

Power Relations in the British Development Control System

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Introduction

The operation of development control is the most visible and arguably the most controversial aspect of the British planning system. At its best it has been described as a valuable defender of environmental quality (HMSO 1994) and at its worst it has been exposed as secretive and sometimes corrupt instrument dominated by vested interest (Doncaster DC 1997, Bassetlaw DC 1996 etc.). The increasing complexity of planning applications has compounded the growing disenchantment by the general public at what appears to be a closed and insular arena of planning decision making. Indeed, there has been a significant increase in the level of direct action by the public at major development sites (Newbury 1996, Manchester 1997) which indicates that at least for some, the system is no longer a legitimate instrument in the defence of the public good. Ultimately these new pressures present challenges to both the philosophical rationale of the planning system and the practice of the professional planner. These pressures provide a clear motivation for investigating planning practice thereby to penetrate this complex pattern of decision making which has important consequences for society and the environment. The following paper provides a brief description of the research programme highlighting some of the key methodological and theoretical dilemmas as well as its implications for planning knowledge

Research Methodology

The nature of development control has a number of specific characteristics which make its study problematic.

- Development control operates in a complex institutional environment, most obviously within local government but also involving the institutional patterns of other players including national government, the development industry and judiciary. The boundaries of development control practice are, therefore, defuse and fluid.
- The decision making process in development control is the expression of multi-centred and complex power relations which may be focused either in the overt procedural/technocratic or covert personal/political domains
- The public involvement in development control is complex and dispersed.
- Specific points of contact with individuals inside this complex system may be characterised by a desire to conceal and not reveal the true workings of the system. This may be expressed as a slight or extreme problem and may stem from the desire to defend corporate or personal positions.

It is, therefore, evident that for both practical and contextual reasons the examination of the development control system was likely to be most profitable using a qualitative case study framework. The initial criteria for case study selection was to identify medium sized development control cases, that are of regional rather than national significance. This recognises the focus of previous research on national cases and of the importance of studying smaller applications which may be far more representative of general trends in development control practice. A further factor was the desire to study a range of local authorities which reflected differing institutional, political and economic circumstances.

Semi-structured interviews were sought with public sector planners, private developers, elected members, third parties and statutory consultees. This data was complemented by a wide range of secondary documentary evidence drawn from planning files, personal correspondence, press cuttings etc. The conduct of the field work raised a number of important ethical questions surrounding access to key documents and the author's prior involvement in one of the case studies.

Major Obstacles

Perhaps the most problematic issue of the research project has been the realisation of the need to relate the detailed analysis of planning to a coherent theoretical framework, both in terms of developing a prior conceptual framework and in analysing the case studies. This difficulty has led to the generation of several chapters of the thesis which ultimately proved inappropriate. The reason for this problem lies not in any fundamental disagreement between the author and his supervisors but in an essential misunderstanding about the theoretical scope of the early part of doctoral thesis and in particular of how far it is appropriate to debate and justify in detail a prior theoretical stance in research particularly when this stance may be academically unfashionable.

The provisional conceptual framework of the research sought to recognise the merit of a theoretical position informed by aspects of Marxist thought. In order to justify this position I embarked on a theoretical chapter which sought to outline the orthodox conflict between Marxism and liberalism in social theory and to propose that the third way theory and particular Giddens's thesis could be firmly placed, at least in terms of outcomes, in the liberal tradition. In retrospect embarking on such a task, which remains a central concern of sociology and philosophy, was obviously naive and both departed from the core interests of my research project and failed to accept the need for a more flexible theoretical approach which is grounded in the practice of planning. Nonetheless the debates about the extent of prior theoretical position in research is important and raises interesting issues about how far we exclude outcomes by rigid mind sets or conversely how we fail to make explicit ideologies which dominate the direction, conduct and outcomes of our research.

Preliminary Results

The case chronology and individual and group profiles provide a complex and sometimes contradictory view of the progress of the three development control cases. However, a number of themes did emerge which appear to be shared, if from different perspectives, by all the players. These themes included:

- the strong feeling of powerlessness by third parties.
- the exclusive nature of planning procedure in terms of language, complexity, timing, physical access to documents and meetings and the financial cost of participation.

- the overwhelming influence of planning gain and the financial, professional and strategic power of the private sector.
- The importance of professional norms and political ideologies, rather than objective criteria in validating the 'truthfulness' of one player's discourse over another.

Relevance to Planning Knowledge

The complexity of the provisional research themes defies any easy theoretical conclusions. Nonetheless a recurring theme of the results was the importance of power in planning arenas and how this power was shaped by both modes of expression and by its links to broader economic patterns. Such conclusions point towards the utility of political economy in analysing planning and in particular the validity or otherwise of positions informed by Marxist thinking. Such a position undoubtedly provides an understanding of the context for the operation of planning in the capitalist state but is clearly more problematic in explaining the micro outcomes of particular planning cases and specifically the importance of agency action. In this regard it is important to recognise that Marxist thought does not ultimately prescribe the balance between structure and agency but it does conclude that economic imperatives provide the driving force of civil society. The possibility of some limited room for manoeuvre is further enhanced by the inherent contradictions in capital itself. The development industry is not necessarily highly organised and monolithically powerful but often inefficient and fundamentally divided through the nature of competition. A structuralist perspective does not therefore imply unified outcomes but instead emphasises the general dominance of economic force over agency action. Such a position, albeit provisional, provides a powerful theoretical critique not just of classical and neo liberalism, which provides the foundation of much planning theory, but of more recent explanations based on Structuration theory. Whatever the final credibility of the structuralist position research into development control must confront the relationship of structure and agency and the adequacy of the competing theoretical perspectives in ascribing values and explanations to this relationship.

It is important to note that the output of the research provides strong confirmation for aspects of other theoretical positions particularly John Forester's thesis concerning the importance of communicative norms in shaping process and outcomes in planning. However, the general trend of the communicative turn is I believe still inadequate in that it overvalues communication in

both its analysis of current problems in planning and consequently in its prescription for change. The distortion of communicative norms are symptomatic rather than the core determining factor, they are expressions of ideological positions which relate to wider patterns of structural force. While the removal of distortion is desirable and their reduction perhaps possible through advocacy planning, this will not resolve the essential power imbalance between the economically powerful, with varying expressions of state support, and the economically weak. In order to uphold normative goals we must recognise the validity and necessity of conflict in precisely the way that the private sector acknowledges it in pursuit of accumulation. If one accepts this principal then the communicative turn may actually be a barrier to finding a positive new agenda for planning practice and theory. The basis for such a new agenda should be the recognition of the planning movements key role not in facilitating accumulation but in actually interfering and curtailing it in defence of democracy, social justice and environmental protection.

Taken together the initial findings of the research raise serious challenges to the rationalist and comprehensive conception of planning. While this may be a well established conclusion among some academics, the rationalist ideal is an absolute precondition and foundational rationale for planning practice in the public sector. Planning is a political process which is more and more dominated by a battle between the ideological positions of the players. That is, by their competing claims about truth based on radically different value systems and interests. While this is accepted by private sector planners and in fact poses no ethical difficulties for them it is an immense problem for public sector practitioners i.e. who do they serve? Where does their conception of public interest lie?

It would be easy to move from the picture of planning as an ideological battle ground with truth and objectivity simply impossible and relative constructs, to firm commitment to a post modern view of planning theory. But the concept of ideologies as expressed in Marxist thought is of value systems which are derived from class interest. The concept of planning as an ideological battle does not necessarily invalidate the notion that there is some definable truth about a planning issue. It simply states that this is layered over with ideological positions and interpretations of its significance. This conclusion appears to have two implications:

1. That planning must confront its inevitably political /ideological role.
2. That planning cannot be value neutral and therefore must define what values are inherent or should be part of planning.

Even if one is reluctant to endorse a radical agenda of value setting there are still unavoidable questions about what on earth planners believe they are trying to achieve. It appears that the pressures on public sector planners are driving them further into policing procedure and meeting performance indicators which concentrate on the facilitation of the private sector and which have no grounding in any other value system. While no one wishes to belittle the systems achievement in protecting aspects of the countryside or in urban containment, these concepts hardly provide a vibrant basis for future planning movements presented with ever more complex social, economic and environmental challenges.