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Book review: The collaborating planner? Practitioners in the neoliberal age

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Book Review

Ben Clifford and Mark Tewdwr-Jones (2013), *The Collaborating Planner?: Practitioners in the neoliberal age*. Bristol: Policy Press. £70, pp. 288, hbd.

Calls for planning reform are nothing new. From almost the inception of the postwar system there were cries that planning caused delay, uncertainty and was a “waste of time” (Times, 1950:8). Here the planner was seen as a rule bound bureaucrat who stood in the way of the economy and progress. Planning was too slow. Town plans were inadequate and their approval was delayed. The very heart of the economy was threatened by this moribund system! Within five years of these critiques being made the planner took on a new mantle. This time as Eversley (1973) describes it, the planner was seen as a monster “...in league with, if not in the pockets of, the private developer.” (p.169). In this critique the system favoured big developers. It drowned out community input. The very soul of local democracy was threatened; something had to be done to increase public input into planning! Interestingly for us these two images of the planner – the man or woman who went out of their way to delay decisions – and the corrupting force who greased the wheels of development existed and exist contemporaneously in the minds of reformers. This book by Clifford and Tewdwr-Jones beautifully illustrates this cleft stick in which planning seems inexorably caught where on the one hand we must speed up but on the other we must slow down in order to consult more.

The book takes as its starting point the post-millennial changes to planning made under the New Labour administration, which legislatively began in England and Wales with the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act and

in Scotland the Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006. These acts alongside a raft of governmental advice sought to usher in a new spatial planning ethos in Britain, which was to go beyond earlier more incremental changes to the system.

However, as the title of Chapter One suggests “Planning at the coalface in a time of constant change”, these were not to be the only alterations with significant reforms also coming in 2008 and 2011 with the election of the Coalition government.

What this book cleverly seeks to do is not offer a detailed account of the structural aspects of these reforms as part of a general neo-liberalising trend, which over the past 30 years or so has moved us subtly and sometimes more obviously away from our Keynesian roots towards a form of planning more at home with the imperative of growth, as this has been well covered elsewhere (Thornley, 1993; Allmendinger, 2011; Lord & Tewdwr-Jones, 2012). Rather the book engages with planners at the ‘coalface’ asking, “What has really been the opinion of the planner as the reforms and changes have been experienced?” and also inquiring “Have planners been collaborators or resisters to such ideological ideals as neoliberalism, new public management and democracy?”. In this way the book offers something unique to the body of literature on planning, for whilst there have been limited attempts to tell the story of reform from the planner’s perspective (Inch, 2010; Mace, 2013) few have been done from such a methodologically rich set of data.

The book is organised with an initial set of three chapters dedicated to explicating the planning reforms. Chapter One provides a useful overview of the mechanics and drivers of change. Chapter Two examines these reforms through the theoretical lenses of governance, neoliberalism, new public management,

New Labour's Third Way and the Coalition's version of localism. In so doing, the authors come to rest on the ideal that the work on neoliberalism offers the strongest (though admittedly contested) analytical purchase when considering the drivers of reform in the UK. Yet, when we consider the response of planners to these changes the authors rightly note that we need a perspective that allows us to understand policy change as a peopled process where structures are laid down by governments and put into practice by individuals. Chapter Three provides just such an approach using a sociological reading of institutionalism drawing on Giddens' structuration theory.

The joy of the book comes in the four central chapters dedicated to the empirical material. These are fixed around core themes: Process implementation; Management; Participation and Culture. Here the reader is not only introduced to the very thorough survey data collected by the authors but also to the words of the planners themselves drawn from 60 interviews (17 exploratory and 53 in-depth). In these chapters the authors begin to try and unravel their central research question of collaboration or resistance to the process of reform. The answer, perhaps predictably, is that planners at the coalface have had mixed and multiple responses. There was good evidence that reform was not seen as a wholly negative or unnecessary process. In fact, planners readily embraced certain aspects of change using these in an entrepreneurial way, as opportunities to enhance the status and importance of the profession. What was clear from the research was that primary objections came from the rapidity and volume of change meted out by Central Government and the lack of consultation and control at the local level.

Finally, with regard to answering the question of collaboration or resistance, the authors provide an interesting observation that bears much more thought in planning scholarship. Here they discuss the culture of planning and the notion of the 'greater good', which a majority of planners referenced in interviews. Whilst the public sector ethos is criticised by both planning theorists as an illusion and free market economists as a needless intrusion into market functioning, it clearly serves as an anchor point for many planners when they conceptualise and explain the purpose of their work. The authors very rightly note, NPM and neoliberalism seek to redefine and re-imagine professions like planning more along market lines. The ability to harken back to an early set of foundational principles offers planners other ways of legitimising their role. This book provides an engaging and compelling account of the functioning of these processes at the coalface of planning.

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