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An uncivil turn: instituting planning in the populist moment

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ABSTRACT

The rise of populist political expression over recent decades has happened in parallel with ongoing debate about how planning should relate to civil society. To some extent both developments can be seen to grow from dissatisfaction with ‘traditional’, top-down modes of governance, which have continued to come under strain in the late-neoliberal, ‘post-political’ era. This article engages with how these trends relate to one another, through analysis of a populist newspaper produced in the UK, *The Light*, which is animated by conspiracist thinking and has been characterized as far-right. The complicated emergence and influence of *The Light*’s grassroots-driven populism has interrelated implications for planning’s theorization of and response to both political populism and the ‘civic turn’. These implications are drawn out and discussed using the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, supplemented by Roberto Esposito’s notion of institution. The paper concludes by exploring whether the upsurge in populism pushes planning to make its case anew and the ways in which an instituted planning as per Esposito might be more convincing in this regard than the communicative and agonistic paradigms that have dominated recent theoretical debate.

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Introduction

The orientation that planning has assumed towards ‘civil society’ – those areas of collective life that are outside the immediate purview of the state, in some theorizations also the economy (Friedmann and Douglass 1998) – has changed over time with planning’s societal role. Indeed, we perhaps too often neglect that even planning’s mainstream roots are outside the state, whether one foregrounds the elite-led forerunners to the city beautiful movement (Binford 2021) or the more co-operative development envisioned in Howard’s Garden Cities. While much planning energy was subsequently absorbed by statutory planning, from the 1960s civil society began to more assertively speak back, frequently with understandable anger (Goodman 1972). Motivated by social justice concerns, some planners began to align themselves with civil society

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(Inch et al. 2024), while others have responded to societal diversity by casting themselves as mediators, seeking to include and serve various claims on resources and attention in developmental processes (Healey 2006). More recently, if there was a moment during the post-political zeitgeist when anyone felt that they had a firm handle on what planning was and should be, it surely has passed. Today, planning must reckon with the reemergence of politics with a vengeance in a conjuncture characterized by our collective inability to respond to the interrelated outcomes of climate breakdown, ecological catastrophe, inequality and the tolls these are taking on our planet and collective well-being. This paper grapples with the symptoms of this conjuncture in the UK, where right-wing populism and attendant conspiracist viewpoints have become increasingly prominent. The empirical base is analysis of a populist newssheet, *The Light*, which is animated by conspiracist thinking. The primary aim is to understand the implications of new political realities for planners, with a focus on how we theorize and engage with civil society; a secondary aim is to introduce the potential utility of Roberto Esposito's thinking around institution here if we are to reanimate the planning project in turbulent waters.

Civil society and populism: planning in polycrisis

Populism is not a new phenomenon but is perceived to have grown in prominence over recent decades such that it can now be considered part of the political mainstream, albeit a challenging part (Mudde 2004; Zulianello 2020). From a planning perspective this is notable, as many of the assumptions underpinning planning practice were established longer ago, in the mid-twentieth century. Dominant understandings converge in seeing recent populist projects centring 'the people', in opposition to an 'elite' (Müller 2017); at least partial rejection of contemporary liberal democracy can be seen to follow, albeit framed in democratic terms. Agreement might also be perceived around populism's malleability, in avoiding announcing firm ideological commitments as, for instance, socialism or liberalism do. This has seen populism characterized as 'chameleon-like' (Taggart 2004), a 'thin-centred ideology' (Mudde 2004), part of its purchase resting in its ability to adapt to contextual specificities.

The dominant modes of engaging with populism, the ideational and the discursive, diverge more clearly in approach. Working in a more traditional political science vein, ideational scholars, represented most prominently by Cas Mudde, focus on the characteristics of populism, particularly its ethical construction of a morally pure people, 'the heartland', against a corrupt elite that incorporates not only politicians of traditional parties, bureaucrats and big business, but also the minority groups they apparently champion. This has seen a focus on close engagement with the varieties of right-wing populism, particularly but not exclusively those prominent in the Global North. By contrast, those working in the discursive paradigm, most prominently Laclau (2005), are interested less in the ideologies of actually existing populisms and more in the logics through which populism works, how a 'people' and an accompanying set of demands is constructed and operationalized. This has seen more optimism about the counter hegemonic potentials of populism, particularly with reference to movements in Latin America and southern Europe. Across the conceptualisations, however, it is important to note the ever-increasing complexity and depth of understanding, both in

relation to political practice and the specificities of particular contexts (e.g. Favero and Zulianello 2024; Padoan 2020; Zulianello 2025).

Scholarship on the relationship between planning and political populism has also grown in recent years. Prominent theorists have focussed on the challenge that right-wing or authoritarian populism poses to planning from a variety of perspectives, including the communicative (Sager 2020) and the just city paradigms (Fainstein and Novy 2025). Across these interventions, it is clear that right-wing populism positions planners squarely within the ‘elite’ camp, as technocratic agents blocking pursuit of the ‘will of the people’ and interfering with a straightforward relationship between that people and their political leaders. As Hillier (2003) noted longer ago, the pluralist values, social justice concerns and environmental awareness of planning are potentially decentred by populism, an observation sharpened by more recent developments. The work of Trappenberg Frick and others demonstrates some of this hostility, having explored how the Tea Party movement in the US sought to resist planning efforts, mobilizing around property rights and suspicion of sustainable development, particularly the role of the UN (Trappenberg Frick, Weinzimmer and Waddell, 2015). Research on opposition to 15-minute cities is a continuation of this phenomenon, pointing to various complex drivers: climate change scepticism, distrust of experts and authority, and a vulgar libertarianism, particularly around the use of cars, strongly associated with freedom and the pursuit of a normal family life (Marquet et al. 2025). We have also begun to see exploration of how populist rhetoric finds expression within participatory planning processes (Mattila, Hirvola, and Borrup 2025), and the implications for planning where populist politicians gain power at the municipal level. Dunn (2024) notes that populists in power carry through anti-urban and anti-sustainability positions to pursue strong protectionism and hostility to almost all change, while understandings of planners’ roles and notions like the ‘public interest’ and ‘garden city’ are open to populist rearticulation.

An additional observation of Dunn’s, about localist populism in Sweden, relates to its unsettling of existing understandings of left/right politics. This points to important implications for the relationship between populism and theorizations of civil society, which present acute difficulties for planning:

... the agenda is anti-entrepreneurial and anti-privatisation [... it] promotes reengagement with non-financial value, and the fundamentals of local community engagement, privileging local needs and voices, echoing past radical, anti-capitalist and right-to-the-city movements [...]. Further, envisioning planners as Guardians of public interest and facilitators of a rejuvenated local politics, seized from elite interests, mirrors the ideals of 1960s/70s radical participatory and advocacy planning. (2024, 12-3)

Whilst one could see justification here for the potential some identify in populism, it is not only the who, why and how populating the logic that undermines straightforward optimism. The observation echoes Mudde’s (2004) argument, whereby the politics around the 1968 moment, of the New Left and nascent green movements, is characterized or motivated by populist critique. His ideational approach allows him to square the circle by articulating a fundamental difference with more recent populist challenge:

The populism of the New Left referred to an active, self-confident, well-educated, progressive people. In sharp contrast, the current populism is the rebellion of the “silent majority”. The heartland of populists like Berlusconi or Haider is the hard-working, slightly

conservative, law-abiding citizen, who, in silence but with growing anger, sees his world being “perverted” by progressives, criminals, and aliens. (2004, 557)

The suggestion is that contemporary populism claims a strong organic base in civil society and everyday life, frequently aligned around a strong leader who will deliver the people’s will, and that this is a direct reaction against the participative populism of the post-’68 moment and its influence. Planning must reckon with this being the precise point of departure for its own contemporary understanding of and interest in civil society (Inch et al. 2024). Given this lineage, many planners will find it galling to be placed in an elite camp characterized as technocratic and out of touch, but it is important not to allow this to blind us to the cleavage that has emerged, or been manufactured, in this space. It would perhaps be correct to blame post-political planning and governance practices but that does not solve the immediate political problem whereby, as we will see, in the eyes of an ascendant populist-right planning itself is the more legitimate target.

Unpacking this, we might discern overlapping approaches to civil society developing in planning since the 1960s. The first, perhaps more radical, looks to align planning, or at least part of it, with civil society actors. Planners might adopt advocacy or equity approaches, whereby even when working within the state they look to serve first and foremost the disenfranchised and marginalized (Davidoff 1965; Krumholz 1982). Within this tradition, however, they might also adopt more activist-like community organizing roles; this could involve working within campaigns and initiatives that have emerged from civil society, or it might involve seeking to foment and foster such initiatives (Miraftab 2009; Shrestha and Aranya 2015). This approach shares an appreciation of difference and diversity, along with attendant concerns with equity, with the communicative approaches to planning that, in practice, have troubled less its position as a division of public administration (Forester 1999; Healey 2006). Whilst no less a response to the failures of top-down modernist planning, these approaches have arguably continued to position planning and planners at a remove from neighbourhood and community groups, albeit in facilitative and mediating roles that identify civil society actors as legitimate stakeholders to be supported in participating in decision-making. A third approach is discernible if we acknowledge that, fundamentally, most planning in the neoliberal period has continued to operate in a technocratic, top-down way (Raco and Savini 2019), albeit one that must pay lip service to inclusion and participation (Goonewardena and Rankin 2004). Given the messiness of actually existing practice, it is probably more helpful to view a continuum rather than distinct approaches to civil society here; but wherever planners sit, right-wing populism positions them as outwith ‘the people’ and therefore civil society. This fundamentally negates how civically minded planners have sought to position themselves within ‘struggles for a rebalancing of power relations between “elites and people” [...] manifestations of a worldwide social movement, a rising of civil society in all of its forms’ (Friedmann and Douglass 1998, 3).

If populist mobilization represents an exclusionary and majoritarian civil society speaking back to power, both the deliberative and agonistic approaches to planning, which have loomed large in recent scholarship, appear wrong-footed in similar ways. On the one hand, inviting the populist-right to engage in a deliberative encounter whereby their claims are mediated by professionals and acknowledged as having no

more or less validity than anyone else's is to inflame an already existing grievance. On the other, moving to position the populist-right as an adversary in an agonistic encounter looks like a discursive reframing of a fight that planning is at best losing, at worst has already lost. The question raised is what tools planning has left to understand and respond to this situation. The interventions by Sager, and Fainstein and Novy, both end by acknowledging an apparent contradiction, between planning's democratic values and its inclusionary ones, for which there is no simple resolution. Scholarship has not been blind to the fact that more widely drawn forms of participation might leave us grappling with ugly sentiments (Campbell 2005; Mattila, Hirvola, and Borrup 2025), but we need to keep thinking about what it means for civil society actors to be actively exclusionary and hostile to planning itself, developing theory in this light that takes us beyond saying that these things are good when we like them but not when we do not.

The rest of this paper makes its primary contribution here, elaborating on the foregoing problematic by developing understanding of actually existing right-wing populism's engagement with planning in the UK, through a discursively oriented content analysis of a populist newsheet called *The Light*, exploring the implications for planning, with a particular focus on its understanding of civil society. Analytically, the paper relies on the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, pertinent aspects of which are introduced now. The subsequent analysis, however, supports the suggestion above that planning is in need of more normative theory to respond to the questions raised by populism, and a further contribution of the paper is to provisionally suggest a role for Roberto Esposito's political theory here. To this end, some key ideas of Esposito's, particularly around institution, are introduced after Laclau and Mouffe's. Contextualization and a methodological note then set up the findings section, which leads into a concluding discussion.

An analytical lexicon: the discursive approach to populism and agonistic planning

Laclau and Mouffe's work, centred on their discourse theory, is likely to be familiar to planning scholars on account of its promotion of agonistic pluralism, an approach to democracy that is distrustful of consensus, seeing conflict as inevitable and therefore foregrounding contestation, albeit in an adversarial rather than antagonistic mode (Mouffe, 2005). This has been adopted by those critical of planning's communicative turn (e.g. McClymont 2011; Pløger 2004). Of equal import here, however, is a longstanding and interrelated interest in populism, outlined below. Fundamentally, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) propose an understanding of the social centring difference, but also, inevitably, conflict or antagonism. This rests on the notion of the 'constitutive outside', as developed in Lacanian and deconstructive thought, whereby identity is affirmed in relation to the other. In parallel, they centre the experience of Marxist political praxis, which they argue has come to undermine economic essentialism, pointing instead to a new space for openness and contingency.

Laclau and Mouffe's interest in discourse, central to this paper's analytical approach, rests here: 'Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre' (1985, 112). Their discourse theory, centred on how meaning is created, understands discourses as historically

specific but able to incorporate material and behavioural elements in addition to the linguistic. For our purposes we can identify populist discourse in the UK, within which The Light's articulatory practice is enacted:

The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity. (1985, 113)

The political, stemming from the fundamental antagonisms introduced above, is central to Laclau and Mouffe's understanding of the social and contestation within it. Logically, an interest in populism follows, encompassing the way in which oppositional camps are constituted and how they engage in hegemonic struggles. It is possible and desirable, then, to engage with The Light in terms of hegemony, involving 'the linking together of different identities and political forces into a common project, and the creation of new social orders from a variety of dispersed elements' (Howarth 2000, 109).

As noted, the discursive approach to populism does not focus on ideological content but underlying logics. From Laclau (2005), Howarth (2015, 13–5) identifies five basic features:

- Construction of 'the people' as a privileged subject
- Definition of an enemy/articulation of a political frontier
- Linking of diverse demands, giving shape to the political boundary and collective subject
- Symbolic representation of (illusory) unity through the deployment of 'empty signifiers' (frequently a leader)
- Affective attachment to certain signifiers (myth-making)

The logics of equivalence and difference, always part of Laclau and Mouffe's theorisation, are important within populist projects and are prominent in the forthcoming analysis. The former reflects the creation of unity by making equivalent diverse subject positions and demands, vis-a-vis a purely negative outside that threatens them. The latter identifies more expansive processes of identifying and incorporating an increasing number of subject positions and demands within a bloc. Laclau suggests that the relationship between these logics within populist movements is complicated – equivalence and difference 'reflecting themselves in each other' (2005, 120) – because whilst there is an ultimate antagonism, the logics need one another. Here we can identify both being utilised in overlapping and divergent ways because of our particular interest in the negative outside/enemy, where planning is situated.

A new normative lexicon. Esposito and institution

Whilst Laclau and Mouffe's political teeth have helped planning theory to mitigate against naïve understandings of what it might mean to work with and through existing institutions, their foregrounding of radical contingency for political praxis has perhaps been read overly optimistically, potentially also introducing ethical blind spots or concerning abstractions (McAuliffe and Rogers 2019; McNay 2014). As such, this paper

posits Esposito as a normative supplement to their work, helping us not only to understand *The Light* as a project but also to identify responses. The similarities and overlaps between the two oeuvres have been noted (Kioupliolis 2017; Lemm 2022), including emphatically by Esposito (2022b). He similarly centres plurality and conflict in his understanding of social life, but proposes that institutions and the institutional realm can respond to this in a dynamic and inclusive way. This is contrasted with the constitutional realm of states and statutes, which bends inevitably towards exclusion and stasis.¹ This distinction has potential for planning in the face of populism, given how populists seek to position planning and planning's complicated relationship with the state, which has, in turn, inflected its understandings of civil society.

Esposito develops his interest in institution, centred on the interrelationship of the term's meanings as both noun and verb, to the extent of identifying an instituting paradigm in political ontology (2021, 2022a).² His project, explicitly left-oriented, responds to the perceived failure of radical movements in the post-68 period. Whilst this is a key departure point for planning's understanding of civil society, Esposito suggests that the rejection of institutions it represents has been a dead end. Instead, rootedness gains a new importance; we are encouraged to appreciate the senses in which institutions make us and, as such, the necessity of working with and through them, enacting an instituting practice that contains at once both stasis and movement.³ In light of the foregoing discussion of planning's interest in civil society and the rise of populism, it is possible to see why Esposito might offer us a way out of an apparent impasse. On the one hand, he mitigates against hankering after golden ages, whether lost or yet to come; on the other, pluralism is not only an inevitability but becomes a normative value, as does democracy. As such, Esposito's project is in direct opposition to contemporary populism, with its exclusionary focus only on stasis and singularity, its conflation of the state and institutions, and its narrowly transactional and majoritarian rendering of democracy. These are crucial points in considering instituting thought's possible relationship to planning and given our interest in the civic, whereby planning needs to move beyond an unhelpful bracketing out of state, market and civil society (Goonewardena and Rankin 2004).

Introducing *The Light*

Existing at the intersection of right-wing populism and conspiracism, *The Light*, published monthly since September 2020, is styled as a 'truthpaper'. It emerged as a response

¹Esposito's work builds on close engagement with Foucault's, identifying biopolitics, a regulatory focus on the control and administration of people's bodies and lives, as central to contemporary societies. Innovatively, Esposito develops an *affirmative* understanding of biopolitics (Foucault 2008), around an acknowledgment not only of its inherent violence but also its protective and enabling potentials (Esposito 2008). This is figured in a dialectical way, around a productive but potentially dangerous tension between the individual and the collective: individuals fundamentally need the collective but this also represents a threat to them.

²At this level Esposito's *institution* is set against a *destituent* paradigm represented by Heidegger and a retreat from political questions, and a *constituent* paradigm represented by Deleuze, which renders everything political to the point of meaninglessness.

³In Esposito's terms: 'Rather than tearing up the preexisting root the novelty hinges on it by extending and strengthening it. The singular character of its logic is holding together movement and stability, change and permanence, innovation and conservation. As Merleau-Ponty, who was Lefort's teacher, argues, the institution was not born *ex nihilo* but always from something that was also already instituted, something to be preserved and innovated at the same time' (2022b, 147).

to COVID-19 and related government interventions and public health measures but quickly broadened its scope. *The Light* has a full archive online but claims a print-run of 250,000 (Hope not Hate, 2024), being distributed freely either by individuals or readers' groups in town and city centres, or by being left in public places, including alongside the mainstream press (Hanspal 2023). Qualitative content analysis of issues 1–62 constitutes the empirical base for this paper, undertaken in two stages: first, thematic analysis of article topics in each issue; second, more fine-grained discursive analysis of planning-related articles, utilising the conceptual schema introduced above. It may seem like a marginal case but there is no doubt that various of its perspectives have now found more mainstream expression and civically oriented planning must be informed by political developments, with an area of interest beyond formal governance and policy, close to the fine-grain of everyday life.

The COVID-19 pandemic, catalyst for *The Light*, occurred in the wake of 2016's Brexit vote, which changed the landscape of UK politics and is central to the discussion of populism within it. By the time *The Light* emerges, Boris Johnson has become Prime Minister and overwhelmingly won an election by promising to 'Get Brexit Done', apparently saving it from derailment by an indistinct political and economic elite. Notably, Johnson's policy programme also promised to 'tear [the planning system] down and start again' (MHCLG 2020). While a range of arguments were put forward for Britain leaving the EU, the trope of the British people regaining control from EU bureaucrats dominated the debate. The overriding focus was arguably control of borders, but so too 'red tape' and the institutions of law and order, which were seen to enfranchise minorities at the expense of the majority, making liberally inflected judgments contrary to 'common sense'. This sits in a complicated relationship with Brexit's supposed economic benefits, which rested on free-market ideology and imperial nostalgia, whereby Britain could prosper as a go-getting nation, trading with the whole world. Brexit's contradictions as a populist project are reminiscent of those of Thatcherism, identified nearly four decades earlier by Stuart Hall as a kind of 'authoritarian populism' (Hall 1988). Detailed discussion of either Thatcherism's influence or its populist dimensions is beyond this paper's scope, but noting the resonances is helpful, situating contemporary populism in a longer history to which *The Light* relates, while also clarifying the suggestion that populism can see fringe ideas brought into the political mainstream. Hall identifies this in relation to the extreme racism of the National Front influencing Conservative Party policy in the late 1970s, laundering it of the 'more disreputable associations of street fascism' (1988, 145). In contemporary Britain the ascendant Reform Party may see the process follow a different dynamic.

The Light's populist logic

Initial consideration of *The Light*'s populist logic more generally will enable more meaningful discussion of its engagement with planning. Produced in September 2020 in direct response to governance of the COVID-19 pandemic, Issue 1's front-page headline utilises a trope that recurs across issues, whereby 'Western "Democracies" Decline Into Totalitarian Police States' (*The Light* 1, 1). The article deploys logics of equivalence to create oppositional camps: 'ordinary, law-abiding people' in diverse jurisdictions, facing legal censure and police violence for resisting pandemic restrictions; versus 'the bubble of

government, NGOs, and mass media'. Notable, however, is a third, amorphous group of 'most people', not yet convinced by the 'truthpaper'. The paper's mission is clear, as in articles of all types it deploys persistent use of personal pronouns, seeking to draw readers, 'you', into a camp of 'we', struggling against a nefarious and indistinct 'they', for 'our children', 'our nation', 'our lives'.

From the outset we can identify key nodal points that seek to stabilize The Light's discursive universe, frequently overlapping with more mainstream right-wing politics. They are characterized as transparently natural/right, and given shape by their constitutive outsides: 'the individual' and 'the family' as opposed to 'government' or, frequently, 'regimes'; 'freedom' as opposed to 'control'; 'the nation' as opposed to 'the global'; 'sovereignty' as opposed to 'tyranny'. Readers become agents, able to choose a path of 'truth', 'independence' and 'resistance'. This moralistic pull is intensified through a perceived duty to protect the vulnerable, particularly children and the elderly. Readers have an equally profound responsibility; however, towards their ancestors; the spectre of Nazism being invoked repeatedly, reminding readers that the freedoms being taken were fought for.

These nodal points recur across various sites of struggle, of which the pandemic is just one. Though apparently distinct, these struggles are joined in an equivalential chain that collectively constitutes a wider, frequently indistinct threat to life as readers know it and humanity itself; as it is put in Issue 9: 'plans for the twenty-first Century Permanent Technocratic Enslavement of Mankind' (The Light 9, 13). A compounding effect is produced whereby readers concerned about mandatory mask wearing are encouraged to see this as equivalent to climate change scepticism and equivalent to concern that initiatives promoting birth control are part of a depopulation plan and so on. A reinforcing effect emerges whereby almost everything stems from the wider threat and in turn demonstrates it, incorporating all social and political actors within a friend/enemy and insider/outsider binary. In Issue 48, this sees local planning authorities, in permitting 5G infrastructure (discussed in more detail below), becoming complicit in the 'Digital takeover of our bodies' (The Light 48, 3), a concern that synthetically incorporates not only 5G but myriad elite enemies/concerns, ultimately including genetic modification whose 'nanoparticulate components introduced with COVID inoculations have the ability to self-assemble and act as a network for monitoring the human body', in turn rendering 'Covid-injected people [...] the intellectual property of U.S. Department of Defence patent holders' (The Light 48, 3).

It would be reasonable to dismiss this as conspiracy but short-sighted, as there are important political effects. We must be alive to the fact that scepticism about one element of the signifying chain has little impact on its overarching impact: the complexity of The Light's discursive web and the slippery ideological nature of populism facilitating this resilience. As noted, The Light shares key nodal points with thicker ideological configurations. Over time it deepens its reach by incorporating rejection of 'political correctness' (including EDI and BLM initiatives), 'gender ideology' (i.e. anti-trans positions), and migration. Ultimately, The Light is not about winning power, which would be the truly dislocatory moment for the project, but about exerting influence, and we can see its concerns being taken up within more mainstream political discourse. For planning, then, the important point is not that civil society actors believe to some degree in conspiracy theories; rather, that a significant number have a strongly

sedimented, radical distrust of almost every social, political and economic institution. These points will be clarified as we engage more deeply with The Light's discussion of planning.

Planning within The Light

Critically minded readers will quickly realize that plans, broadly conceived, haunt The Light. Both 'plans' and 'planners' are almost always negatively inflected, perhaps obviously, because The Light's *raison d'être* is to expose an overarching, secret plan to 'control the entire earth' (The Light 32, 15). Plans, therefore, signify top-down, duplicitous and threatening. The regular adoption by contributors of the portmanteau 'pandemic' to refer to COVID-19 illustrates this well. Once again, however, there is a strong adoption of longer running criticisms of planning from the more mainstream ideological right. Particularly prominent in the neoliberal era, these see plans as inherently wasteful and inefficient breaks on enterprise and liberty, inevitably leading to worse outcomes than would have been achieved otherwise. The notion of 'central planning' is particularly prominent, imbuing the perceived threat of 'world government' and its agents, especially the UN, with connotations of twentieth century communism. As noted, planners are subsumed into a subsection of the global elite, as 'technocrats', within a populist logic that resonates with neoliberal critiques of both the post-war Keynesian settlement and more contemporary governance.

Overarching tensions are evident around urbanisation and climate change, driven by the way that they necessitate institutional policy interventions, particularly state-led, and the roles of professionals and technology in pursuing these. These dimensions of The Light's project see it engaging more concretely with spatial planning in key areas, which we will unpack now. Firstly, a broader exposition of the centrality of the UN/Agenda 21, then a closer engagement with interrelated initiatives at decreasing scales: Smart Cities and 15-minute cities, under which sit 5G infrastructure and Ultra-low-emissions zones/Low Traffic Neighbourhoods.

The UN and agenda 21

As noted, the UN and Agenda 21 are central to The Light's conspiracist worldview and its populist logic, with the UN standing in for the 'global elite'. Articles frequently mention Agenda 21 within the context of other topics, whilst more in-depth pieces regularly discuss it exclusively, notably in Issue 2, October 2020, where Agenda 21 forms the front-page story, with the headline: 'Agenda 21: For the few, not the many'. The piece inextricably links this to the pandemic:

The renewal of the Coronavirus Act on Wednesday 30th September with barely a mention in the mainstream media and only a 90-minute debate by Parliament is a clear sign that the planned implementation of 'Agenda 21' is at full throttle (The Light 2, 1)

We are told that the removal of 'individual rights and natural freedoms' is Agenda 21's aim, 'under the guise of "saving the earth's resources"':

Did you enjoy lockdown? Imagine that permanently in one city [...] Agenda 21 will leave the vast majority of us imprisoned in 'smart cities' where we will be fully surveilled,

automatically policed and taxed, and desperately fighting over the few and more expensive resources allotted to us. (The Light 2, 1)

Central tenets of The Light's spatial understanding are evident, particularly the drawing of a sharp urban/rural distinction, with cities characterized as unnatural and immiserating. The affective pull of 'freedom' is paramount; so too is the nation, the purported privacy of the family home and 'our known way of life' – the Coronavirus Act is characterized as 'sweep[ing] away the ancient law of 'an Englishman's home is his castle'. The emotional dimension of this understanding and its anchoring within a wider popular imagination are prominent as the piece closes:

... we have seen it happen on screen so many times, [...] 1984, Brave New World, and a thousand "Dr. Evils" who always get defeated at the last minute by the superhero [...]. Only this time, it is those in the audience who have to be the heroes in this story. (The Light 2, 1)

Articulated from the Global North, the patriarchal and colonial dimensions of this understanding are obvious, for ultimately the 'way of life' at stake amounts to being able to access the resources you want, whenever you want, to do whatever you want.

Cities, we might infer, are the enemy because the experience of them undermines such a deeply held chauvinism; in Esposito's terms, an instituted social order with attendant policy programmes cannot but be the precondition of a viable urban and planetary existence. Spatial planning is firmly implicated here, for in a subsequent piece in the same issue, which also devotes a centrespread to exposing the 'hidden agenda' of the SDGs, planning is foregrounded:

Metropolitan Planning Organisations, Councils of Governments, Ministries of Commerce, and other quasi-governmental groups are quietly implementing Agenda 21 in every country, city, and town on earth. (The Light 2, 11)

A list of apparently suspicious policy interventions follows:

"place-based" urban planning to reduce commuter traffic and promote mixed-use urban zones; high-density SMART urban housing (or "Stack and Pack") policies to reclaim outlying lands for ecological purposes; "community engagement" and "collaborative planning" strategies to encourage public-private partnerships, or P3s, that may circumvent sluggish legal frameworks in favour of swift regulatory governance; the privatisation of social services such as housing, education, policing, and public health [...] and the establishment of special "economic development" or "innovation" zones that often receive tax incentives for investments in "distressed communities".

We might reasonably wonder whether any spatial planning intervention is not proof of encroaching totalitarianism. The ambivalence here, however, is that there are many reasons to critique the interventions listed based on experience of them, and to do so, as Healey (2010) would have it, from a 'planning orientation'. Noteworthy again is the total distrust in institutions both within and without the state, but also the defence of 'distressed communities'. The inverted commas are The Light's, serving to make planning responsible for the othering of such communities while bringing them into their camp. These are important points of tension for civically-minded planning, which must reckon with decades of exclusionary practice and inequitable outcomes – most damningly, this includes the period of any perceived civic turn. Esposito's utility lies

here, in providing an alternative approach to understanding and working through institutions, which have manifestly failed to deliver on their promises, and acting in solidarity with the disenfranchised. For planning this means a foundation both before and outside of the state, which does not ignore the importance of working with and through it. These points are revisited in the conclusion, but first we will deepen understanding of them through closer examination of more specific policy interventions.

Smart-cities

For *The Light* ‘smart-city’ is an archetypal empty signifier, frequently holding myriad grievances and concerns. Whilst perhaps surprising to those who see the term describing an approach to urban management leveraging technological change to make cities more sustainable and liveable, the breadth and diversity of the ‘smart-city’ paradigm perhaps lends itself to politically minded reappropriation, having mitigated against a clear, all-encompassing definition (Willis and Aurigi 2020). For *The Light*, smart cities are implicated in the climate change they deny, pursued by the technocrats they oppose, and represent surveillance and coercion: ‘The plan is to relocate country dwellers to modern ‘smart’ high-rise cities, whether they like it or not’ (*The Light* 15, 8). The invocation of ‘high-rise’ here as a cultural shorthand is instructive, encompassing the deficiencies of both twentieth century planning and technocracy, and the democratic deficit that underpinned them (Smith 2023). Elsewhere articles identify a slippery slope from current events to a dystopic future:

In Vienna, Austria, every citizen will be offered an App which will reward good behaviour with “Vienna Tokens”. The plan is to turn Vienna into a smart-city with data replacing money as the city’s currency. In future all decisions will be made by artificial intelligence so that there will be no need for elections. (*The Light* 23, 22)

The piece identifies similar schemes, incorporating a familiar range of concerns – digital currency, urbanisation, travel restrictions, vaccination – across very diverse countries, making Austria equivalent to Zimbabwe, the Netherlands, Ukraine, Iran, Russia, New Zealand, and India. A global plan with totalitarian implications is once again identified: ‘the technocratic state in full flow’. The direction of travel is seen to be a ‘Chinese-style’ social credit system that will make, for instance, university enrolment reliant on, for instance, one’s parents not walking their dog without a lead. At this level, however, the creation of a narrative against a package of urban governance interventions, many planners may be unlikely to find populist mobilization coming up against their day-to-day work, this might happen instead at pinch points around the narrative. One such pinch point in relation to anti-smart city sentiment relates to 5G infrastructure.

The Light understands 5G infrastructure, largely masts and antennae, to be central to the pursuit of the ‘twenty-first century Permanent Technocratic Enslavement of Mankind’. Scepticism here is compounded by scepticism about the technology’s impacts, its health effects on the one hand, underpinned again by absolute distrust in mainstream science, and its governance on the other, underpinned by absolute distrust in the machinery of government and its perceived capture by the global technocratic elite. At this scale, however, tensions within *The Light*’s conspiracy-driven populism become apparent; two examples help to demonstrate this. First, a common approach to evidence

emerges, wherein certain pieces of evidence are picked to support concerns whilst others are ignored. In this instance, this includes WHO reports, one of the key organizations driving the global conspiracy against which *The Light* is positioned. Second, at the level of planning practice, *The Light* begins to encourage readers to engage with participatory processes, including advice on how to do so successfully. While the question of whether these engagements are in good or bad faith is open, planning practice has a potential impact here beyond the immediate issue. The hard them/us distinction, central to populist mobilization, is hard to sustain at this scale, creating potential for planners to act in ways that unsettle the wider project and the assumptions that underpin it.

15-minute Cities

Resistance to 15-minute cities is perhaps the most prominent area where planners have noted populist backlash to their work (Marquet et al. 2025). Nevertheless, it is possible that the links between anti-15-minute city sentiment and COVID-19 conspiracism have not been fully appreciated by planners. As an article in *The Light* notes, when describing resistance to local plans in East Anglia: ‘The meeting had come about when a group of local people, who began a Stand in the Park during the COVID-19 lockdowns, decided to unite on this issue’ (*The Light* 32, 5). Activists were able to quickly mobilize resistance in a relatively small town, apparently inspired by attendance at more prominent protests in Oxford, testament to both the purchase and reach of populist-inspired, conspiracist discourse. An interview with one of the organizers of Oxford protests notes the strategic importance of the issue:

It’s the issue of the moment [...] the most strategic action I have started [...] striking while the iron is hot and before a policy is normalised is essential. [...] people know that “15 min cities” will really mean permanent lockdowns, and councils have started to announce them everywhere. (*The Light* 32, 11)

The affective dimension of resistance seems vital here; the sense that a whole way of life is threatened. This justifies the import that Laclau puts on myth-making within populist political projects, but it is important to recognize that what attains a mythical status is the act of driving to the shops:

The truth is that the authorities do not want people to own cars; they do not want freedom of movement. People need to understand the motives of their masters. The goal of technocracy is full control over population and resources, using the tremendous advances in surveillance technology to develop digital totalitarianism. (*The Light* 32, 2)

Again, however, at the very local scale, in relation to Low-Traffic Neighbourhoods and Ultra-Low Emissions Zones, this begins to touch on planning work:

... activists must be in every council meeting; scrutinising and asking assertive questions, sending in Freedom of Information requests, lobbying councillors and building alliances with those who are opposed, doing petitions, and taking up proper challenges in the courts. (*The Light* 32, 11)

This approach to grassroots intervention may look jarring because it seems at odds with a worldview that sees local democratic institutions as the smallest scale of a global conspiracy, but it goes hand-in-hand with attempts to build alternative bases of support and

action outside of both the state and the mainstream. The classifieds section of each issue, which includes advertisements for a range of ‘alternative’ service providers in all aspects of life – from healthcare, to banking, to energy provision – is a strong example, but so too the annual Stand in the Light music festival, which The Light began to organize in 2024 (The Light 46, 14–5). Once again, then, we see the kinds of practices we might centre in a civically-minded planning mobilized against planning from a grassroots level, which would seem to push planning to revisit its theorisation of and relationship with civil society.

Concluding discussion

It is worth beginning this section by clarifying why the foregoing analysis should interest planners. Firstly, the rise of political populism is an important development, setting part of the context for planning work, within which organized disinformation and conspiracism have important roles. This changes the nature of the ‘mainstream’, with 15-minute city conspiracism given credence by British government ministers, and the populist Reform Party taking control of numerous local authorities. It is vital for planners to understand these processes as they are unfolding in specific contexts, particularly where they touch their work. Furthermore, it points to the importance of strong theoretical underpinning for planning beyond its state allocated role, especially where populists are seizing power at local and national scales. Esposito’s understanding of institution may have potential here, in pointing to an institutional base for planning that goes beyond the identification of abstract values and supports a diversity of planning practices both inside and outside of the state. By confirming existing observations about contemporary populism, analysis of The Light also demonstrates why a re-institution of the planning project may be necessary. In particular, the centrality of the friend/enemy and people/elite distinctions in contemporary politics, whereby planners are situated in the elite/enemy camp, with planning understood as a state-led activity. Underpinning this positioning is a profound distrust not only of the institutions of government and governance in liberal democracies but also ‘technocratic’ ways of being and knowing, including underpinning regimes of research and science. Planning, then, as both a body of knowledge and a governance activity, is attacked from two sides simultaneously, unsettling dominant understandings of planning and the work of planners, and pointing to the need for both change and a better platform from which to defend itself.

More specifically, in view of ascendant right-populism in the Global North, Sager (2020) and Fainstein and Novy (2025) identify tensions that have emerged between the imperatives of inclusion and democracy. These have been centred in contemporary planning following critical reflection on planning’s actual and potential relationships with civil society. The foregoing analysis clarifies these tensions in a particular context, asking new questions of how planning might engage with civil society and pushing us to think critically about our response. Would a collaborative approach be possible or desirable with those inspired by The Light? Could populist logics be leveraged but in a pluralist, inclusive way, with a role for planning closer to its professed core values? Should planners adopt an unequivocally political approach, confronting exclusionary populism head on? Whilst various responses to these questions would find some support from recent scholarship, understandings from political science introduce

further complication, with populist mobilization driven simultaneously by resistance to mediated participation, whether parsed in communicative or agonistic terms, and around a clearly articulated ‘everyman’ political subject (Mudde 2004). The findings support this, demonstrating how firmly sedimented these positions might be, with effective discursive grounding across various right-wing positions, suggestive of a strong organic base in civil society. Before this, both communicative and agonistic approaches look shaky in their ‘social weightlessness’, as McNay (2014) would have it, supporting moves to deeper nuance in understanding of the relationship between the two (Mattila, Hirvola, and Borrup 2025). Esposito’s attention to rootedness could provide a useful conceptual tool for planners here, which does not abandon a commitment to pluralism or shy away from change. As such it might also underpin and justify both communicative and agonistic planning practices where they make sense.

To clarify the foregoing remark, *The Light* represents an attempt to organize and mobilize particular civil society actors around a proactive political project radically hostile to planning. This is a significant problem for theorisations of civil society within planning, whether they have seen civil society as representing actors, albeit in diverse forms, who might be brought into processes mediated or facilitated by planners (Healey 2006), or whether they have valorised civil society as a progressive force, to which planners might lend their support in the pursuit of greater equity or justice (Friedmann and Douglass 1998). Far from being a weakness, the indistinct and amorphous demands of *The Light*’s project are a key strength. In a post-industrial society in the Global North, it is unsurprising that this runs in a familiar right-wing groove, which looks backwards for its anchors and finds, with some justification, that its privileged subjects have been marginalized or dispossessed. Planning has struggled to engage productively with such perspectives, not least because to contextualize them meaningfully, acknowledging the social, political, economic and environmental conflicts that underpin their history, their way of life, and their understanding of it, would be utterly catastrophic for the subjects of right-wing populism. Conspiracy, then, acts as a sink for absorbing the myriad contradictions of a world view, constituting an ever-expanding universe of them/us circling around the paranoid refrain, ‘it is worse’. From here, it seems reasonable to argue that planning runs counter to contemporary populism and is an important target for it, not only because of fundamentally divergent values, but because it is founded on a commitment to practices that look to affirm that ‘it could be better’.

There have, of course, been various perspectives on what ‘better’ means over time; these have sometimes been in conflict, and in hindsight, some should be sources of discomfort for us. Arguably, developments in planning theory have emerged as responses to these conflicts and this discomfort, sometimes pushing us towards a kind of campism. In the face of the moral purity characteristic of exclusionary populism (Müller 2017), however, it seems important to embrace the discipline’s contradictions, especially if we hope to encourage others to work through their own. Whilst his direct influence is relatively limited, Li Destri Nicosia and Saija (2025) have noted that Esposito’s thinking resonates here, and a minor aim of this paper is to develop, however provisionally, an understanding of its utility. That utility, as it relates to planning’s recent engagement with civil society, has been introduced above; in closing, we would stress the overlapping potential that lies in conceiving of planning as an institution in Esposito’s terms: preceding the state, following it and exceeding it on all sides (Esposito 2022b). This is where

Esposito seems to provide something quite different from existing conceptions: planning cannot allow itself to be overtaken by a desire to step outside of its own history; neither can it be a somewhat detached means of ‘building up the institutional capacity of a place’ (Healey 2006, 61) that relies on certain governance configurations; rather, it must be that institutional capacity. Characteristically, this might look like both a difference of degree and a clean break, but key is that Esposito provides a moral urgency that matches the challenge of thinking through where contemporary populism has come from and how planning might respond to it. This would seem to support more expansive understandings of planning, noting multiple roots, both within and without the state, which can be extended and strengthened in diverse ways. As instances of institution, Esposito points to mass political parties and trade unions, the influence of which diminished in the latter twentieth century, creating a vacuum that populism can be seen to have filled, whilst privileging exclusionary definitions of institutions such as family, home, private life and property. Whilst it is important to avoid a trite transposition of planning into this space, it is nevertheless useful to think through what potential planning has for fostering and driving instituent collective action, with a moral commitment to pluralism and inclusion.

Esposito’s instituting thought, then, might offer a way both to understand and communicate the planning project to the world outside the discipline with humility, but also with gravity, potential and purpose:

If movements only acquire strength and duration by becoming institutionalized, then institutions can only regain their creative power by mobilizing. The need to institute life has once again become the priority, in both senses: to vitalize institutions and to restore life to those instituent traits that propel it beyond mere biological matter. (Esposito 2022c, 98–99)

We perhaps must recognize that democracy and inclusion are not values of the same kind. This gains clarity in the empirical sections of this paper, where The Light’s project most closely engages with planning work. Democracy must be foundational, while inclusion might be articulated and practiced in multiple ways. The instituted route suggested by Esposito seems to walk a fine line between the communicative and agonistic camps, acknowledging a responsibility to engage with others that has the potential to avoid either patronizing, alienating or making enemies of them.

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