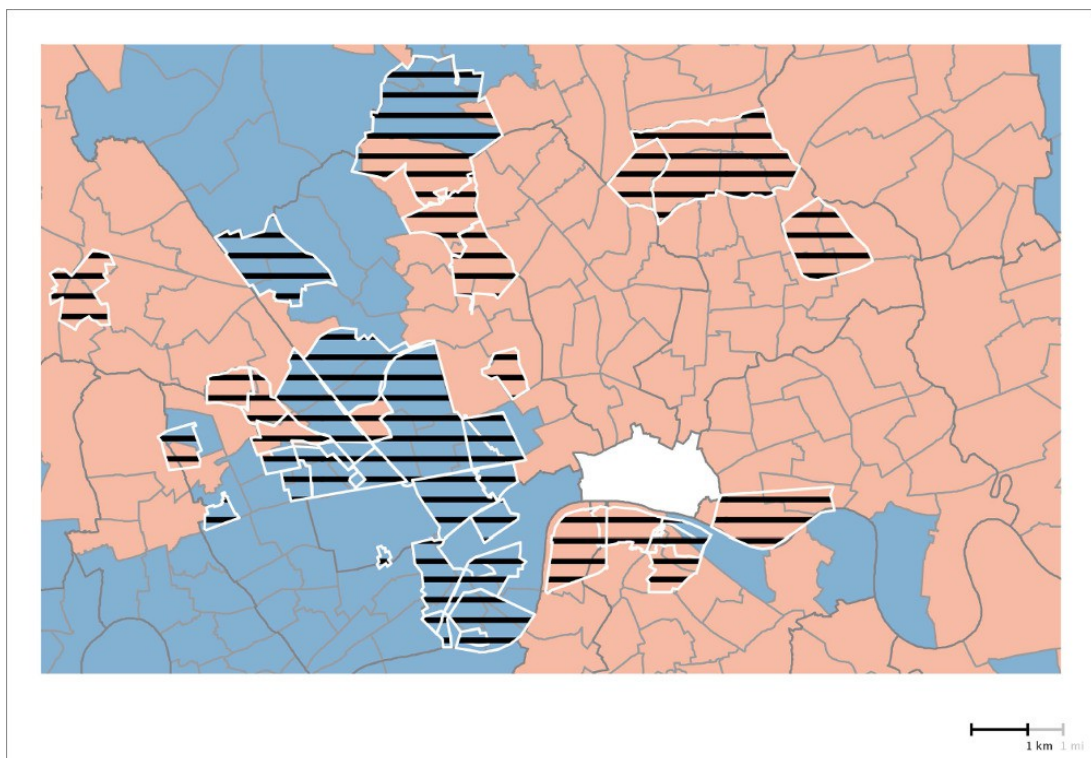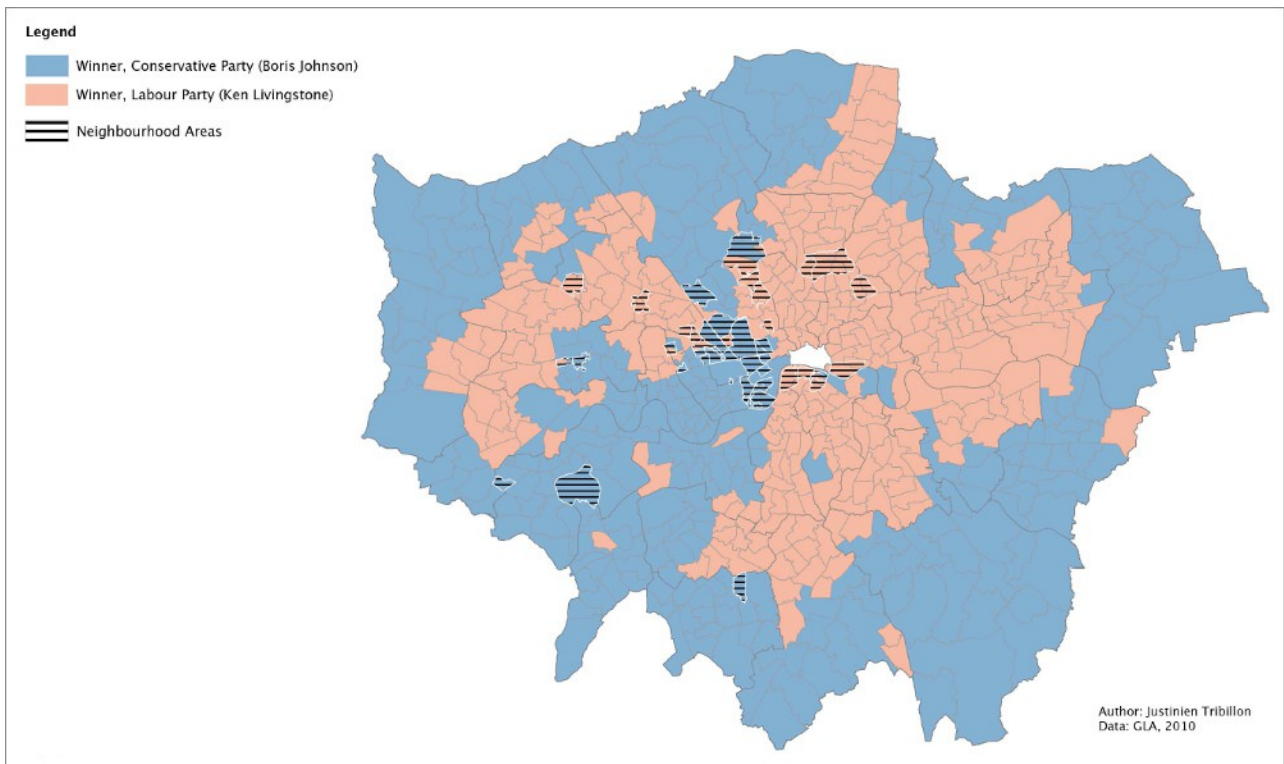
Figure 4 reveals a strong correlation between the political choices made by electors and the boundaries of the Neighbourhood Areas. The correlation concerns not the choice of party *per se,* but rather the level of political homogeneity within each of the Neighbourhood Areas. Only four applications are composed of a majority of Conservative-voting wards or a majority of Labour-voting wards. For instance, the Neighbourhood Areas within the borough of Westminster (in central London)stand out by their clear demarcation in terms of electoral results (see Figure 5, which zooms in on Neighbourhood Areas within Westminster).
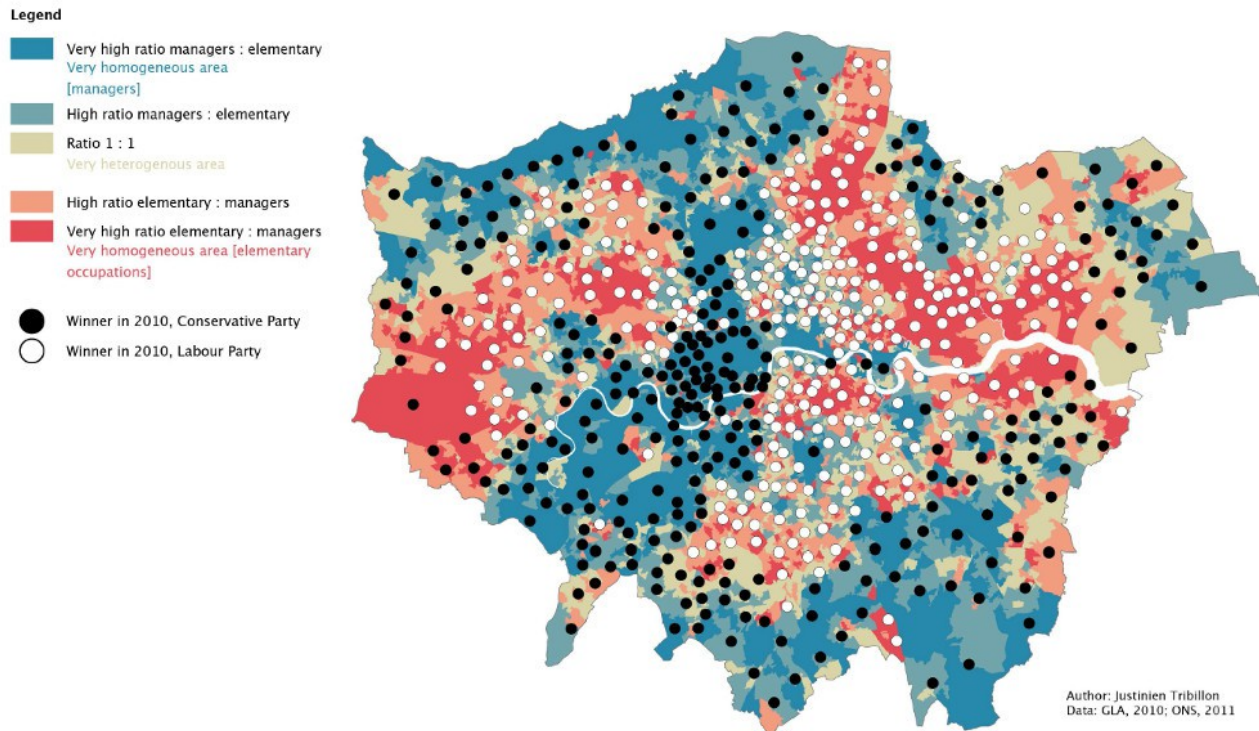
Figure 5: Neighbourhood Areas within the London borough of Westminster and the winners of the 2010 mayoral elections by ward
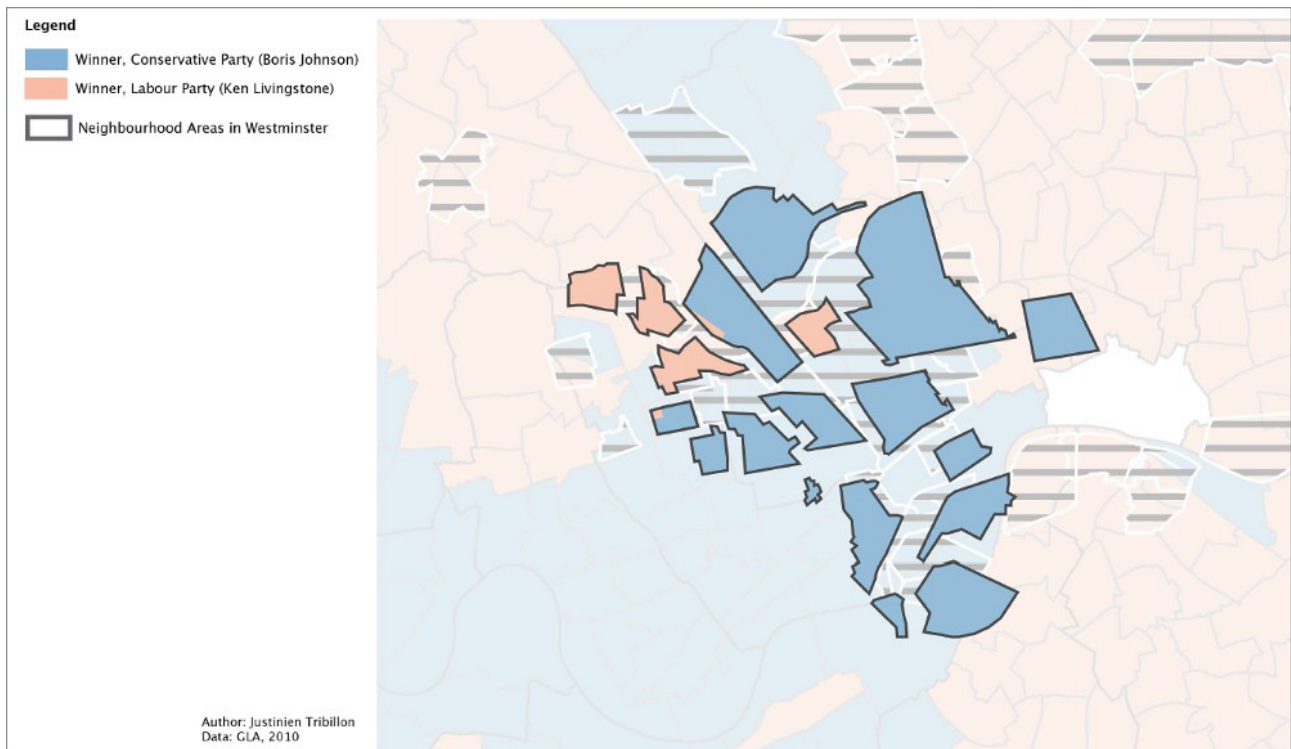
Socio-economic homogeneity is the key factor in the formation of Neighbourhood Areas

Three findings can be drawn from these maps. First, there is only a weak correlation between ethnic diversity and Neighbourhood Areas. However, looking at diversity from a socio-economic point of view reveals the great homogeneity of "neighbourhoods" applying to be designated as Neighbourhood Areas. Also, the strong correlation between socio-professional categories and their political choices (figure 6) – i.e. "managerial occupations" tend to vote for the Conservatives, and "elementary occupations" for Labour – confirms the homogeneity of the areas mobilising to set up a Neighbourhood Area. Finally, the most well-off neighbourhoods are more likely to set up a Neighbourhood Area.

Figure 6: A representation of socio-economic diversity in London by LSOA and the winners of the 2010 mayoral elections by ward, illustrating the strong correlation between the two

Legend

- Very high ratio managers : elementary
  Very homogeneous area [managers]
- High ratio managers : elementary
- Ratio 1 : 1
  Very heterogenous area
- High ratio elementary : managers
- Very high ratio elementary : managers
  Very homogeneous area [elementary occupations]

- ● Winner in 2010, Conservative Party
- ○ Winner in 2010, Labour Party

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Data: GLA, 2010; ONS, 2011

Spatial boundaries as the new urban "gates"?

Mapping socio-economic diversity in London shows that distinct homogeneous groups, mostly well-off, can now enact new administrative boundaries around their "neighbourhood", and gain more control over the planning of their environment. Neighbourhood Areas allow them to shore up their communal identity by demarcating their own territory within the rest of the city. By contrast, in the most socio-economically diverse neighbourhoods, the implementation of the Localism Act creates tensions and often results in failure. This is what happened in North Hackney in 2013, where two "local communities" – one group mainly composed of orthodox Jews and another group of secular middle- and upper-middle-class inhabitants – claimed the same territory as their Neighbourhood Area, eventually resulting in the rejection of both applications by Hackney Council on the grounds that they were "not viable" (see Booth 2013).

To conclude, the Localism Act mainly reinforces pre-existing socio-economically homogeneous neighbourhoods. Moreover, the law is chiefly implemented by the most "privileged" socio-economic categories of the population. Cameron's Localism Act and its aim of drawing boundaries "from the bottom up" enables an institutionalisation of social inequalities and urban divisions. In addition, there is no intention of building an assembly of Neighbourhood Areas on a larger scale, which would have been a genuinely ground-breaking innovation in London's governance. Thus, contrary to the displayed aims, the Localism Act is not the reinvention of "local democracy", but rather the institutionalisation of parochialism. In the words of a Conservative councillor for North Hackney (where two applications were rejected): "We don't need the south [the location of Hackney town hall] to decide on the north. That is the whole idea of localism" (in Booth, 2013).

Iris Marion Young's thoughts (1990, p. 239) chime with those of many urban enthusiasts when she writes that "in the good city, one crosses from one distinct neighbourhood to another without knowing precisely where one ended and the other began. In the normative ideal of city life, borders are open and undecidable". While urban landscapes grow more and more accustomed to "gated communities", sealed off by walls and fences (see Goodyear 2013), are Britain's Neighbourhood Areas erecting the "gates" of tomorrow?

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