

ONE STEP FORWARD AND TWO STEPS BACK: URBAN POLICY AND COMMUNITY PLANNING IN ENGLAND SINCE 1979

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Recently, in a radio program on Belfast, a local resident attempting to develop non-sectarian initiatives, made a comment along the lines of: when you hear the word 'community' in this city, you know someone is going to get hurt.

This observation is significant to the scope and content of this chapter for the following reasons. Firstly, despite its usual connotations of harmony and stability, the concept of community is not fixed. It is socially constructed in specific contexts through discourse. This chapter will highlight the importance of the construction of the term community by a key figure in English urban policy since 1979; Michael Heseltine. This chapter also explores the implications of this construction for progressive social relations.

Secondly, the story is, in part, a rare contradiction of Williams (1983: 76) who wrote that community "... unlike all other terms of social organization ... never seems to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any positive or opposing term". This should alert critical thinkers to the more subtle process of redefining, rather than replacing, a positive term.

Thirdly, the issue of scale is one that arises repeatedly in discussions of community, and is highlighted in the above story from Belfast. Smith (1993: 105) wrote:

Community is therefore the least specifically defined of spatial scales, and the consequent vague, yet generally affirmative nurturing, meaning attached to 'community' makes it one of the most ideologically appropriated metaphors in contemporary public discourse. From the 'community of nations' fighting a murderous war against Iraq to 'the business community' attempting to justify class-based exploitation, the idea of community is appropriated to rescript less salubrious realities. Identities established at other scales are easily rolled into struggles over community.

Fourthly, as Harvey (1996: 426) identified, communities "cannot be understood independent of the social processes that generate, sustain and also dissolve them". In Belfast, as distinct from many areas, these social processes include sectarian influences.

This chapter will focus on urban policy located at the national scale. However, while central government is an important tier from which urban policy emanates, it must be recognized that it is not the only possible scale at which urban policy may be introduced. Urban policy operates at many scales, ranging from the influences of the United Nations through to the European Union and on down to national, regional and local levels. Urban planning is perceived as a tool through which urban policy is

supposedly enacted, but this does not necessarily occur. In their day-to-day activities, planners may use a variety of means to resist, or not enthusiastically enact, policies emanating from various levels of government.

The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that a discussion of *communities* and the impact of *urban planning* on *progressive social relations* cannot accept any of these terms uncritically. Each of these terms is given meaning through its social context, hence any discussion of power needs to recognize the power relations in discourse, not just the power relations in distributive outcomes. As Smith (1993: 97) highlighted, the use of spatial metaphors, of which community is one, “taps directly into questions of social power” Community is a process of social relations, not a conduit for privileging macro-scale social relations.

It will also be argued that the definition of progressive is contestable. No ideology, whether traditionally left, right or Green, has a mortgage on what is progressive. Thus it is naive to expect planners, despite their own rhetoric, to necessarily be progressive. A thorough analysis of the history of urban planning should dispel this myth.

In light of the above considerations, this chapter begins with a questioning of assumptions about planning and urban policy. This leads into a discussion of the political space in which progressive social relations can be developed. The criteria for what constitutes progressive social relations vis-a-vis community is reserved for the following section, where it follows an exploration of what is ‘community’. A range of interactions between communities and various tiers of government are then outlined and discussed. These interactions include an overview of the various urban policy objectives and instruments of the Conservative governments since 1979, and a wider view of communities and planning that does not privilege central government. In conclusion some comments are made about social relations in England today, and suggest some possibilities for the future.

1. Assumptions about Planning

One of the key assumptions about planning is its progressive character. It is part of planning culture for planners to portray themselves in this manner, usually in opposition to traditional conservative ideology (maintenance of the status quo) or the ubiquitous notion of “the market”. However, this assumption needs to be explored from ideological, cultural and historical perspectives.

While some notable planners, including Ebenezer Howard, Thomas Adams, Louis Mumford and Patrick Geddes, were interested in what may be termed “social reconstruction”, other planners were not. While social change was considered necessary, this change was to be of limited scale, and managed. Alternatively, where physical changes were significant, the social implications were often to reaffirm the status quo. Regressive outcomes should not be seen as an undesirable effect of some planners’ activities. That was their goal. They were not simply, in the words of Smyth (1996, 60), “making provision for the future”, they were partly shaping the future through their planning.

Historically, by overemphasizing space and physical land-use, planners have often neglected the important ideological context of their activities. Sometimes this has

occurred through a process of self-editing, where planners refuse to engage in political representations of themselves, their activities and their subject. At other times this process has occurred despite the explicit urban, political-economic and social policies advocated by progressive planners. Sandercock (1975) highlights how the political-economic and social aspects of Ebenezer Howard's original Garden City idea were transformed into a design ethic that suggested communities could be constructed through physical processes alone.

Perhaps, then, it should not be surprising for McLoughlin (1992) to find that planning has generally reacted to macro economic forces, or for Simmie (1993) to find that planning has reduced market competitiveness and worsened problems of urban poverty. Maybe this means more credit should be given to planners who do succeed in implementing progressive policies and plans. In the context of England since 1979, credit is especially due to planners who have successfully worked with communities to achieve outcomes that are acceptable to the community directly impacted, without unnecessarily disadvantaging other communities. This is creditable planning given that the "political space" to achieve progressive outcomes has shrunk considerably since the late 1970s.

2. Political Space for Progressive Planning

Planning is a power relationship. Power is capable of being stored in structures of varying permanence (such as laws, budgets, plans and institutions), but it is the exercising of power that enables the extent and character of that power to be (re)defined in various ways. In England, power relationships between communities and various tiers of government are complex, as are the power relationships between, and within, the various tiers of government.

To explore the political space available for communities to exert power, it is helpful to construct a taxonomy of local authority reactions to Conservative Party policies. The generalized ideology driving decision making over this period may be characterized as 'economic liberalism' exemplified by its discourse of globalism, international competitiveness, mobile capital and the need for people to generate their own employment opportunities. If this should result in the break-up of various forms of community, then that was the price of progress. (This is in contrast to the traditional Conservative ideology of paternalism where there is an implicit responsibility to care for the less fortunate, but not to invite change to their position in the social hierarchy.)

Local Authority response to the ideology of economic liberalism has been mixed. The reactions may be summarized as:

- Fully supportive
- Playing the game
- Reluctantly playing the game
- Refusing to play the game

Conservative dominated councils, such as Westminster (an inner city local authority in London), have been very supportive of central government policies. This, generally wealthy, community has had its identity reaffirmed through the frequent praise it receives from central government for being a model council. Capping council rates did

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