'Capital' cities: marketisation, governance and the demise of planning

Peter Brand[1] and **Paul Watson**[2]
[1] Universidad Nacional de Colombia (Medellin campus), pbrand@unal.edu.co
[2] Past President, Planning Officers Society (UK), prw2013@gmail.com

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Abstract: This paper examines the question of governance as a product of contemporary capital accumulation. Rather than focusing on formal arguments around governance (efficiency, civil society, democracy), a more radical approach is adopted in terms of governance as a strategy and means for opening up new areas and means for the circulation of private capital. In this sense all cities are 'capital' cities: cities of hegemonic capitalism. Theoretical analysis is developed at three levels: the macro-level involving the economic landscape following the 2008 financial crisis and the move towards greater central government intervention in regional and local affairs; the meso-level concerning political resistance and the legitimacy crisis; and the micro level concerning local reform and the debilitation of local government and planning. These issues are illustrated from experience in the Birmingham/West Midlands region in the UK. The impacts of the Scottish independence referendum and the re-emergence of English regionalism and the UK government's response to them are examined. It is shown how the restructuring of the regional and local planning system, formally aimed at greater local autonomy and community participation, is producing new fields of conflict and a weakening of public powers and democratic institutions, including planning as guarantor of the public interest. Governance, it is argued, is failing to provide the sense of cohesion and collective well-being for which it is designed. Against this, planning, both theory and practice, requires a new sense of political direction and social responsibility.

1. Introduction

One of the outstanding effects of neoliberalism has been the heightened profile of cities in global economic development. The dismantlement of international trade barriers and the conformation of new economic blocks and regulatory institutions gave the impression of a waning of the nation state, thrusting cities into to limelight as leading spatial players in the new global economic landscape. Cities, or city-regions, were held to be the new locus of economic power and control centres of globalised economic networks (Sassen, 2001, 2005; Taylor, 2005), and cities continue to occupy a central position in urban planning theory and practice, seen as the key actor in the restructuring of economies and the future competitiveness of nations.

Notwithstanding a reconsideration of the continuing importance of the nation-state in recent theorising of this geographical re-scaling process (Brenner, 2004; 2009), it was the global financial crisis of 2008 which demonstrated, in practice, the structural role of the nation-state. The financial crisis and its aftermath – the deepest economic recession since the Great Depression of the 1930's – have been the major issue in economic and social policy across Europe and North America. Rescuing the banking system involved a huge fiscal cost with dramatic consequences for cities, with highly differentiated effects across continents, between countries and within urban areas.

Whilst the effects on cities have been extensively documented, the implications for planning itself have been less thoroughly explored. A new round of austerity politics orchestrated by national governments gave a new shape to urban economic development policy, as well as accentuating spatial inequalities and provoking new forms of social protest (Harvey, 2012). A temporarily crippled banking sector and collapsed property markets sent crisis waves through the three-decade orthodoxy of property-led development and city entrepreneurialism. National governments turned to major infrastructure developments as a means to re-establish growth, and both economic and social policy became increasingly under the direction of central governments.

This paper explores the consequences of this process for urban governance and planning practices. Focusing on the UK experience, we highlight three aspects: greater direct intervention of national government in regional/urban affairs seen as of strategic to economic recovery, the reconfiguration of the institutional spaces of local government and community participation, and the consequent legitimacy crisis as expressed through social unrest and rebellion in the regions. The cumulative effect of these phenomena presents, we suggest, a major dilemma for planning, which has become so closely intertwined with business interests and property markets that has become unable to argue convincingly the public interest and exercise its legitimating function.

The paper first outlines the nature of the financial crisis, its geographical dimension and its implications for spatial governance. It then examines how these complex and uneven processes are unfolding in the Birmingham/West Midlands area of the UK, where regional planning structures have been dismantled in the context of severe austerity politics and, notwithstanding claims of 'localism', central government continues to dictate city and regional governance and resource allocation. This is followed by an examination of the rebellion in the regions, as exemplified and inspired by the Scottish independence movement. The final section reflects on the consequent demise of planning, locked into capitalist interests, devoid of any proper corpus of ideas, and unable to present an alternative, socially progressive outline of the future. The paper ends with a plea for planning to rediscover its radical roots and lead in addressing the decisive question of socio-spatial equality and sustainability.

2. The political economy of the financial crisis and urban planning

It is not our intention to detail the causes of the financial crisis, of which there are many excellent accounts concerning predatory lending practices, global financial instruments and the speculative culture of the finance industry. We focus instead on its geographical dimension and implications for state intervention at the local level. Indeed as Aalbers (2009) observes, the crisis was a particularly geographical phenomenon, whereby local/national housing finance markets acquired global significance through securitization, thereby implicating countries and regions not directly involved in the origins of the crisis in subprime lending in the USA. A decade of NICE growth ("non-inflationary consistent expansion") suddenly turned nasty (see Kitson et al., 2011, p.289). Economic growth turned out to have been based on unsustainable rates of consumer spending fuelled by a deregulated and speculative financial system, and the bubble burst through the housing and property markets.

The immediate response to the crisis was a huge state effort to rescue the banks. One or two went bust (Lehman being the most notable) but most were bailed out at a huge cost ($1.5 trillion according the IMF, cited in Kitson et al., 2011), which threw national economies into turmoil. National governments became embroiled in unprecedented levels of borrowing, public sector debt soared, and what to do about it became the defining question in the following years.

The immediate impact of the crisis hit cities severely, though unevenly, and with differential social and spatial consequences. In the USA, foreclosures were concentrated in certain cities and neighbourhoods, with particularly adverse repercussions for low-income and minority communities (Aalbers, 2009; MacLeavy, 2011), whilst in much of Europe the rate of foreclosures was lower but young and low-income families suddenly encountered even greater obstacles to entering the housing market as credit facilities dried up. The 'credit crunch' halted major building projects across Europe and parts of the Middle East, in Spain the bursting of the real estate bubble left a million new homes empty with no chance of buyers, and many investors, both large and small, personal and institutional, found their assets devalued or worthless.

It was not long, however, before governments and multilateral organisations were declaring the end of the crisis, arguing by the end of 2009 that the worst was over and that things were getting back to normal. This might have been true in the USA where (low) growth was restored fairly quickly, but in Europe things were different. Countries such as Greece, Spain, Ireland and Portugal, were forced to seek help from the European Union to meet debt obligations, and sustained negative growth or multiple-dip recessions haunted the continent. The European economy as a whole remains severely troubled. The effect on world trade led to falling growth rates in China, fears for growth in the emerging countries and a reserved outlook for the global economy as a whole.

From an urban perspective, a major consequence was that the hitherto cosy relationship between cities and private capital was severely shaken (Harding et al., 2010; Kirkpatrick and Smith, 2011). The model of property-led development, city entrepreneurialism, urban regimes, public-private partnerships, and so on, temporarily ground to a halt and will undoubtedly face reshaping in the future. This in turn poses some interesting questions concerning governance.

The notion of governance as a more horizontal, flexible, efficient and inclusive way of dealing with complex change had become established as the new orthodoxy of urban policy, through which the private sector acquired enormous influence and a high profile in urban development. Under the legitimating guise of governance there unfolded a vast array of privatisations, deregulations, restrictions on public investment and areas and forms of intervention. The fiscal pressures arising from the financial crisis, constructed and devolved to local state authorities, has resulted in 'fiscal bullying' and extremes of privatization, monetization and outsourcing in the US, Maywood, CA and Sandy Springs, GA being prime examples (Peck, 2012). In the UK, local authorities such as the London Borough of Brent and Suffolk County Council have proposed reducing the local state apparatus to the bare threads of a procurement procedure, involving the total commissioning of public services (including planning) from the private sector. However if the 'democratic deficit' of governance had already provoked concern amongst some academics, the radical proposal of total privatisation has also met with considerable opposition from citizens, and no such scheme has been implemented to date.

Governance also has a strong scalar dimension. Although much attention has been paid to the institutional arrangements concerning different actors in the development process, globalisation established the multi-scalar nature of those actors and the complex intersections of local, national and supranational interests and influences over policy decision-making and project implementation. But as Wissen and Brand (2011: 3) observe:

> The problem, however, is that mainstream political science tends to conceptualize the new spatio-institutional configurations in a rather static way. The contested process through which they are produced is often excluded from analysis. The same applies to their specific social content determined by the social relations of forces which are inscribed in the arenas of global and multilevel governance and which account for the strategic and structural

> selectivities of the latter. In short, the aforementioned political science approaches are more concerned with the *interaction* of pre-given spatial levels and less with their *production*.

These authors point out the much more process-oriented understanding of the spatial dimension of state transformation developed through the scale debate originating in radical geography, as well the renewed importance of the territorial dimension under conditions of financial and environmental crises. The work of Bob Jessop and Neil Brenner was especially influential in developing state theory under conditions of neoliberal globalisation. Governance practices could then be seen as emerging from the multi-layered intersections articulating local-global networks of economic and political power, as cities and city-regions emerged as key players in the global economy.

However the financial crisis has spurned a resurge of interest in city governance. As Keil (2010) observes, the state 'roared back' in response to the financial crisis. National governments were responsible for bailing out the banks and coping with the fall-out that followed. Dealing with the huge levels of public borrowing led to widespread spending cuts which directly affected public sector employment (shrinkage, wage cuts and reduction of pension entitlements) and focused on social policy (welfare provision and social services and programmes) as prime targets of the new round of austerity politics. The financial system and its bonus culture remained largely untouched, along with tax benefits for the wealthy and large corporations. Public indignation over the injustice of it all led to the Occupy movement, the 'indignados' in Spain, and widespread protest in Greece and Portugal.

Austerity again became the keyword in fiscal policy. Austerity itself is nothing new, having been a recurrent feature in times of economic crisis (Levitas, 2012) and an inherent feature of the different phases of neoliberalism characterised by a permanent state of fiscal restraint and market oriented selectivity (Peck, 2012). Peck argues that the current crisis has produced a more revanchist state and systemic austerity, leading to a 'cumulative incapacitation' of the state. This political agenda was eagerly implemented in the US and UK, and imposed by multilateral finance institutions on countries more reluctant to follow the orthodoxy of austerity. More recent calls by the IMF to relax austerity programmes have fallen on deaf ears in the aforementioned countries. As Krugman (cited in Peck, 2012) asserts: "The austerity drive isn't really about debt and deficits ... at all; it's about using deficit panic as an excuse to dismantle social programmes." Similarly, Chang (The Guardian, 2013) argues that in the UK "... the coalition government isn't as stupid or stubborn as it appears. It is sticking to its plan A because spending cuts are not about deficits but about rolling back the welfare state. So no amount of evidence is going to change its position on cuts".

We argue in this paper that it is also about reshaping spatial planning to facilitate, compensate for and legitimise state retrenchment. It is worth recalling Harvey's (2005) reading of neoliberalism as accumulation by dispossession, a class project involving a sustained attack on the working class and increasingly the middle class, growing social inequality and the concentration of wealth and power. Each crisis sharpens the neoliberal resolve. Austerity measures are rolled out with a (class) vengeance, against economic logic and policy alternatives, and used as a motive to reduce the living standards and life expectations of the poor, and further concentrate wealth in the hands of a privileged capitalist aristocracy.

The unfolding of neoliberalism is frequently improvised, experimental and contradictory. This is equally true in the case of local spatial planning, where formal planning structures and procedures have long been held to be an unnecessary restriction on development. In times of crisis, city planning may be called upon to deregulate and re-regulate simultaneously and intensively, paving the way for renewed circuits of capital accumulation through urban development whilst attempting to reconstruct convenient forms of social stability through notions of place and community. The following sections examine these processes as central government tightens its grip on local government as an instrument for the administration of national economic austerity.

3. Governance and planning practices in the West Midlands, UK

Like most of Europe, the banking system in the UK was heavily implicated in the 2008 financial crisis. The major banks were obliged to recapitalise, merge or were effectively nationalised, a rescue operation that cost the government an estimated £120 billion. As credit facilities and confidence dried up, there was in a sharp fall in economic output, rises in unemployment and the sedimentation of the legacy of huge public borrowing would dominate economic policy.

The financial crisis – who was to blame and what to do about it - was at the centre of the May 2010 election. The Conservative party formed a Coalition Government with the minority Liberal Democrats on a platform of ruthless austerity. Reducing public debt was the ostensible and obsessive economic goal. There were some tax increases (VAT to 20%, additional capital gains tax and a 50% rate for high earners) and a public sector salary freeze subsequently capped at 1%. However, the overwhelming strategy involved drastic cuts to public spending. Social programmes provided by local authorities, and local authority spending in general, itself heavily dependent on central government, were prime targets. In the first round of spending cuts, whilst the average central government department saw its funding cut by 11.2% between 2011 and 2015, spending on local government was slashed by 26.8% (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2012).

In Birmingham, the UK's biggest local authority at the centre of the West Midlands region, this means job losses (another 2,100 forecast for 2013 and up to 7,000 by 2017) and the reduction of services to the core. According to a city report "The extent of the future financial challenge facing Birmingham will change the landscape of local government not only in Birmingham but nationally – we will have to decommission a number of services" (Birmingham City Council, 2012). A survey of 81 local authorities carried out in March 2013 found that planning services in most areas were in line for large cuts, especially in big cities such Manchester (54%), Portsmouth (49%) and Liverpool (35%) (The Guardian, 2013a). Sir Richard Rogers was prompted to warn that this would undermine the government's localism policy (designed to devolve planning decision-making to community groups) and leave the development industry to control the agenda (The Guardian, 2013b).

The financial crisis was exploited by the Conservative-led Coalition government to substantially dismantle the strategic planning system. Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) had been introduced by the previous Labour government in the 1990s to govern and indeed form part of the statutory development plans for individual local authorities. RSS were developed by Regional Assemblies (of local authorities) and addressed in a holistic way, with short, medium and long term horizons, matters including housing provision, employment growth, the future of towns and cities, and inter- and intra- regional transportation, with an explicit agenda for social, economic and environmental change. Alongside RSS, a Regional Economic Strategy (RES) was developed by Advantage West Midlands, one of the Regional Development Agencies established and funded to act as the delivery arm of central government in UK regions. Together they provided a clear and consistent framework and priorities for investment which addressed need as well as opportunity, delivered by public institutions in an evidence-based, open and transparent way. The locally set explicit agenda for urban renaissance was radical, realistic and realising positive results (West Midlands Regional Authority, 2010).

These strategic planning structures and processes were immediately abolished by the Coalition Government in 2010, a move echoing the abolition of the Greater London Council and Metropolitan County Councils by the Thatcher government in 1986. While still in opposition, the Conservative Party policy paper "Open Source Planning" determined to "... abolish the entire bureaucratic and undemocratic tier of regional planning..." (Conservative Party, 2010: p.2). Upon taking office, funding for these regional institutions was immediately cut off, Regional Development Agencies were closed down and the statutory basis for the abolition of RSS was included in the Localism Bill which became law at the end of 2011. However the Localism Act also included a 'Duty to Cooperate' designed to ensure that all bodies involved in planning work together on issues of more than local significance. It was a last minute and reluctant recognition of the need for some kind of supra-local strategic planning, certainly sitting uneasily against the views of the Conservative Secretary of State who had said that "…the whole concept of regional economies is a non-starter and (regions are) arbitrary dividing lines across the country for bureaucratic convenience" (Pickles, 2010).

The Duty to Cooperate remains at best an unproven mechanism as yet unable to coordinate effectively policy issues such as planning for climate change, housing and transport (Planning Officers Society, 2012: Royal Town Planning Institute, 2015). In the meantime, local areas are left to the vagueries of the market as effective control of development is prejudiced by a 'no plan' context wherein major decisions often fall at appeal to the central government's Planning Inspectorate.

The Localism Act also transferred judgement on infrastructure planning to the Secretary of State, supported by a Major Infrastructure Unit located within the Planning Inspectorate. This represents a radical scalar differentiation and the disconnection of infrastructure and regular planning (Layard, 2012). The lie that is the rhetoric of localism was finally revealed by the Growth and Infrastructure Act of April 2013 which inter alia transferred to central government (the Planning Inspectorate) decision-making on large-scale commercial and business development.

At the sub-national level, central government strategy was to replace coordinated regional policy and management with private sector led Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) charged with articulating and delivering local aspirations for economic growth. These one-dimensional, business-led bodies, formed by geographical groupings based on local authority administrative boundaries but with no direct public accountability, have over time been given real power and influence over policy and resource allocation. In another echo of the 1980s, Enterprise Zones (EZs) with a relaxed planning regime were also created. These measures have resulted in tensions with local authorities, heightened by competitive bidding for limited government funds, and provide little prospect for balanced or effective treatment of regional imbalances.

In the case of the West Midlands, the boundaries of the LEPs reflect not economic geographies but political marriages of convenience at the time of their creation. The continuing Balkanisation of local governance in the West Midlands and the eschewing by LEPs of cross-boundary spatial issues, indeed of spatial planning of any form, has led to an increasingly incoherent and inefficient approach to the region's challenges and opportunities. This issue is well exemplified by the lack of strategic planning around the proposed high speed rail link between London and Birmingham known as HS2. The proposal has seen a sustained effort towards exploiting the economic opportunities presented by the development of new internationally-connected stations, but little coordinated planning regarding local connectivity to the stations or the regeneration needs of the wider urban area.

The fact that the West Midlands conurbation is split between two LEPs in no way helps. Indeed the "divide and rule" strategy of central government is demonstrated by the influence & control it exercised over the agendas of individual LEP Growth Strategies (which set out priorities for local investment) and its requirement that they be submitted to and approved by the Coalition Government to form the basis of negotiation of “City Deals” on local responsibilities and funding.

In this speculative, competitive, divisive and privatised winner-takes-all context, the losers will continue to suffer from a competitive disadvantage now institutionalised by local governance reforms and financing.

4. Unrest in the regions

Tensions arising from intensified central government intervention and the concentration of public and private investment and wealth in London and the south-east, produced unrest in the UK regions. The Conservative-led coalition government paid little attention, confident in its close relationship with the London-based finance and media industries, and its stranglehold over local government through tight fiscal controls. Austerity politics, it seemed, could be implemented with a minimum of local government opposition and maximum of regional inequalities. The facade of participatory governance provided by the Localism Act could legitimate the socio-spatial chasms opening up across the under-developing cities and regions.

There was, however, some expression of concern from the largely neoliberalised planning establishment. The Royal Town Planning Institute’s (2012) ‘Map for England’ initiative produced information on the differential spatial impacts of public policy, while a Town and Country Planning Association report demonstrated that England is “[…] one of the most polarised of the developed nations [...] There has been no sustained attempt in the last thirty years to fundamentally rebalance the economic geography of the UK” (Town and Country Planning Association, 2013). The pro-business organisation Centre for Cities’ (2014) report showed that for every twelve jobs created between 2004 and 2013 in cities in the South of England, just one was created throughout cities in the rest of UK. Commenting on the report, David Sparks, Chair of the Local Government Association commented: “We can’t ignore the evidence that some of our great cities are being held back by being denied the sort of autonomy enjoyed by equivalent European cities” (The Planner, 2015: p.6). His comments reflect the position of the English Core Cities Group, established in 1995 by eight major English city authorities (Glasgow in Scotland and Cardiff in Wales were admitted in 2014). These city councils are also members of the pan-European Eurocities network, a group co-founded by Birmingham City Council.

Calls of this type for more regional autonomy fell on deaf political ears until the referendum on Scottish independence. As the 18 September 2014 date loomed, a surprised political establishment became alarmed at the strength of popular support for independence. Scotland had been particularly badly affected by 35 years of neoliberalism (demonstrators in Glasgow danced on the streets at the news of Margaret Thatcher’s death), and disenchantment with Westminster was running strong. At the last minute the three major political parties joined forces to counter the independence vote and the referendum was defeated, partly on the basis of promises of the devolution of substantial new powers and fiscal resources.

The Conservative-led coalition government had already been awakened by poor performance in the 2014 European Parliament and local elections, especially in less prosperous areas, and was under pressure from MPs for England to address issues of accountability and control. Following the Scottish referendum both main political parties offered promises of more investment and powers to England’s outlying cities, and the Coalition government’s offer of ‘Devo Max’ to Scotland was followed by ‘Devo Manc’, an agreed package of powers and resources devolved to Greater Manchester (Birmingham’s competitor for the title of England’s Second City and immediate neighbour to the Chancellor’s constituency) unveiled in November 2014 and promoted as a model for how other City Deals might be shaped. However, the promise of a new ‘Northern Powerhouse’ must be seen against the effects of macroeconomic policy which according to Liverpool's mayor Joe Anderson has seen cities "absolutely battered by the government's austerity measures and cuts" (The Guardian, 2014).

These devolutionary packages within England have many strings attached, most noticeably the requirement of elected mayors (as 'executive officers') and continuing Whitehall (central government) influence and control of local agendas. A good example of this is the Northern Transport Strategy (Department for Transport, 2015), prepared independently from local spatial planning processes (Planning Resource, 2015). Other City Deals currently being negotiated are similarly being centrally determined. The Edinburgh region of Scotland, for example, has put together a package for investment in transport, housing, economic regeneration, energy and digital connectivity which according to the Leader of Edinburgh Council Andrew Burns will build on their strengths and tackle "persistent pockets of inequality" that "threaten to hold the region back", but which has to be agreed by the UK and Scottish governments (The Planner, 2015, p.7); and in Cardiff the local Business Council will be subject to review (by central government) to ensure that it is "fit for purpose", with the Leader of the local council Phil Bale saying that the city has to take part in the deal or "risk being left behind" (The Planner, 2015). In the West Midlands, exploration of governance options for the conurbation continues but in a fraught climate created not only by rivalry between competing LEPs but also by a central government review of Birmingham City Council (Kerslake, 2014).

There was, however, a significant difference between the specialist, business-oriented regional initiatives and the Scottish independence movement. Whilst the first argues for more autonomy to pursue the international neoliberal urban agenda, the latter is, to a large extent, a popular political reaction against it. The resentment against the both Conservative and Labour neoliberal governments was far from quashed after the 2014 referendum , and in the May 2015 General Election, an overwhelming 56 of the 59 Scottish parliamentary seats were won by the Scottish Nationalist Party, whose campaign was based on anti-austerity politics and social policy reform.

As the new Conservative government sets out on another and more severe round of welfare cuts, with Scotland immune to a degree, the future of the English regions will hinge around the equation of central government, market-led capital investment and increasing urban poverty and inequality, with the bogus participatory mechanisms of New Localism entrusted with the task of providing legitimacy to the whole process. Where planning stands and what stance it adopts is far from clear.

5. Conclusions

It is clear from both theoretical and practical viewpoints that, in the UK, the 2008 financial crisis brought with it not only enormous economic upheaval ('creative destruction' from within the finance sector) but also political opportunities for neoliberalised governance. Ironically, the deregulated excesses of speculative international finance capital resulted in even greater political influence of capitalist interests in national economic and social policy. The effects over cities and regions have been considerable and threaten to shape territorial politics in the immediate future, as separatist/regional movements combine with fracturing political parties and landscapes.

Spatial governance, we argue, needs to be understood in this macro-political context. Governance is not simply a matter of administrative procedures re-enacting the immediate, superficial concerns of 'stake-holders', but the re-engineering of the mechanics of power and capitalist interests as they operate at spatial different scales. Governance is a neoliberal ideological form whose function is to legitimise the uneven distribution and social effects of contemporary capitalism: 'good governance' is what is good for capitalism, its mantra.

For many years now planning in the UK has shared this mantra, articulating its spatial dimension and property market interests to, it must be recognised, some positive effect, at least before the financial crisis. Since then, the sharp edge of capitalism in crisis has thrown the professional tenability of 'good planning governance' into disarray. In practical terms, the combination of centralised government intervention with weakened local regulatory powers has accentuated the vulnerability of local government, increasingly dependent on or hostage to both central government and private capital. When the specifically planning considerations outlined in this paper are put into the context of austerity politics and all its social injustices, then city authorities are facing a veritable legitimacy crisis.

In our view, the notion of 'fuzzy boundaries' tends to obscure the political nature of current governance practices, and facilitate a neutral position from within planning. Just as in the Scotland case it was politics that challenged the neoliberal austerity orthodoxy, the planning profession needs to rediscover its progressive reformist and radical roots, and address issues of equity and ethics in professional practice at all spatial scales (TCPA, 2015). In particular, the reintroduction of critical theory into planning schools curricula will be essential for addressing present problems and future challenges.

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