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**Deconstructing spatial planning: re-interpreting the articulation of a new ethos for English local
planning**

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Deconstructing spatial planning: re-interpreting the articulation of a new ethos for English local planning

Abstract

The article reviews recent debates about the emergence of 'spatial planning' as a new ethos for English planning, suggesting that continued uncertainty around the term's use is partly caused by a failure to consider its emergence as the product of a contested political process. Drawing on an interpretive approach to policy analysis, the article goes on to show how this new organising principle is a complex articulation of different and potentially contradictory reform impulses. The result is to destabilise the concept of spatial planning, showing how it has been constructed as an 'empty signifier', an unstable, and tension-filled discursive stake in an ongoing politics of reform. Finally, it is argued that this has significant implications for the ways in which implementation success and failure should be understood and for analysis of planning reform initiatives and systems more widely.

Introduction: a new ethos for English planning?

Recently, academic attention in England has focused on understanding the complex series of reforms introduced to the planning system and practices since 2004. In particular, scrutiny has been devoted to interpreting the implications of the proclaimed shift from a land-use to a 'spatial planning approach' (e.g. Taylor, 2010; Shaw and Lord, 2009; Tewdwr-Jones et al, 2010). As Allmendinger and Haughton (2009) note, the rise of spatial planning as a new organising principle for English planning has been remarkably rapid with the concept quickly becoming embedded within government policy, and seen as central to the re-shaping of professional practice and education.

Considerable hopes have therefore been invested in this new ethos and its potential to reinvigorate planning (e.g. RTPI, 2001; Tewdwr-Jones, 2004), though its prospects now appear increasingly fragile under a new government unconvinced of the merits of its predecessors reforms (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010).

Emerging literature suggests a range of diverse influences shaped English spatial planning, including:

- Developments in European planning thought (Nadin, 2007; Tewdwr-Jones et al, 2010; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009).
- The rescaling of the state and increasing complexity of spatial relations (Nadin, 2007; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009; Haughton et al, 2010; Tewdwr-Jones et al, 2010)
- The need to achieve better policy integration (Tewdwr-Jones et al, 2010; Vigar, 2009; Morphet, 2009).
- Environmental sustainability (Nadin, 2007).
- The role of New Labour in government (Marshall and Inch, 2009; Nadin, 2007; Shaw and Lord, 2010; Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009).

Each of these factors is understood to have generated pressures for change to the pre-2004 planning system and practices. Each also, however, implies different emphases and purposes for reform. Thus, though the product of considerable debate over the principles that should guide planning reform (Nadin, 2007; Shaw and Lord, 2009), spatial planning has nonetheless proven difficult to define. Indeed, concerns about the lack of a common understanding of the term led the Royal Town Planning Institute (2007), who have advocated spatial planning as a key principle of their “new vision” (RTPI, 2001), to seek an ex-post definition of how it is being used in practice; a grounded theory approach that suggests spatial planning is very much an emergent social construct rather than a clearly defined concept.

Whilst some commentators consider English spatial planning synonymous with reforms to the statutory planning system, and therefore its interpretation by government (Shaw and Lord, 2010; Taylor, 2010); for others it represents a broader set of ideals ill-adapted to the reformed system (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). Some academics also see spatial planning as an emergent practice across the devolved nations of the UK (Vigar, 2009; Haughton et al, 2010), though it has not, for example, become part of the language of the recently reformed Scottish planning systemⁱ. Much discussion has also focused on the extent to which spatial planning represents the genuine change for planning its advocates have claimed (e.g. Morphet, 2009; Tewdwr-Jones, 2004), with critics suggesting it is a more cosmetic rebranding exercise (Kumzmann, 2009; Taylor, 2010).

These debates have helped to establish a diverse range of possible intellectual *roots* of spatial planning in England, and to interpret how these might be understood. However, rather less attention has been focused on the *routes*ⁱⁱ by which it emerged as a policy discourse. Thus, though political ideology has been recognised as an influence, the construction of spatial planning as the contingent product of a contested political process has remained obscure (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). This is potentially dangerous, risking reifying the concept of spatial planning, masking the contestations that have shaped it and thereby failing to critically understand the complex nature of this new ethos, and its implications for implementation.

This article therefore seeks to foreground the politics of constructing 'spatial planning' in England, presenting the shift to a spatial planning approach as part of a contested process of change. As a result it becomes possible to deconstruct spatial planning, understanding it as an 'empty signifier' (Gunder and Hillier, 2009) charged with managing tensions between different interpretations of what was wrong with planning and what was required to fix it. As a result the concept is destabilised, and the significance of the power relations that have shaped its emergence and ongoing, uncertain embedding within the planning system and practice are emphasised. It also focuses attention on the ways in which 'planning' is constructed and mobilised in efforts to reform

planning systems; suggesting that it may indeed be everything and nothing (Wildavsky, 1973) but that this is, in fact, key to understanding the discursive politics of planning reform.

Interpreting the articulation of a new 'planning'

The paper draws on 'interpretive policy analysis' (Yanow, 2000; Fischer, 2003) to assess the contingent, political construction of English spatial planning. This can be considered an emergent and somewhat eclectic orientation which views public policy as a series of socially constructed problems and solutions, framed by particular discourses or rationalities (Newman, 2001; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003)ⁱⁱⁱ. Successful discourses become part of the taken for granted "common-sense" of actors working within policy networks. However, such common-sense is not given but is instead a product of ongoing political struggle and the power-relations that shape particular knowledges, social relations and identities (Gramsci, 1998; Fairclough, 1992). Such approaches therefore emphasise the soft-institutions that govern the cultures of policy networks (Healey, 1997), and view one of the tasks of policy analysis as being to uncover and explain these interpretive frameworks and the politics behind their emergence. Interpretive policy analysis also therefore focuses attention on the actors involved in producing, reproducing and transforming such frameworks, the traditions of thought they draw on as they act and the ways in which they come to identify with new discourses and practices (Yanow, 2000).

In the heavily centralised English planning polity the national level policy community is a key site of contestation over the issues framing debate about the purposes of planning (Tewdwr-Jones, 2002). Actors at this level seek to construct discourse coalitions as a means of stabilising the way in which issues are seen (Hajer, 2003; Griggs, 2005). Discourse coalitions seek to close down opportunities to contest settlements around key policy questions, creating a framework of shared understanding through which the ambiguities and antagonisms of policy can be managed. However, when existing discourses stop functioning, or are disrupted, opportunities emerge for new framings to be

articulated. This can be particularly associated with the election of new governments or the emergence of new issues that lead to shifts in governing discourses.

Discursive shifts create a new regime of truth - where certain kinds of knowledge and practice are validated, whilst others are problematised (Newman, 2001; Foucault, 1978). The New Labour governments' drives to 'modernise' public services during the 2000s can be seen as a particularly concerted governmental effort to problematise existing practices and shape new ones within the English state. As such moments of discursive disruption and contestation were created in each sphere where modernisation was attempted (Newman, 2001; Finlayson, 2003). These represented moments of intense political activity and opportunity for actors seeking to shape these policy fields. New Labour's policy-making approach at times appeared to value the input of such actors, except perhaps where issues were understood as ideological or economic imperatives (Larsen et al, 2006). This led professional bodies and other interest groups, including the RTPI and Planning Officers' Society (POS), to re-focus their activities around national level lobbying (Laffin and Entwistle, 2000).

By analysing the emergence of spatial planning in England as a product of such a moment of disruption it becomes possible to open up a more critical assessment of the nature of the change it implies. Moreover, this approach also emphasises that planning systems and cultures produced in this way are contingent products of contested processes and power struggles. Attempts to articulate new discourses capable of stabilising or fixing meaning often require the assembly of diverse elements and aspirations in such a way as to give the appearance of a coherent and rational set of policy prescriptions (Li, 2007). This type of coalition building can be achieved through, for example, the construction of "storylines" that shape argumentation (Hajer, 2003), or of key "empty signifiers" – terms whose lack of positive content allows them to assume a broad, ambiguous appeal (Griggs, 2005; Laclau, 1996; Gunder and Hillier, 2009). The contingency of this process of construction is, however, often subsequently tidied away, allowing the policy process to be presented as a technical rather than a political realm (Howarth, 2009), something that was identified as a feature of New

Labour's managerialist politics in the UK (Finlayson, 2003). This process of "rendering technical" (Li, 2007) can obscure how particular sets of diverse elements are articulated in ways that may prioritise certain elements and/ or subordinate others (Newman and Clarke, 2009). However, by foregrounding the production of policy discourses key tensions and contradictions become visible.

Newman (2001) suggests that public policy is constructed within a field of tensions between different regimes of control and approaches to managing change in the policy process. She argues that New Labour's approach to governing was marked by an eclecticism that drew unevenly on a range of available discourses. Whilst this might be considered a "belts and braces" approach to policy implementation, Newman also highlights how these different approaches imply quite different governance cultures, including different conceptions of state actors, the relations between them and the types of change required of them (represented in figure 1).

Planning systems and their cultures are often understood to have been put together in this way - operating within a 'field of tensions' and charged with achieving multiple, ambiguous and even contradictory purposes (Vigar et al, 2000). Recognition of this ambiguity is not new, and should be considered central to the problem of defining the elusive concept of planning itself (Foley, 1960; Wildavsky, 1973; Tewdwr-Jones, 2009; Taylor, 2010). In this regard, Gunder and Hillier (2009) have usefully focused attention on the role of 'planning' itself as an empty signifier, tying together multiple and often contradictory narratives about the governance of land-use change. A central goal for analysts is therefore to assess particular plannings (cf. Haughton et al, 2010), interpreting particular articulations of diverse elements and their potential to achieve the often diverse outcomes sought by policy-makers (Li, 2007).

The paper therefore seeks to assess the emergence of "spatial planning" as a response to a particular political conjuncture, a discourse constructed to manage the tensions between different understandings of planning. In this way the stability of the concept as a new organising principle for planning practice is challenged and the tensions between different interpretations of it are opened

to critical scrutiny. The analysis draws on empirical research into the construction of the planning reform agenda, and the emergence of spatial planning in England. This involved eleven semi-structured interviews with actors involved in framing the planning reform agenda at the national level, and a further twenty-four interviews with local authority planners, managers and elected members in two case studies. Interviewees at the national level included civil servants and representatives of other key planning organisations. Interviews lasted from an hour to two and a half hours in duration, and were recorded and later transcribed. They sought to assess actors' interpretations of spatial planning and of the modernisation agenda, providing both a view from the inside of the planning reform process, and an assessment of the new system in practice. This was supplemented by analysis of a large corpus of publicly available documents from governmental, professional, and non-governmental sources prominent in national level deliberations from 2000-2005. This was both a means of verifying findings from the interviews, and of mapping the way in which spatial planning was understood by key actors beyond the planning policy community as they sought to influence the planning reform agenda.

The article begins by describing how the reform agenda in planning unfolded, stressing the particular interpretations that were understood to have framed governmental action, and the discourse coalitions that sought to influence the agenda. This draws in places on, and develops, the author's previously published accounts of New Labour's planning reforms, and the culture change agenda that has accompanied it (Inch, 2009; 2010), but makes use of the conceptual framework outlined above to critically analyse the discursive politics of planning reform from which the concept of spatial planning emerged. It then goes on to assess spatial planning as an attempt to manage tensions between quite different conceptions of what planning is, what was wrong with it and the role it should play. This reveals the extent to which the discourse has been constructed as an uneasy combination of different aspirations. Three different interpretations of spatial planning are then outlined to illustrate the scope for divergent articulations of the elements that constitute spatial planning. These reveal the status of spatial planning as a stake in an ongoing politics of reform,

leading to a final discussion of the implications of this for implementation and for analysis of planning reform more generally.

Planning as a problem- “throwing the balls in the air”

During their first term in office the New Labour government showed relatively little interest in pursuing wholesale reform of the planning system. The inclusion of a commitment to legislate on planning reform in the general election manifesto in 2001 therefore came as a surprise to many within the planning community (Upton, 2006). As a result, the election of the second Blair government marked a significant shift in the language used by Government to represent the planning system. Policy statements published during Labour’s first term in office, though critical of aspects of planning’s performance, had stopped short of proposing the need for substantial change. From 2001 onwards, however, the system was radically problematised with Ministers suggesting the need for a “clean slate” (Blackman, 2001) to deal with the “quagmire” of the existing system (Dewar and Winkley, 2001) and realise “fundamental change” (DTLR, 2001). The appointment of Lord Falconer as minister with a strong mandate to drive through reform was interpreted by civil servants as a determined effort to “throw the balls in the air”, suggesting a clear attempt to dislocate the discursive settlement that had emerged around planning in the 1990s.

The Green paper itself presented the existing system as broken, claiming a consensus on the need for “fundamental change”, describing an overly negative system no longer meeting the needs of its chief users, ‘business’ and the ‘community’ (DTLR, 2001). Despite government claims of a consensus, the subsequent consultation period produced a lobbying battle to redefine the principles governing the system, yielding some 15, 500 responses. Environmental and social NGO’s expressed strong misgivings about the government’s motives. Certain developer interests also expressed concern at the potentially negative impact of a period of concerted change. Though the emphasis on the ‘broken system’ was later moderated (e.g. ODPM, 2002), such doubts struggled to influence a

determined government. Instead those discourses best placed to influence the reforms were those advocating change and agreeing in some way with the assertion that the planning system had become a problem. It was in this context that spatial planning gradually emerged and was able to influence the reform agenda.

The emergence of “the spatial planning agenda”

At the national level of the planning policy community there were a number of voices calling for reform at the turn of the millennium. This was based on considerable frustration with aspects of the performance of planning, and the plan-led system inaugurated in the 1990s. It is possible to identify several key principles of problematisation woven together within their concerns:

- *The regulatory rut*: as a result of the settlements produced in the 1990s, planning had become a quasi-legalistic, and overly bureaucratic form of environmental regulation rather than a strategic means of shaping the future of places. As part of this plans were felt to have become rule books for development control that were slow and expensive to produce.
- *Residualisation*: consigned to a regulatory rut and overly focused on development control, planning had become increasingly residualised within local government. As such the system was seen as an impediment to dynamic change rather than a tool for delivering it. As a result planning was increasingly relegated as a local government function, and unable to effectively engage with actors beyond cumbersome statutory processes.
- *By-passing*: a further implication of the above, and the increasing centralisation and fragmentation of the state, was that the planning system had come to be bypassed by other means of more effectively delivering change, such as competitive funding streams for delivering regeneration (Thornley, 1993).
- These problems had all been further exacerbated by the effects of *centralisation* of control over planning and attendant limitations on local discretion, and by what Tewdwr-Jones and

Harris (1998) describe as the *commodification* of planning, driven by the imposition of centrally determined performance targets. These increasingly defined the culture and performance of local government planning, driving out discretion and concern for quality in development and replacing it with a 'tick box' mentality driven by concern for speed (Tewdwr-Jones, 1999).

- These processes were also related to the “*drabbing down*” of the profession’s image (RTPI, 2003), and a struggle to attract new entrants (Tewdwr-Jones, 1999).

Several reports gave expression to these frustrations within the planning policy community. Civil Servants recognised the Local Government Association’s (2000) *Reforming Local Planning* as particularly influential in shaping the government’s reform agenda. This was the product of a working group including key figures in the professional and policy communities, chaired by future Deputy Mayor of London Nicky Gavron. The report produced a clear diagnosis of the problem with existing practices, describing a system that had become sclerotic and was not capable of fulfilling planning’s potential to provide the flexible, strategic vision required by modern local government.

Drawing on developments in European planning thought that were particularly influential at this time^{iv}, it presented a model of a positive planning system producing a more flexible and streamlined hierarchy of *spatial development strategies*. This would make planning central to corporate decision-making in local authorities, delivering a faster and more visionary process, but also an holistic and integrative tool to promote sustainable development in partnership with key stakeholders in government, economy and civil society. The report gave expression to a clearly felt need for change amongst influential elements of the planning policy and professional communities.

Within the RTPI (2001), recognition of the need for planning to renew itself had, by this time, led to an internal movement to re-shape the profession. This was spearheaded by the launch of the “New Vision” in 2001. This was based on a very similar analysis to that of the LGA report, seeking to

reaffirm “core values” underlying professional practice, but to reinterpret these in line with the perceived challenges of a changed world. Central to this was a desire to broaden the horizons of the profession, and in so doing to articulate a more strategic role for planning. This needed to take the profession beyond the statutory planning system and promote a wider understanding of planning’s potential contribution to society.

The emergence of this modernising discourse coalition can be understood as an articulation of a particular tradition of planning thought. Frustration with planning’s overly regulatory and development control-dominated role has been a feature of planning’s development within the UK. This has led to regular calls for change, and periodic reforms, designed to focus planners’ attention on the ‘real’, creative and productive work of plan making, rather than the routine, administrative ‘burden’ of regulation (Prior, 2005). Several of those interviewed at the national level expressed strong personal identification with what came to be known as the spatial planning agenda. Their understanding of planning had been developed through experiences of planning education and practice in the 1970s, a period when planning’s potential to play a broad, proactive role had been widely asserted. For them the plan-led system of the 1990s had created a frustratingly narrow understanding of planning. They were therefore ready to embrace the principle of change as a restoration of planning’s ‘lost’ sense of purpose. The shift from land-use to spatial planning therefore became a shorthand for a broadening of planning’s purpose, with the idea of a “*spatial planning approach*” coming to symbolise the “*culture change*” that the profession and other advocates sought for planning (Goodstadt, 2003). The spatial planning agenda was therefore understood by its advocates as a chance to restate the positive, progressive purposes of planning.

As a modernising narrative spatial planning shared key characteristics with the prevailing discursive climate under New Labour – presenting change as a necessary response to a changed world. Moreover, the government’s discursive commitments to fostering ‘community’, more participatory policy making, partnership and integration across government, evidence based policy making, and

pragmatic implementation all fitted with key elements of the planning tradition that spatial planning sought to rearticulate (Rydin and Thornley, 2002). This sense of a 'fit' with New Labour's progressive language of network governance had generated considerable hope for the renewal of planning. However, it had also generated frustration since the government apparently did not see planning in these terms (e.g. MacDonald, 2001). Instead the key driver of reform was widely understood to lie in the influence of what can be labelled the "Treasury agenda", and the concerted lobbying of business groups like the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). This rested on a rather different conception of planning's role, the problems with the existing system and way they should be addressed.

"The Treasury Agenda" as a driver of reform

A series of reports published during Labour's first term that described planning as a regulatory barrier to economic development prompted interest in planning reform in both the Treasury and Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) (e.g. McKinsey, 1998). A high profile campaign by the CBI that reinforced this message in the run up to the 2001 election added further momentum (CBI, 2001). As a result, the Treasury was reported to have begun a review of the planning system in early 2001, instigated apparently without the initial knowledge of the department formally responsible for planning^v (Blackman, 2001a). This is broadly consistent with the Treasury's wider role in the setting of domestic policy which, with Gordon Brown as Chancellor of the Exchequer between 1997 and 2007, had become perhaps more powerful than at any time in its history (Larsen et al, 2006). The influence of the CBI on government thinking can be gauged by the tendency for ministers to announce their intentions to reform planning in speeches to the Confederation (Blackman, 2001a; Brown, 2005; Blair, 2006). Their concerns were related to the speed and reliability of decision-making within the system, which they claimed led to delays with negative impacts on the economy. To solve this problem they sought to strengthen the voice of business interests, and performance management regimes.

The manifesto commitment to reform planning had implied that speeding up the system would be the primary goal of legislative change (Labour Party, 2001). The subsequent announcement in the pre-budget report of 2001 that a Planning Green paper was imminent was significantly positioned amongst a package of proposals designed to “meet the productivity challenge”, with reform intended to “improve the flexibility, speed and responsiveness of the land-use planning system” (HM Treasury, 2001, 31). For many of those interviewed, this symbolised the central thrust of the government’s interest in reforming planning – dissatisfaction at the negative economic impacts of land use regulation.

Within New Labour’s adaptation of neoliberalism the drive to promote economic competitiveness remained an often over-riding priority (Finlayson, 2003), and was particularly central to the Treasury’s agenda across government (Larsen et al, 2006). Advocates of spatial planning understood this as a continuation of the Treasury’s default attitude towards the planning system since the 1980s, and therefore as shaped by a neoliberal conception of planning as a regulatory burden (Low, 1991). As a result the Treasury was constructed as an ideological threat to the role of planning. As one interviewee put it:

And the Treasury doesn’t understand. The Treasury starts from a very thin economic model which is based upon the idea of market failure of course. We should only intervene if there is market failure. Well it’s very hard to talk about what market failure actually constitutes in the real world which is planning.

The idea of an understanding based in theory and not in the “real world” was reinforced by the strikingly negative language used in interviews to describe civil servants in the Treasury as, for example: “hyperactive children”, “attack hounds”, or, more often, “pointy heads” with double firsts from Cambridge University but “no common sense”. Treasury officials were caricatured as naively beholden to a narrow economic rationality that viewed planning as an intrinsically problematic and anachronistic form of intervention in market forces, and that could not comprehend the wider

imperatives of sustainable development. Meetings between Treasury officials and spatial planning advocates were described as a paradigm clash between competing rationalities or traditions that remained, to some extent, mutually incomprehensible. This is backed up by the findings of Haughton et al (2010, 166-170) which draws similar conclusions from work that also included interviews with Treasury officials.

The identity of the spatial planning discourse coalition was therefore further secured through its opposition to the Treasury agenda, an antagonistic 'other' that threatened its identity (cf. Griggs, 2005). The spatial planning agenda has, at times, therefore been experienced and portrayed as a rear-guard effort to defend planning, and a broader commitment to principles of sustainable development, against the threat posed by bullying from the Treasury and its 'narrow' competitiveness agenda (e.g. Upton, 2006; Ellis, 2007). As such the spatial planning discourse coalition sought to bring together a range of different groups interested in asserting a broader purpose for planning in opposition to the narrowness of both the Treasury's critique, and the 'regulatory rut'. Proponents consistently maintained that the change implied by the switch to spatial planning would create a more flexible planning system. Planning could therefore play a vital role in creating the conditions for sustainable development, meeting business needs for efficient decision-making whilst *also* achieving environmental and social goals. The NGO's that had been wary of the principle of reform in 2001, therefore generally came to endorse if not actively advocate the principle of a spatial planning approach, seeing it as a vehicle through which to assert a stronger conception of planning's role.

The spatial planning discourse coalition then emerged as a response to frustrations with planning's role and status, and a desire to restate a broader practice with a stronger sense of purpose.

However, it also provided a means of defending planning against attack from the Treasury agenda and a rather different conception of what was wrong with planning. Both the spatial planning and Treasury agendas emanated from particular and very different traditions of thought about planning

and the role it should play. These provided the basis for their distinctive problematisations of existing planning practices which were each articulated in line with key concerns of the New Labour government. Whilst the Treasury agenda was seen to have been central to the decision to reform planning, with the “balls in the air” the fact that the spatial planning discourse coalition was able to present a coherent modernising narrative created opportunities to influence the emerging agenda.

Constructing “spatial planning” as a new state practice – the 2004 Act

Given that the CBI critique of planning was focused on the speed and efficiency of decision-making, the fact that the legislative changes proposed by the government focused largely on plan-making suggests that the spatial planning discourse coalition was, to some extent, successful. Ministers were able to claim a consensus for reform based on the idea that, “planning is too often seen as part of the problem, not part of the solution” (ODPM, 2003, 12). A spatial planning approach was endorsed as a key part of this solution, becoming a “key principle” of the reformed planning system through which a more “positive” planning process could be realised:

Spatial planning goes beyond traditional land use planning to bring together and integrate policies for the development and use of land with other policies and programmes which influence the nature of places and how they function (ODPM, 2005)

The idea of “going beyond” previous practices constructed spatial planning as a principle of change, and a broadening of the role of planning. However, the presence of these two distinct discourse coalitions, and the traditions they drew upon in framing their respective cases for reform, suggest the extent of the challenge for any new settlement seeking to govern the planning policy network. The key tensions that had characterised the planning policy network in the 1990s remained. To developers, for example, the definition of sustainable development as a statutory purpose for planning was a symbol of government concessions to environmental interests (e.g. Blackman, 2002);

whilst environmental groups continued to view the government's motivations with suspicion (e.g. Ellis, 2003). These were exacerbated by the tensions between government departments, with the powerful Treasury seeking to intervene in the affairs of the weaker department responsible for planning. The government's attempts to sell the new system as a solution to the problems identified by both the Treasury and the spatial planning lobbies led them to downplay the tensions that the planning system was being asked to manage. Lord Falconer for example, in his evidence to a Select Committee Inquiry into the Green Paper in 2001/2, had refused to accept any necessary tension between the goals of speeding the system up for business, and increasing levels of public participation. This echoes a distinctive element of New Labour's wider approach – the claim that a 'third way' can be found between traditional antagonisms such as "enterprise *and* the attack on poverty and discrimination" (Blair, 1998, 1). This allowed the party to claim a pragmatic "what matters is what works" approach to government, presenting political antagonisms as managerial challenges (Mouffe, 1998).

As it became embedded in the reformed system, spatial planning therefore took on the role of an empty signifier, charged with defusing tensions between competing conceptions of planning's purpose by presenting change as a solution to a series of quite different problems. It therefore also represented the interaction between New Labour's hybrid ideological approach (which sought to endorse multiple principles and purposes within an overarching framework where economic competitiveness was key), and the particular politics of the English planning policy network. As such spatial planning *in the English planning system* was clearly an assemblage of different aspirations for planning.

Spatial planning as an empty signifier

By considering spatial planning as an empty signifier it is possible to consider the way these diverse aspirations are held together within a potentially unstable and deeply ambiguous discursive regime

(cf. Newman and Clarke, 2009), questioning the status of the reformed system, and the coherence of spatial planning as an organising principle.

Nadin (2007) identifies five key characteristics of the spatial planning approach embedded in the 2004 Act, each of which responds to key governmental imperatives and criticisms of the performance of planning:

- *A responsive system*: addressing the perennial failure of the system to deliver up to date plan and decision-making processes
- *An inclusive system*: fostering improved levels of public participation in the planning process
- *A collaborative system*: working to achieve the better integration of different policy agendas
- *A results driven system*: focused on implementation on the ground and realising change
- *An evidence based system*: Reflecting another key commitment of New Labour in government, the idea of an evidence based planning process has been a central goal of the new system

Nadin accepts the presence of (inevitable) tensions between these goals, and suggests that spatial planning must therefore be considered as a whole. However, by taking these tensions seriously it becomes possible to identify how different articulations of these parts may lead to the construction of quite different spatial plans. Whilst these are not necessarily mutually incompatible, the differences between them highlight the challenge involved in establishing the legitimacy of spatial planning.

The spatial planning discourse coalition, for example, has viewed spatial planning as an expression of the shift towards new forms of networked, local governance and an opportunity for planning to be recognised as central to this (e.g. Tewdwr-Jones, 2004). As noted above this articulation of spatial planning was aligned with key New Labour discourses (Newman, 2001) and influential elements of planning thought. It therefore places particular emphasis on the *integrative* and *collaborative*

dimensions of spatial planning. The ideal underpinning this conception of spatial planning is of a process in which a wide range of stakeholders embrace the planning system as a means of steering the spatial development of places, bringing together representative and participatory democratic voices with the interests of various agencies to debate the best *evidence* available. Advocates of this interpretation of spatial planning have also accepted the need for a more *responsive* system that is able to *deliver* sustainable development. However, this emerges from a conception of the regulatory functions of the planning system as a necessary, but essentially routine bureaucratic task of implementation that should not impede the creative work of spatial planning (cf. Allmendinger et al, 2010).

It is also necessary to identify key tensions *within* this articulation of spatial planning, or the wider promises of network governance (Newman, 2001). For example, the principle of fostering partnership between different stakeholder agencies and the commitment required to develop effective working relationships may well work against the encouragement of genuinely participatory policy making. The extent to which such an approach implies that the planning system has the power to produce a rational, evidence-based consensus over strategic policy choices (Flyvbjerg, 1998); and the balance between representative and participatory democracy are further sources of potential tension.

The role of planning professionals within spatial planning must also be considered. As indicated above, the RTPI has been a strong advocate for spatial planning as network governance, seeing this as a key principle around which to **renegotiate the state-professional pact** and thereby secure a broader role for the profession within local governance. They have accepted that spatial planning calls into question the profession's claim to own its field of practice (RTPI, 2001). However, in as far as professionalism rests on the claims to specialist expertise made by professionals, collaborative forms of planning may challenge traditional roles (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 1998), and the market value of professionalism.

For the **Treasury/ CBI discourse coalition**, the legitimacy of spatial planning as a new organising concept for the planning system has never been clearly established. This was made apparent in 2005 when the Treasury commissioned Kate Barker, a member of the Bank of England's monetary policy committee, to conduct a review of the *Land-use Planning System* and how it "can better deliver economic growth" (Barker, 2006). Whilst Barker's (2006) final report recognised the value of the planning system in achieving the broader goals of sustainable development, the fact that its terms of reference made no mention of spatial planning suggests the difficulty the concept has encountered in being accepted outside the planning policy community. However, it is still possible to identify the way in which the diverse elements of spatial planning can be articulated to fit the concerns of the Treasury/ CBI's neoliberal concerns. Here the chief complaint has been over the planning system's perceived failure to deliver fast and effective decisions to support economic development. Key priorities then were to create a *responsive* and *results-driven* system focused around facilitating development. Other goals, e.g. *inclusion* and *collaboration* were accepted to the extent that they either heightened the 'business' voice in decision-making, or did not slow up the system. The Barker Review meanwhile represented part of a wider drive to ensure that the system would become more responsive to economic *evidence*, e.g. price signals.

These different interpretations of spatial planning can be mapped onto the model of governance as a field of tensions introduced above (see figure 2). The result is to highlight the very different implications of these understandings of how planning reform should influence the direction of change in the planning system. This helps to highlight the tensions that the concept of spatial planning is being asked to manage, and the way in which it became a container for quite different aspirations. Figure 3 meanwhile highlights the tensions within and between these different interpretations of spatial planning. This suggests that it is necessary to exercise some caution in interpreting spatial planning, and in assessing its prospects as a new organising ethos for the English planning system. Instead it suggests that spatial planning should be thought of as an empty signifier, whose considerable tensions must be interpreted and managed within the policy process.

Spatial planning as stake in an ongoing politics of interpretation

As the Barker Review of *Land Use Planning* suggested the 2004 planning reforms struggled to silence influential criticisms of the planning system. The period after the passing of the Act was therefore marked by attempts to both establish the legitimacy of a spatial planning approach, and to define how the concept should be interpreted in practice. This has been attempted through a range of different mechanisms designed to generate support for this new approach and the changed practices it requires (including the academic debates described above). Calls for a 'culture change' amongst all users of the system, for example, have come from across the planning community, helping to create an impression of a strong consensus for change (e.g. NPF, 2008). However, such calls often elide significant differences between competing conceptions of the type of change required of planning cultures (see figure 1). In so doing they mask the ongoing politics of interpretation through which a hegemonic articulation of spatial planning is contested.

At times, however, these politics have become visible, revealing, for example, fractures in the relationship between the government and the profession which obliged the profession "to go on the offensive" (RTPI, 2003). The RTPI consistently argued that the use of performance targets worked against the culture change required to realise their interpretation of spatial planning as network governance (RTPI, 2003). Additionally, professional and environmental lobby groups opposed attempts by government to emphasise economic development at the expense of the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development (Cowell and Owens, 2006). These instances help to foreground the contested nature of spatial planning as a discursive stake in the reform of English planning (Inch, 2010), highlighting the struggle to institutionalise particular interpretations of spatial planning. In so doing they help to clarify the task for advocates of particular spatial planning but also raise important doubts about the power of the spatial planning discourse coalition to establish the hegemony of their interpretation of this new ethos. This has important implications,

emphasising the uncertain political positioning of planning within the contemporary state, and the way in which this limits opportunities to establish a legitimate, new governing ethos. Moreover, such an account stands in significant contrast to, and problematises a more technocratic tendency to view the emergence of new practices as a 'technical' question of implementation and practitioner commitment to change.

Implementing an empty signifier

Thinking of spatial planning as an empty signifier it also becomes necessary to question whether the tensions and ambivalences which shaped planning reform were capable of being managed within the reformed English planning system. Spatial planning is not a single, coherent ethos but is instead being asked to perform multiple different tasks that each imply somewhat different changes for planning cultures and planners in practice. These are not always mutually incompatible, but do, at the very least, suggest possible sources of implementation failure. This might have opened up interpretive possibilities for some actors at the local level to harness, creating new discourses through which they can make claims for new roles and power. However, it also imposed a burden as planners sought to interpret this new, multi-faceted governing ethos and understand it in relation to the practices and powers the 2004 system enabled. This requires an understanding of the challenge that implementation of such a complex agenda poses, and of the agency required to make spatial planning work (cf. Newman, 2008). In this sense calls for a culture change amongst practitioners as a key to realising spatial planning in practice may be a sometimes necessary but by no means sufficient condition. Expectations of what spatial planning needs to, and can achieve in practice have been high, however, this may have obscured the extent to which the tensions between the different elements within it may produce quite contradictory pressures (e.g. to speed up processes against performance targets whilst increasing levels of public participation). It may also have limited debate about the prospects for different interpretations of spatial planning being

realised in a wider context where the state's power to realise democratically defined spatial objectives was progressively undermined under New Labour (Gough, unpublished). **Indeed**, In this context it is necessary to question what successful implementation of spatial planning would entail, and whose assessments of success and failure should prevail. This depends, in part, on the outcome of the discursive power struggle over 'spatial planning' and its uncertain ability to command the continued commitment of the discourse coalition that supported it in a rapidly changing political climate^{vi}.

Conclusions: the discursive politics of planning reform

Though heavily rooted in the particularities of English planning reform, the analysis presented here has implications for the study of planning reform initiatives and planning systems more broadly. The tools of interpretive policy analysis can produce a particular focus on the politics shaping change to policy processes, and how they are enacted through the complex discursive power-relations of policy-making and implementation. In so doing, they highlight how different conceptions of planning compete to give meaning to the way that planning systems work. However, they also illustrate how 'planning' can be constructed as a container for quite different aspirations. The paper therefore provides an empirical exploration of the role of planning as an empty signifier (Gunder and Hillier, 2009), highlighting the value of this concept as a means of questioning the way in which planning is articulated and mobilised in particular political contexts and how this frames and delimits the possibilities of reform. As described above, this provides particular grounds for critically interrogating the rhetoric that often surrounds the implementation of change, opening up new more sympathetic views of the struggle to realise the normative promises of planning in practice and challenging the tendency to 'render technical' the implementation of complex change agendas. Finally, foregrounding the political work required to construct particular plannings clarifies the task for those interested in influencing change in planning systems. This requires a more explicitly, and

strategically political understanding of their work and of the struggle over key discursive 'stakes' in shaping the possibility for new planning practices.

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Figures

Figure 1: Models of change in planning systems (adapted from Newman, 2001, 34)

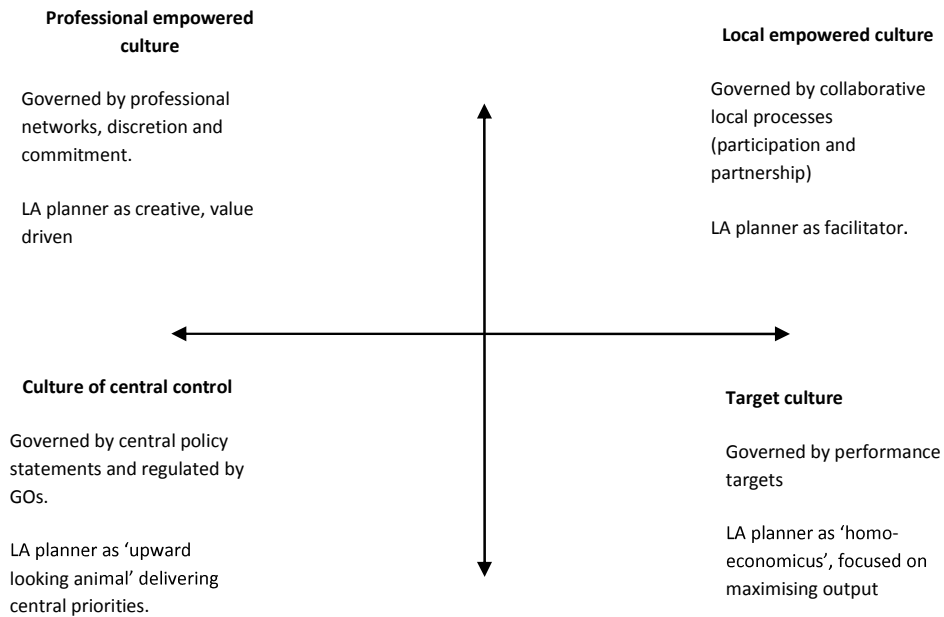


Figure 2: Mapping interpretations of spatial planning

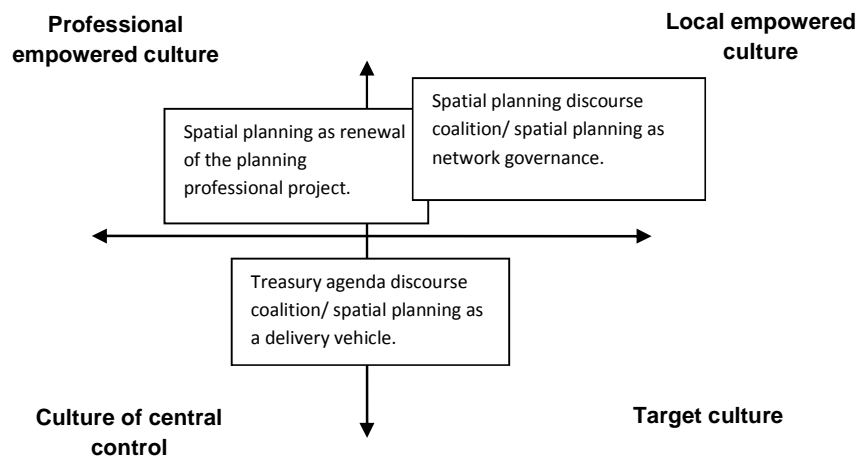


Figure 3 Tensions in and between different interpretations of spatial planning

Spatial planning as...	Key advocate	Articulation of elements of spatial planning	Tensions within this articulation	Tensions with other interpretations
1. Network governance	Spatial planning discourse coalition	<i>Inclusive and collaborative</i> as key to transparent <i>evidence-based</i> process of deliberation. <i>Results</i> and <i>responsiveness</i> seen to flow naturally from this as concern for making change happen	1. Open participation vs. effective partnership 2. Participatory vs. representative democracy 3. Scope for reaching a rational, evidence based consensus on controversial issues	1. Local deliberative process at odds with centralised delivery. 2. Decentring of professional expertise at odds with renewal of professional project
2. Delivery Vehicle	Treasury agenda/ CBI	<i>Results</i> and <i>responsiveness</i> seen as key to ensuring system delivers what the economy requires. This must involve more appreciation of market based <i>evidence</i> . <i>Inclusion</i> and <i>collaboration</i> must not hinder drive to facilitate development	1. Policy guidance contains contradictory messages	1. Centralisation at odds with local deliberation 2. Standardisation at odds with creative local/ professional work
3. Renewal of the planning professional project	The planning profession	As in 1 above	1. Professional expert decentred within network professionalism	1. Trust and empowerment of professionals at odds with low trust, high-output model of delivery vehicle 2. Potential for conflict with decentred role in local governance

ⁱ Which is not to argue that planning reforms in Scotland have not been influenced by, and sought to respond to many of the challenges gathered in England under the banner of 'spatial planning'. Rather it is to highlight some of the conceptual uncertainty that the label's prolific use can generate.

ⁱⁱ The roots/ routes distinction is one that originally comes from Paul Gilroy, via Stuart Hall (1996).

ⁱⁱⁱ This eclecticism involves, for example, combining elements of post-structuralist discourse theory with more hermeneutic traditions of social science (e.g. Fischer, 2003). This is not unproblematic, but the approach adopted here seeks out points of complementarity between different conceptual and theoretical traditions,

bracketing the differences between them to explore the value of this broad sensibility in illuminating processes of governance change.

^{iv} As Allmendinger and Haughton (2009) note association with European planning ideas has acted to lend added legitimacy to spatial planning. The European influence was clear in the LGA report, and was generally more marked pre-2001 when the influence of the European Spatial Development Perspective (European Commission, 1999) was particularly felt.

^v The government department responsible for planning has been through a series of incarnations over the period in question from Department of the Environment Transport and the Regions (DETR) to Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR) to Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), to Communities and Local Government (CLG).

^{vi} This depends crucially on the influence of a new coalition government, elected in May 2010 with clear intentions to introduce a fresh set of changes to English planning. The adaptation of spatial planning to the new discursive environment that this creates will be a significant test.