



Perceptions of the common good in planning



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ABSTRACT

There has been plenty of debate in the academic literature about the nature of the common good or public interest in planning. There is a recognition that the idea is one that is extremely difficult to isolate in practical terms; nevertheless, scholars insist that the idea '...remains the pivot around which debates about the nature of planning and its purposes turn' (Campbell & Marshall, 2002, 163–64). At the point of first principles, these debates have broached political theories of the state and even philosophies of science that inform critiques of rationality, social justice and power. In the planning arena specifically, much of the scholarship has tended to focus on theorising the move from a rational comprehensive planning system in the 1960s and 1970s, to one that is now dominated by deliberative democracy in the form of collaborative planning. In theoretical terms, this debate has been framed by a movement from what are perceived as objective and elitist notions of planning practice and decision-making to ones that are considered (by some) to be 'inter-subjective' and non-elitist. Yet despite significant conceptual debate, only a small number of empirical studies have tackled the issue by investigating notions of the common good from the perspective of planning practitioners. What do practitioners understand by the idea of the common good in planning? Do they actively consider it when making planning decisions? Do governance/institutional barriers exist to pursuing the common good in planning? In this paper, these sorts of questions are addressed using the case of Ireland. The methodology consists of a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with 20 urban planners working across four planning authorities within the Greater Dublin Area, Ireland. The findings show that the most frequently cited definition of the common good is balancing different competing interests and avoiding/minimising the negative effects of development. The results show that practitioner views of the common good are far removed from the lofty ideals of planning theory and reflect the ideological shift of planners within an institution that has been heavily neoliberalised since the 1970s.

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Introduction

A considerable proportion of the debate on the nature of the common good in planning lacks empirical grounding. It is acknowledged in the literature that the concept is ill-defined (Campbell & Marshall, 2000) and yet it is evoked constantly as a means of legitimisation for a whole range of planning decisions. Indeed, there is a significant mainstream literature which either directly or indirectly espouses the virtues of the common good as a foundational concept in planning and its importance to the profession as a whole. On the opposite end, there is also a radical theory element within planning which rejects the view that it is inherently a public interest institution and regards it as an institution which supports the interests of capital and the societal elite (Fox-Rogers, Murphy, & Grist, 2011). Indeed, Harvey (2001, 277) has suggested that the

state uses the ideology of the common good to disguise the inherent interest of the state as a facilitator of the capitalist system.

An interesting question for critical scholars then is whether the mainstream rhetoric regarding the role of the common good in planning is grounded in reality or whether it is, in fact, a purely aspirational concept that supports power by providing a cloak of moral and ethical legitimacy for the 'dark side' of planning practice (Yiftachel, 1998) and, more broadly, the institution of planning as a state activity? For example, there is a tendency for the common good or public interest to be used by state power to legitimate decisions which the public are likely to consider highly controversial. Chomsky (2002), for example, alerts us to the fact that ideologically-laden terminology such as the 'common good' and 'national interest' can be used by the holders of power as a means of 'containment'. He points out that the standard way that power protects itself is to place a cloak of mystery around it which can be achieved by instituting a complex system of filters' and through 'terms of political discourse [which] are designed to prevent

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thought' (Chomsky, 2002, 11, 27, 41). To take concrete contemporary examples, in the US the state rescue of the financial industry was undertaken in 'the broader public interest'¹; so too was the recent state rescue of the Irish financial system even though it resulted in the most significant transfer of private debt to the general public in the history of the state (Fraser, Murphy, & Kelly, 2013). Similar examples can be found in the planning domain, particularly at a legislative level where, under neoliberalism, planning legislation has gradually been altered in the so-called 'public interest' but in ways that are highly beneficial to the existing power structure in society (Fox-Rogers et al., 2011). Indeed, almost two decades ago Reade (1997) made similar observations albeit from a somewhat different perspective, while Foley (1960) has argued that the public interest is often substituted for more substantive reasoning in planning decision-making. In a planning context, Campbell and Marshall (2000, 308) sum it up neatly by asserting that 'it is a term that has often been used to mystify rather than clarify'.

Aside from this issue, planning scholars also need to question whether the common good is considered at all by planning practitioners when they are making planning decisions. Indeed, in terms of planning outcomes, do planners think the common good can be achieved at all under existing arrangements? These are important questions to explore because they go to the very core of the nature of planning as a progressive institution.

In this paper we ask these kind of questions using Ireland as a case study. And Ireland is a unique case, not least because of the recent property crash where the planning system has been implicated as a major contributor to the downfall. The recent completion of a 12 year process investigating planning corruption in Ireland has stressed the extent to which the system has been compromised by powerful political economic interests (Government of Ireland, 2012). But Ireland is also interesting in other ways. The Irish state and its institutions have been subjected to processes of neoliberalisation over the course of the last two decades – and the planning system has been far from immune (see McGruirk & MacLaran, 2001; Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2014). In this sense, the Irish case serves as something of an archetype for planning systems worldwide that have been subject to heavy neoliberalisation. Quite surprisingly though, few scholars have attempted to enquire about the natural tendency of the planning system in a neoliberal state and more importantly what type of planning professional is bred within such a context. In this paper we also reflect on this matter and suggest that as the state, and its various institutions such as the planning system, become increasingly neoliberalised they move towards governance and decision-making arrangements that increasingly serve the interests of power. Thus, under neoliberalism, it becomes an institutional imperative to support the political economic power base driving that institution. In a neoliberal planning system, this means that planners are more or less compelled institutionally to act as agents in support of power and cannot, therefore, adhere to principles of the common good even if compelled by their own moral and ethical judgement to do so (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2014). Indeed, the recent work of Allmendinger and Haughton (2013a, 8) has decried the '...normalisation of neoliberal thinking... as a form of natural order...' that ultimately supports a type of land-use planning in the UK that is market supportive. They suggest that the current phase of neoliberalism reflects a political economic governance ideology that is searching – through 'soft spaces' – for more effective forms of planning and associated outcomes that are even more advantageous for capital (see Allmendinger & Haughton, 2013a, 2013b; Haughton, Allmendinger, & Oosterlynck, 2013). Furthermore, Fox-Rogers

and Murphy (2014) have demonstrated how these informal 'soft spaces' are utilised by powerful stakeholders to reshape planning outcomes in their favour.

Planning and the common good: theory and practice

While the common good and public interest are often used interchangeably, there has been some debate about whether or not the concepts are, in fact, similar. According to Jarenko et al. (2013, 2) the common good is normally conceived of as 'something collective and indivisible, the good of the community, while 'public interest' would refer to the aggregate of 'private interests'. In other words, the 'common good' can be related more closely to communitarian ideals of the good of human well-being and involves objectives such as peace, prosperity, justice, equality and community and the principle of redistributive justice. Indeed, this vantage point is very much one that this paper subscribes to particularly with regard to the role of the planning system as an institution of the state. On the other hand, the public interest can be thought of as being more individualistic and entrepreneurial in that it can be seen as the aggregate of private goods. However, in the planning literature, in particular, the concepts are utilised more or less interchangeably and thus, for pragmatic purposes, this paper treats the two concepts as being synonymous.

There is no doubting that the common good is an evasive term not only in the planning literature but also in political theory. The concept was once a central principle in political and social theory primarily because scholars thought it useful as a framework for thinking about the relationship between individual and broad-based community interests in societal terms. As a principle and a concept for society and ethics, its origins lie with Aristotle who was, in fact, not overly optimistic about the possibility of achieving the common good. The reason for this was his pessimism about our ability as citizens to transform ourselves from '...individualistic competitors fighting over scarce resources to partners in a flourishing community' (Smith, 1999, 628). Despite this, Aristotle was very much in favour of (a rough) equality of outcome in society primarily because he felt it would prevent revolutions from occurring whereby the poor would confiscate property from the rich (Fox-Rogers et al., 2011). Indeed, while he favoured the holding of property in private, he felt it should be used in common stating that 'it is clearly better that property should be private, but the use of it common' (Aristotle, 1996, 36). As Aristotle noted, the concept ultimately centres on issues of redistributive justice with the objective being to reduce inequality and eliminate poverty which he saw as 'the parent of revolution and crime' (36). Contemporary political philosophers have taken a more pragmatic view of the concept. In his most recent work on the issue Chomsky (2013, 686) suggests that concern for the common good should impel us to overcome policies and forms of domination that hinder the development of human potential 'from the educational system to the conditions of work, providing opportunities to exert the understanding and cultivate human development in its richest diversity'. Indeed, in a planning context the work of Rydin (2013) echoes these sentiments calling for a reform of the planning system to work within a zero-growth context that focuses more on ecological and environmental sustainability as well as issues of human well-being and inequality.

In the academic literature, the common good is often associated with the role of the state and, in particular, is considered to be one of the key welfare objectives of authorised governments. However, the emergence of liberal theory, heavily influenced by the work of Mill (1947), has undermined unitary concepts and general principles related to the common good. In the epigraph to *On Liberty*, Mill (1947) points out that concern for the common good should impel us to find ways to cultivate human development in its

¹ http://www.fwdailynews.com/news/latest/bernanke-tells-it-like-it-is-some-dont-listen/article_98339d73-504b-50c5-b418-c1be99fefbec.html.

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