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Planning at the limit: immigration and post-war Birmingham

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Abstract

It is acknowledged that the post-war period of urban planning has played a significant role in the construction of Britain's cities. The plans themselves and the commentaries on these plans tend to illustrate this phase as predominately involving rehousing, the reorganization of land use and the containment of urban sprawl. Through a close, de-constructive reading of two plans instructive to the rebuilding of the City of Birmingham, this paper suggests that post-war reconstruction cannot be reduced to such domestic, localised issues. Instead, it demonstrates that although planners often elided any mention of immigration and promoted a notion of natural population increase, there remain traces of an uneven relationship with immigration operating at a number of scales in the documentation. The paper elucidates such traces and, in turn, works towards a reassessment of the literature on immigration and the city.

Keywords: Birmingham; Deconstruction; Immigration; Planning; Reconstruction; Scale

Introduction

> In this sense…the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is after all 'inside' the subject as the founding repudiation.[1]

In a history of 20th century British planning, Gordon E. Cherry—former President of the Royal Town Planning Institute—writes of, amongst many things, post-war regeneration. In one paragraph, he expertly sums up some of the aspirations of post-war planners and some of the issues in his discussion. He suggests:

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> There would be a veto on sporadic building in rural areas…and the economic and social base of the countryside would be protected by a revivified agriculture. The urban spread of town would be contained; sprawl would be avoided, and the London green belts showed the way. Town and cities would be redeveloped; the scars of war would be healed and the squalor of old building replaced by new. Overcrowding would be eased in a process of moving population out to a combination of peripheral estates and new towns. Over time, built-up areas would be reconstructed according to new principles of layout and design; order would replace disorder, amorphous residential areas would be transformed into planned neighbourhoods with social and other facilities, and the various land-use components would be neatly separated. Overall, qualitative improvements in urban living conditions would be effected. The country's assets of scenic heritage would be protected in National parks. *All these matters became the conventional wisdom of post-war planning, the collectivist state being the steersman to a brighter, nobler future for its citizen.*[2]

Set amongst a background of Keynesian economic policies, Cherry also tells his reader of a nationalisation programme and the construction of the welfare state. In some detail, he lists and champions the Family Allowances Act of 1945, the National Health Act of 1946, the National Insurance Act of 1946 and the National Assistance Act of 1948. However, what seems at odds with his narrative is that he misses a piece of policy that defined the legal limits of citizenry that forms the target of his conventional post-war planning wisdom. The policy that I am referring to here is the British Nationality Act of 1948.[3]

Of course, this omission might be excused as an oversight on Cherry's part. He is, after all, an expert on planning and not citizenship. Yet the biases of his training do not prevent him from discussing the 'Commonwealth', which the Act redefined, or some of the immigration that it legislated. In these passages, Cherry plays upon a particular understanding of immigration. In short, he associates the *presence* of immigrant groups with the emergence of certain unhelpful and disruptive features. For example, Cherry informs his students of a 'continuing rise in the birth-rate, coupled with immigration from overseas' that pointed to a 'large population increase'[4] and of a housing shortage caused in part, as he argues, 'by immigrants from Commonwealth countries'.[5] In his highly regarded book on Birmingham, Cherry once again uses a similar descriptive device with respect to the planning apparatus. He writes, 'post-war legislation had not bargained for cities where problems stemmed from circumstances very different from those of buildings and their replacement'.[6] In Cherry's explanation, the particular 'circumstances' in question are not a city hit by de-industrialisation and recession, even though this becomes evident. Rather he prefers to list 'the newcomers' and the 'inner city' as the subsequent 'problems' to the post-war glory years of land-use planning. In this paper, I reevaluate some of the assumptions of the post-war period of reconstruction and assess a relationship between urban planning and immigration. Focussing on Birmingham, I suggest that both the presence and the absence of new British citizens were a persistent part of the rebuilding of the city, and furthermore, demonstrate that they became a definitional, yet sometimes silent limit to the ideal of land-use planning. In order to illustrate this I, initially, describe Birmingham's first major post-war plan and locate this document within a broader political context of demographic and economic de-centralisation. I then go on to look at one of the plan's precursors to disentangle the policy of de-centralisation and trace what Butler and others have called a 'constitutive outside'.[7]