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Thinking conjuncturally about ideology, housing and English planning

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Abstract

This paper explores the value of Stuart Hall's approach to conjunctural analysis for examining the complex relations between ideology and planning. By "thinking conjuncturally" we explore planning as a site where multiple social, economic and political forces coalesce; ideology is one of these forces whose role and influence must be tracked alongside others. To illustrate this we draw on recent and ongoing planning reforms in England and their relationship with housing development. Highlighting the faltering role of a particular ideological formation in 'suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments' (Hall, 2011, 713) around housing and planning, the paper draws attention to planning as a space where ideological struggle takes place within the frame of a broader, contingent cultural hegemony. This struggle may help to reaffirm that hegemony but it can also open space for alternative visions to be articulated, with potential to transform dominant logics of planning and reveal routes to practical and progressive action.

Key words: ideology, planning, housing, conjuncture, conjunctural analysis, Stuart Hall

Introduction

For John Friedmann (1987) planning is the guidance of history by reason. However, over recent decades the idea of planning has often seemed to stand on the wrong side of historical change, viewed as inimical to dominant forms of neoliberal[1] reason and accused of obstructing the march of progress (Goonewardena, 2003). The status of planning has been subject to sustained criticism, prompting widespread attempts to reform state guidance of land and property markets and generating pervasive concern that the idea of planning project is *under attack* (e.g. Klosterman, 1985; Gunder, 2016). Whilst such reform initiatives have typically been framed as pragmatic, evidence-based responses to policy (and sometimes market) failures, they are also shaped by political forces operating at various levels. By reworking the institutions and social relations of practice they seek to bring prevailing definitions of planning into line with dominant ideas. In short, they are always also *ideological*.

Tracing the relations between specific attempts to reshape planning ideas and practices and wider ideological forces like neoliberalism, however, raises long-standing questions about the "problem of ideology". A central difficulty concerns how to strike the appropriate balance between the ideational and the material: to what extent do neoliberal (or any other set of) grand narratives drive historical change rather than themselves responding to underlying shifts in economic relations, social change or political events? A balance must be struck somewhere that always risks privileging one side of the analytical coin over the other, whether structuring power over political agency or the ideational over the material. These are theoretical and epistemological as well as methodological questions which have been central to encounters between the Marxist conception of ideology and linguistic and psychoanalytical theories, particularly from the 1950s onwards. They have also been core concerns of planning theory in its engagement with ideology.

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[1] 'Neoliberalism' is an amorphous and contested concept. Here it is understood as a provisional but unsatisfactory label for an ideological formation whose dominance has defined an era based on *processes* of neoliberalisation characterised by, amongst other things, the valorisation of market rationalities and policies founded on a deep scepticism towards public intervention, including planning (except in so far as it creates the conditions for a market economy to flourish). It should be emphasised that 'neoliberalism' is just one of many potential ideological formations, and that 'actually existing' forms of neoliberalism vary widely between different political regimes where they are typically combined in complex ways with other ideological traditions.

From Marxist-influenced critiques of the ideology of planning (e.g. Harvey, 1978) to post-structural reconfigurations of ideology as a discursive structure (e.g. Flyvbjerg, 1998), critical planning theory has explored how various forms of power constrain the scope of planning ideas and practices and serve the interests of dominant elites (e.g. Gunder, 2010). Other strands of planning scholarship, however, remain sceptical of the value of concepts like ideology and neoliberalism, suspecting them of contributing to a structuralist 'over-critique' (Kilminster, 2013) that pays inadequate attention to other factors, whether the complexity of empirical realities (Allmendinger and Thomas, 1998) or the normative and pragmatic imperatives of planning scholarship to show that there is space to do things better, even in a neoliberal world (Campbell et al, 2014).

In this paper we argue that "conjunctural analysis", as developed by the late political and cultural theorist Stuart Hall, offers a productive route for addressing these enduring challenges. As yet underexplored in planning theory, conjunctural analysis seeks to bring into analytical purview the intersection of multiple processes that coalesce at a particular historical moment to produce a distinctive "conjuncture" – or combination of processes – inscribed with particular crisis tendencies and political potentialities.

Ideology is one factor whose role and influence must be tracked alongside a number of other important processes of economic, social and political change. Conjunctural analysis therefore focuses on "diagnosing the present" (Newman, 2014) as a means of generating practical political insight. "Thinking conjuncturally" is not then a purely theoretical exercise but a means of *reading* the complex political possibilities that may be emerging to guide history (and therefore planning) in new directions, particularly in moments of crisis. Given that there are strong signs that the old certainties secured by neoliberalism are crumbling with no clear consensus as to what is to come (Stahl, 2019), we need now more than ever need to be alert to emergent ideas.

To illustrate our argument we explore how pressures generated by a perceived "*housing crisis*" have influenced successive reforms to the planning system in England since 2010,[2] a period shaped by the ongoing effects of the 2007/08 global *financial crisis* which itself had roots in the

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[2] Due to devolution of planning powers within the United Kingdom, our focus here is on England.

ideological positioning of housing within the "neoliberal settlement". We argue these planning reforms have been a means by which a ruling Conservative Party has sought to govern the problem of planning for housing within the terms set by its own evolving political ideology and an ongoing hegemonic settlement that have both situated the promise of "homeownership" in a "property owning democracy" as central to their popular appeal (Clarke, 2010). However, we go on to argue that a deepening of the material, social and political contradictions underpinning the housing question, coupled with the wider *political crisis* prompted by the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union, may have begun to destabilise the core neoliberal problematisation of planning as a root cause of the housing crisis.

Conjunctural analysis therefore enables us to explore the faltering role of political ideology in 'suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments' (Hall, 2011, 713) around housing and planning. As a result, we argue planning should be understood as a site of struggle, where ideology is deployed as part of ongoing efforts to secure, renew or challenge a broader (contingent) hegemonic settlement. However, we also argue that planning could potentially be a site where space may open up for more progressive ideas to be articulated. As a result, we conclude by outlining how conjunctural analysis enables us to bridge the critical and pragmatic orientations in planning theory by exploring strategies for ideologically reshaping planning ideas and practices in and against the profound uncertainties and crises currently enveloping neoliberal hegemony.

The argument is structured as follows: next, we discuss how Hall's conjunctural analysis was developed in response to challenging questions regarding the relationship between ideology and the material world. A summary of our approach to applying conjunctural analysis is then set out. The concept of housing in the context of the English planning system, structural changes to the UK housebuilding sector and the 2007/08 global financial crisis are then discussed. We then analyse various changes to English planning, tracing the role of ideology while seeking to hold various other determinants of the conjuncture in view. After exploring the role ideology plays in narrating the present historical moment we go on to stake out how this form of critical analysis generates practical insight into the contemporary politics of planning.

Approaching the problem of ideology by thinking conjuncturally

Stuart Hall's ([1983] 1996, 25; 2017) work was centrally concerned with the *problem* of ideology or how 'to give an account, within a materialist theory, of how social ideas arise'. He defined ideology as 'the mental frameworks – the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works' ([1983] 1996, 25-6). His was therefore a sociological rather than *necessarily* pejorative conception of ideology as "false consciousness". Nevertheless, he was interested in critically examining how the "mental frameworks" of the powerful shape the consciousness and lived practices of wider society and thus help to secure its domination. Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony was therefore indispensable for understanding how ruling ideas secure dominance through consent as much as coercion.

Following Raymond Williams ([1980] 2005, 37-8), we can understand hegemony as a "a central system of practices, meanings and values, which we can properly call dominant and effective". Like Williams, Hall saw hegemony as operating at a more fundamental level than ideology but also saw in Gramsci a recognition that it was always contested:

> Hegemony, once achieved, must be constantly and ceaselessly renewed, reenacted…Central to this is the notion of various forms and intensities of struggle (Hall, 1988a, 54)

Hegemony is, therefore, a contingent *process* of struggle between dominant, residual and emergent social forces rather than a closed and totalising structure. As ideology is, in significant part, 'a cultural battle to transform the popular mentality' (Gramsci quoted in Hall, 1988a, 55), it plays an important role in struggles to establish hegemony, organising the complex and frequently contradictory terrain of popular common sense. According to Hall's reading of Gramsci, 'a hegemonic settlement only works when ideology captures or "hegemonises" common sense; when it becomes so taken-for-granted that its ways of looking at the world seem to be the only ways in which ordinary people can calculate what's good and what's not' (Hall & Massey, 2010, 62). Drawing on the work of Ernesto Laclau (1977), Hall argued that ideology

therefore seeks to 'articulate' connections, stitching disparate social forces together to suppress, conceal or seek to resolve contradictions between them. In this way, it seeks to provide a degree of coherence sufficient to secure popular consent. Importantly, this means 'Ideology is always contradictory. There is no single, integrated "ruling ideology"…Ideology works best by suturing together contradictory lines of argument and emotional investments…Contradiction is its *metier*.' (Hall, 2017, 713)

This conception of hegemony and the role of ideology, drew on the distinction Gramsci (2005, 229-235) made between a "*war of manoeuvre*", the active seizure of power, and the "*war of position*", the ongoing struggle across multiple fronts through which political leadership can be established in complex societies. Rather than viewing hegemony in monolithic terms as the outcome of a war of manoeuvre, assessing and intervening in the ongoing "war of position" requires attentiveness to the 'different places from which we can all begin the reconstruction of society' (Hall [1984] 2017, 237), staking positions from which to articulate possibilities for change within the constraints of prevailing social and material relations. Hall therefore developed his approach to "conjunctural analysis" as a means of critically reading historical possibilities for such political "position taking".

Towards conjunctural analysis

In seeking to forge a path between "economism" (where all social relations are ultimately determined by the mode and relations of economic production) and "ideologism" (where ideas are seen to float free of any kind of material determination), Hall explored the possibility of *reading* historical conjunctures, understood as:

> …a period during which the different social, political, economic and ideological contradictions that are at work in society come together to give it a specific and distinctive shape. The post-war period, dominated by the welfare state, public ownership and wealth redistribution through taxation was one conjuncture; the neoliberal, market-forces era unleashed by Thatcher and Reagan was another. These are two distinct

conjunctures, separated by the crisis of the 1970s. (Hall & Massey, 2010, 57)[3]

For Hall, conjunctural *analysis* 'means describing [a] complex field of power and consent, and looking at different levels of expression – political, ideological, cultural and economic. It's about trying to see how all of that is deployed in the form of power which "hegemony" describes' (Hall & Massey, 2010, 65). The approach therefore acknowledges that the apparent hegemonic stability of broad historical conjunctures comprises a paradoxical constant amidst dynamic processes where social, economic, ideological and political relations shift across various analytical levels (Peck, 2017). Ideology is understood as a key means by which the hegemonic settlement of a particular conjuncture is secured and re-enacted, by articulating how various (often contradictory) historical processes come together and give the conjuncture its specific shape.

Crucially, however, the different 'levels of expression' that 'come together' in a given conjuncture also have distinctive histories and crisis tendencies. When these tendencies fuse, conjunctures can enter into sometimes protracted periods of 'organic' crisis. Crises may be resolved by the restoration, reconstruction or transformation of a hegemonic settlement (Hall, 1988b,167). Whilst they are driven by deeper historical transformations in the economy or society, however, they are not determined by them. Rather, periods of organic crisis require concerted 'political and ideological work…to disarticulate old formations and to rework their elements into new configurations' (Hall, 1988b, 43). The classic example here is Hall's analysis of the shift from the post-war to the neoliberal conjuncture, where a deep crisis was resolved by the forging of a new 'historic bloc' by Thatcherism, an ideological project which succeeded not just in securing electoral success but in becoming hegemonic and remaking the terrain of British politics and society. The task of conjunctural analysis is therefore to interrogate the nature of any given crisis facing the hegemonic settlement of a particular conjuncture, assessing possibilities for intervention in the 'war of position' through which hegemony is constructed and contested.

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[3] The word "conjuncture" in English comes from from the Latin "conjungere", meaning "join together". Hall's use of the concept derives from Gramsci's use of it in the Italian ("congiuntura"), and Althusser's later incorporation of it in to his work in French. Both Gramsci and Althusser saw the conjunctural as less significant than the underlying "organic" relations of society. Hall, however, sought to develop Gramsci's more "methodological" concern for conjunctures in a distinctive fashion 'as a way of marking significant transitions between different political moments; that is to say, to apply it as a general system of analysis to any historical situation' (Hall and Massey, 2010, 58). It is in this sense that we use the term here.

Conjunctural analysis is intended to help the analyst reflect upon the processes which shape broad historical eras and the movements between them, such as the various "Thatcherism" and "New Labour" phases of the continuing "neoliberal conjuncture" in the United Kingdom (Hall and Massey, 2010, 66). However, planning is not "a conjuncture" in these terms; it is a set of ideas and material practices, typically organised as a specific area of public policy, not an historical period.

So what does it mean to "think conjuncturally" *about planning*? We contend that it means to think about planning as one site, or "position", where multiple social, economic and political processes with roots in the wider historical conjuncture coalesce. Because planning as an institutionalised set of ideas and practices is concerned with mediating the relations between social, economic, political and environmental pressures relating to land and property, it is inevitably a site where these sometimes contradictory processes must be reconciled or where key challenges must at least be obfuscated or displaced. At different times, planning may therefore become a more or less significant site for the contestation or reproduction of hegemonic forces.

Ideology plays a crucial role in this. Ideas about planning are never formulated by an ahistorical "reason" but are instead shaped by the material realities of conjunctures that discipline, without entirely determining, what can be thought and said. The struggle over political ideas in the planning sphere, intimately connected with deeply ideological conceptions of the relationship between land ownership, individual and economic freedom and the state (Shepherd, 2018), may assist in re-enacting and re-securing hegemony in the face of obvious contradiction and challenge, although perhaps in altered form. Yet, because planning is a site of struggle, it can *potentially* also become a space where contradictions in the hegemonic settlement are distilled, become visible and may be articulated in ways that challenge dominant logics.

The political implications of this approach are significant, since it recognises planning as a site where various "positions" might be strategically staked in a "war of position" over its meaning, purpose and role in society. In terms of attempts to reform planning in England, this means

thinking about the dynamism of English planning as partly a function of ongoing struggles to secure the legitimacy of dominant political ideas as they relate to the use and development of land.

Applying conjunctural analysis to English planning

Rather than proposing a *theory,* Hall's primary concern was to use theoretical tools to develop an analytical *practice* oriented towards political learning and action (Clarke, 2014). Conjunctural analysis does not therefore aspire to be a fully-fledged "theory" but an analytical and methodological *orientation.* In what follows we do not seek to dogmatically "follow" or "use" Hall but to adapt his open style of analytical thinking to examine the role of ideology in English planning in the aftermath of the 2007/08 global financial crisis.

We have therefore sought to track changes to English town and country planning since 2010, particularly as it relates to a powerful narrative of "housing crisis", and shifts in the evolving political ideology of the Conservative Party that has wielded power during this period. We have also traced shifts in national planning policies and legislative provisions, relating these to the Conservative Party's political ideology to question its role in securing continuity and change by reconciling competing imperatives around the roles of the state and the market in planning for housing. This approach has required analysis of various policy documents, primary and secondary legislation, political speeches and debates, as well as the popular discourse of the press to build a picture of the practical sequence of changes to English planning, the role of the political pressures created by the discourse of "housing crisis" in shaping them, and how they have been communicated in official policy discourse.

As a result, we have sought to trace the historical roots of the discourse of "housing crisis" and its implications for planning; questioning its nature and significance in relation to the protracted unfolding of the 2007/08 financial crisis and the wider crises dynamics facing the neoliberal conjuncture. This requires an account of the ways in which the political, social and economic roles of planning and housing have changed in English society so as to understand the various historical determinants of contemporary articulations of the "housing crisis" and the roles played

by housing and planning in relation to the forging and sustaining of "neoliberal" hegemony. In this way, we seek to situate our analysis of the period since 2010 in a broader context to trace the continuing influence of various forces, including ideology, in shaping dominant understandings of planning.

There are parallels in our approach with various other forms of post-structuralist and discursive analysis of planning ideas and practices. However, conjunctural analysis is distinctive in seeking to take in the broad sweep of forces which coalesce into a conjuncture, while trying not to privilege any one particular aspect, be it social, economic, political or ideological. Nevertheless, by the very act of thinking analytically about a conjuncture, the analyst still has to carve it up and impose a narrative sequence and sense of coherence. This tension between the chaos of historical change and the coherence of narrative challenges all theory. There is no clear way out of the bind it creates, other than, as Hall (2011) argued, to retain sight of the deeply provisional and contingent nature of any account.

By writing about a conjuncture, certain aspects will inevitably be foregrounded at the expense of others - the whole complexity of interrelationships cannot be adequately captured. Rather than a search for theoretical "truths", then, conjunctural analysis should be judged by its value for "diagnosing the present" (Newman, 2014) and the practical political insights it can generate into ideological struggles to secure or rework hegemony across various sites, from the particularities of planning to the generalities of historical conjunctures. With this in mind we now turn to the longer term context framing the current moment for planning for housing in England.

Housing, planning and the neoliberal conjuncture

Housing supply has long played an important role in the politics of planning in England and the growing centrality of housing to thinking about planning reflects the wider political significance the issue has assumed in recent years. Whilst only one, relatively small part of the wider conjuncture, the "housing question" occupies a position at the intersection of significant economic, social, political and ideological dynamics shaping the neoliberal settlement (Clarke, 2010; Marcuse and Madden, 2016).

Economically, the deregulation of financial markets and mortgage lending by the Thatcher governments in the 1980s created the conditions for the financialisation of housing which came to be increasingly widely regarded as an economic asset, leading to the development of complex financial products and the widespread speculation on mortgage-backed finance that lay at the root of the 2007/08 financial crisis (Watson, 2009). Despite a significant house-price driven recession in the early 1990s and the effects of the crisis, these changes prompted long-term and significant (though geographically uneven) increases in residential land and house prices, fuelled by easy availability of cheap mortgage finance. Indeed, the UK experienced approximately 1090% increase in average house prices in the period 1979 - 2018 (127% in real terms), and approximately 280% increase in the period 1997 - 2018 (112% in real terms) (Nationwide, 2019).

Both housing related debt and capital therefore became increasingly significant not just to individual households but to the functioning of the wider economy in what has been dubbed a "mortgage-led accumulation regime" (Wood, 2018). The diversion of huge amounts of wealth into land and housing has had multiple effects, reinforcing the dominant role of financial services in the British growth model, and masking underlying structural weaknesses in the economy (Edwards, 2015).

Politically and socially, the promotion of homeownership was a significant tool for winning support to the neoliberal policies of successive governments. This was most potently symbolised by Thatcher's introduction of a "right to buy" for council tenants, a policy widely credited with winning working class voters over to Thatcher's neoliberal project. Coupled with restrictions on local authority building that prevented the replacement of public stock, the residualisation of what remained of "council housing" also significantly reinforced negative perceptions of welfare dependency and the "failure" of the post-war settlements in the UK.

Ideologically, the promise of a "property owning democracy" made by both Conservative and New Labour governments over the past four decades appealed to property as a key symbolic stake in the "community". The strength of these ideological linkages was reinforced by long term

rises in house prices that helped maintain "consumer confidence" whilst literally and figuratively mortgaging people into the maintenance of the status quo. Homeowners were thus interpellated as core subjects of neoliberal planning, with housing situated as a key site of both financial and emotional investment.

Significantly, these ideological shifts also largely removed the state from the production of new housing, leading to a long-term reliance on the private sector. Capitalising on growth in land and house prices during this period the housebuilding industry in the UK consolidated into a concentration of large public limited companies (Archer and Cole, 2016). Supply of new housing in England (particularly in areas of high demand like London and the south east) has, however, persistently failed to keep up with forecasted housing need, with an officially reported annual shortfall of approximately 115,000 homes against an estimated need of around 275,000 per year by 2017 (DCLG, 2017).

Another significant long term consequence of these changes has been to alienate increasing numbers of people who have been priced out of the aspiration for homeownership and have become "trapped" in a poorly regulated private rental sector. This notably includes a younger generation for whom the high costs of housing in economically affluent regions is becoming an increasingly visible problem (Corlett & Judge, 2017). The "success" of the neoliberal strategy of promoting homeownership has, therefore, produced a range of paradoxical results and deepening contradictions that have put significant political pressure on governments to act. In response, successive governments have tended to fall back on a core neoliberal discourse, "blaming" the planning system for creating bureaucratic delays and preventing the market from meeting housing need.[4] As a result, planning reform has frequently been positioned as a key response to the dominant construction of the "housing crisis" as a problem of artificially constrained supply.

The Financial Crisis: A new phase in neoliberal hegemony

Conjunctural dynamics around housing and their various crisis tendencies were close to the

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[4] Despite even official reviews acknowledging that increasing supply alone is unlikely to influence key aspects of the problem, particularly affordability (Barker, 2004).

centre of the financial crisis that erupted in 2007-8. In the UK this was followed by the electoral defeat of New Labour whose ideological project had sought to perform a 'double shuffle' (Hall, 2011), accepting neoliberal prescriptions to liberalise markets, privatising and managerialising the state whilst retaining some commitment to the party's more social reformist past. In New Labour's place a coalition government was formed in 2010 between the Conservative Party and the more centrist Liberal Democrats.

The financial crisis exposed contradictions in the ideology underpinning the neoliberal settlement, undermining New Labour's claims that 'light touch regulation' had brought an end to the boom and bust cycle of markets. Illustrating the importance of getting 'hold of the narrative' to control how crises are constructed and used politically (Hall and Massey 2010; 59), however, the banking crisis was quickly transmogrified into a crisis of the public finances (Clarke, 2010). Using the crisis as a pretext, the Conservative-led coalition government introduced deep, fast cuts to public services that it blamed on the profligacy of their predecessors. What had seemed a potential moment of rupture in the settlement, effectively ushered in a new phase in neoliberal hegemony which the dominant ideology of the Conservative Party helped to legitimise.

In the next section we assess how planning in England was repositioned by this ideological agenda from 2010-2015, showing in particular the growing political importance of the narrative of "housing crisis" and how it was used to perpetuate prevailing, neoliberal ideas of planning. We also go on to highlight how the intensification of the politics of housing and the major political crisis created by Brexit appear to have destabilised core neoliberal discourses about the role of planning and the market in delivering new houses. Relating this to the underlying contradictions in the role of housing within the wider conjuncture outlined above, we argue that new opportunities may be opening up to contest the dominant construction of the housing crisis and articulate alternative ideas of planning.

Towards a conjunctural analysis of ideology, planning reform and the "housing crisis"

(I) Localism, housebuilding and ideological struggle

Prior to 2010 the Conservative Party under leader David Cameron had sought to ideologically reposition itself to challenge New Labour's dominance of the "centre ground" of UK politics. The resulting "Cameronite" ideological amalgam sought to combine commitment to the neoliberal aspects of British conservatism emphasised since Thatcher with a more "compassionate" tradition that rested on an organic and "localist" conception of community and society and a paternalistic orientation towards their conservation (Dorey, 2007; Evans, 2010).

In the early years of the coalition government, a strong rhetorical emphasis was placed on the "localist" element of this ideological framework. Summoning citizens to come together and forge a "big society" to manage local affairs previously undertaken by the state, the localism agenda contained a strong current of anti-statism, enabling blame for the crisis to be placed on New Labour's centralising agenda and providing a narrative that, at least rhetorically, linked unprecedented cuts in public spending to a resurgence of local community control.

Cited by Cameron in opposition as an example of the problems caused by too much central state interference, localism had particular resonance in planning, where resentment at central government imposition of targets for new housebuilding through regional plans was particularly strong in many Conservative voting localities (Tait and Inch, 2016). A range of "localist" changes to the planning system were therefore quickly introduced including the abolition of regional plans, and their perceived "imposition" of top-down targets, and the introduction of a new tier of Neighbourhood Development Plans which communities can choose to prepare themselves to shape the development of their local areas.

However, the neoliberal current within the ideology was also strongly present. The aftershocks of the global financial crisis and a subsequent sharp downturn in construction led government to argue that getting housebuilding moving again was 'crucial for economic growth' (HM Government, 2011, viii). The connection between housebuilding and growth led to planning

reforms aimed at deregulating the planning system to enable the market to deliver more housing; an articulation of the core neoliberal critique of planning as a regulatory barrier.

The neoliberal and localist emphases within the Conservative ideology thus intersected in their hostility towards the state. Government rhetoric argued these two strands could be reconciled in relation to housing as communities, freed from governmental interference and offered appropriate incentives, would come to support increased housebuilding. However, there were clear tensions in this formulation. The neoliberal emphasis on housebuilding and growth pushed for the deregulation of the planning system so more houses could be built while the localist agenda promised local people greater control over unpopular new housebuilding by creating an additional layer of planning regulation at neighbourhood level and abolishing regional targets designed to ensure local authorities planned for sufficient housing.

These tensions erupted in the political controversy surrounding the introduction of a "presumption in favour of sustainable development" through a new draft National Planning Policy Framework ("NPPF") which radically shortened existing national planning guidance. The proposal signalled a strengthened pro-development position, potentially undermining local powers to control what was built. It therefore generated strong opposition from a coalition of traditional Conservative supporters, led by a high-profile national media campaign against "concreting over of the countryside" in a key right-wing newspaper. As for previous Conservative governments in the 1980s (Thornley, 1993), planning for housebuilding therefore became a contested area of policy through the interaction of competing ideological imperatives within the ruling party.

The controversy surrounding the draft NPPF temporarily threatened to derail the government's reform agenda, and was only resolved after a number of concessions were secured by the government's opponents. However, the extent to which these significantly altered the neoliberal programme around housebuilding enshrined in the document is debatable. The NPPF was eventually adopted in 2012 with a slightly modified "presumption" which effectively reduced the powers of local authorities and communities to oppose housing development where a local plan is out of date and/or the local planning authority is unable to demonstrate a sufficient supply of

housing land.

A revised requirement for local authorities to plan for "objectively assessed housing need" was also introduced. In practice this meant maintenance of the housing targets so despised by parts of the Conservative Party. Perhaps because these targets would no longer be set by central government through regional plans perceived as "remote" from local communities, their appearance in the NPPF raised few objections. The tension inherent in centrally "imposing" the requirement for local authorities to plan for objectively assessed housing need alongside a "localist" agenda was obfuscated.

In this regard, debates around the NPPF illustrate the relative autonomy of planning as a site where wider social, political, economic and ideological relations are not simply reflected but converge and are mediated in particular ways. The NPPF adoption process also shows how the political ideology of the Conservative Party of the time actively shaped and directed various planning reforms both by "suturing together" potentially contradictory lines of argument to secure consent and by flexibly adjusting in the face of political opposition. In the final compromise, the localist current of the ideology was clearly moderated to ensure the overarching commitment to growth through housebuilding deemed central to the wider neoliberal settlement.

(II) The housing crisis, home ownership and the deepening of neoliberal reforms

In the years following the introduction of the NPPF, the localist orientation continued to be symbolised by consistent government support for neighbourhood planning. This included measures making it somewhat easier for local communities with neighbourhood plans to resist unwanted housing (Barwell, 2016). Meanwhile, the neoliberal critique of planning remained dominant, increasingly focused through the discourse of the housing crisis with a particular emphasis on regulatory reforms to enable the private sector to increase the supply of new housing.

For planning, the result was a period of intensified legal and policy experimentation (Haughton and Allmendinger, 2016) driven by the neoliberal desire to 'remove any unnecessary obstacles in

the planning system to the delivery of new homes' (Explanatory notes to the Housing and Planning Act 2016, paras.2-3). Legislative changes gave central government new powers to intervene when local authorities failed to prepare plans fast enough or in accordance with the need to encourage more housebuilding. In addition, a range of actively deregulatory measures were introduced, exempting certain changes of use from the need to obtain planning permission, including the conversion of office buildings into housing.

An enhanced focus on the viability of development in the aftermath of the global financial crisis enabled developers to challenge efforts by local authorities to extract development value to pay for affordable housing, thereby resulting in fewer "affordable homes". Meanwhile, the definition of "affordable housing" in national policy was itself changed, bringing it closer to market-levels (DLCG, 2012: Annex 2). With house prices quickly rising again following the financial crisis, the result was a decline in the number of new homes which could reasonably be considered "affordable", particularly in areas of high demand like London (Wilcox et al, 2015, 12).

This all occurred during a period when planning services were absorbing the largest budget cuts in local government, amounting to 53% of budgets from 2011-2017 (TCPA, 2018: 36). The cumulative result of these piecemeal changes is still hard to assess but has been deeply significant, reducing planning capacity in local government and control over the location, quantity and tenure of new housebuilding. Overall the 2010-2015 government may have overseen the most significant ideologically-driven reconfiguration of planning policy and practice since the introduction of a comprehensive planning system in 1947 (Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, 2018).

Despite the fact that local authorities had little direct power to ensure new housing was actually built, government hoped that a combination of deregulation and the centralisation of power, particularly where local authorities were judged not to be fulfilling their duties adequately, would ensure enough development land was released for the market to meet "objectively assessed housing need". The discourse of the "housing crisis" therefore played a key role in ideologically positioning planning as a key problem as the government responded to political pressures generated by both the perceived importance of housebuilding to the wider economy and the need

to ensure continued access to the promise of homeownership.

The latter was particularly symbolised by the "first time buyer" becoming an increasingly key discursive figure, appealed to by policy initiatives designed to underwrite mortgage finance for the new build houses being delivered through the "streamlined" planning system. Paradoxically, however, this ideological response to fears about younger generations being priced out of the aspiration for homeownership served to underwrite both further rises in house prices and the profits of housebuilding firms, further exacerbating underlying problems of affordability (Partington, 2019). As we now go on to argue, the focus on reforming planning to boost the market-led delivery of more houses and the creation of more homeowners has increasingly been exposed as an inadequate response to the contradictions underpinning the position of housing within a neoliberal settlement now facing a period of heightened political uncertainty.

(III) Political crisis and the opening of space for challenge?

Following a general election in 2015, a Conservative government was elected. In order to manage the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and dissatisfaction in the right-wing of the party, their election manifesto had promised a referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. Immediately following the decision to 'Brexit' the European Union, David Cameron resigned and was replaced as leader of the Conservative party by Theresa May who sought to respond to the divisive implications of the referendum result for the party and the wider country, and a significant shift to the political left by the Labour Party in opposition following the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader in 2015.

Brexit has has since generated a deep political crisis whose implications are still being worked through. With links to significant discontents amongst those 'left behind' by economic, social and political change over recent decades, including long-term increases in inequality set in chain by neoliberal programmes and exacerbated by austerity, the effects of this were quickly apparent in relation to housing. In a white paper on housing delivery published in early 2017, there was evidence of a subtle reframing of the narrative of the "housing crisis", now associated less with the importance of new housing to economic growth and the encouragement of homeownership,

and more with the social and broader economic effects of *unaffordable* housing. Whereas the term "economic growth" was mentioned 18 times in *Laying the Foundations - A Housing Strategy for England* (HM Government, 2011), in the Housing White Paper (DCLG, 2017), it appeared only twice.

The White Paper acknowledged that blame for the "broken" housing market does not lie solely with the "bureaucratic planning system". The supposed practice of developer "land banking" was questioned, with the accompanying accusation that such practices may be contributing to the undersupply of housing and, therefore, unaffordable house prices. Alongside this reframing of the causes of the "housing crisis" was an acknowledgment that relying predominately on the private sector to provide the homes the country needs has introduced a concentration of power and market influence that is not producing optimal societal outcomes. The White Paper therefore recognised a stronger role for local authorities in direct housing provision (i.e. building homes for below-market rent). The build-out rates (and business models) of major housebuilders have also since come under scrutiny as increasing numbers of planning consents granted by a more permissive regulatory regime have failed to translate into parallel increases in new houses (Shelter, 2017). In addition, the power of private landowners in influencing the supply and price of housing development land has also been questioned (Letwin, 2018).

The extent and implications of these apparent shifts remain unclear. However, it is possible this may have significant implications for planning for housing. In the years immediately following the global financial crisis, Conservative ideology sought to balance localism with neoliberal reforms to the planning system, appealing to the importance of housing and home ownership to economic recovery and prosperity, before then downplaying the localism agenda in favour of deregulation and centralisation of the planning system to help deliver more homes and create new homeowners. However, it now seems to also be responding to the political and social challenges flowing from unaffordable housing. Having previously been off the agenda for ideological reasons, openness to tackling high land values and funding local authority house building through public borrowing are symbolically significant. Increasing material evidence that planning delays are not the main obstacle to housebuilding seem to have interacted with an intensification of the politics of housing and the Brexit crisis to shake the ideological framework

shaping the politics of planning.

This generates significant questions about the potential for planning to become a site of more significant ideological struggle in the years to come, beyond its role in reconciling internal divisions within the Conservative Party from 2010-2016. As part of this, neoliberal "common-sense" that planning is a regulatory barrier and source of bureaucratic delay may be open to challenge by forces seeking a more progressive idea of planning as part of a stronger state-led response to the housing question. Much will depend on who succeeds in getting "hold of the narrative" during a period that will be marked by intensive "political and ideological work" and struggle. Repositioning planning as a core means by which aspirations for decent, secure and affordable housing can be met by redistributing inflated land values could, for example, offer routes to significantly reshape hitherto prevailing political and ideological horizons around planning and housing in England. In the remainder of this paper we go on to explore the value of a conjunctural analysis of these events, both *theoretically*, as a means of understanding the role of ideology in securing continuity and change in planning ideas, and *practically*, for thinking through possible political responses to the profound uncertainties of the contemporary historical moment.

Hegemony, crisis and the politics of planning for housing: the role of ideology

Following Hall's (2011) injunction that there is no single ruling ideology, a conjunctural analysis of the politics of planning reform in England since 2010 encourages us to think about the role of the *particular* political ideology of the Conservative Party during this period and how this relates to a more abstract form of neoliberal hegemony at a broader conjunctural level as well as about the role of planning as a space where these relations converge.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2007/08 financial crisis the legitimacy of neoliberal hegemony was severely challenged as "the material and ideological foundations of neoliberalism were shattered" (Stahl, 2019, 334). Despite this, a major crisis of the neoliberal settlement was apparently averted and neoliberal logics applied to restore "business as usual", legitimising further rounds of state restructuring under the auspices of austerity. This was supported through

active political ideological work by the Conservative-led coalition government to displace responsibility for the crisis, from clear evidence of market failures onto the state and public spending. Although there was by no means unanimous public support for austerity, through this ideological re-framing of responsibility for the crisis an uneasy and fractious consent was secured and the cultural saturation of neoliberal logics continued to hold together the broader conjuncture.

This discourse of blame was strongly apparent in the intersection of the "housing crisis" and planning in England post-2010 where, in the wake of the financial crisis, familiar neoliberal problematisations of the planning system as a barrier to development were given renewed urgency by the need to restore economic growth and access to homeownership as a core aspiration. The central role performed by the idea of homeownership in the political ideology of the Conservative Party at the time, and in the broader neoliberal settlement over the previous thirty years, ensured that planning for housing was a key area for active ideological work which sought to shape the discourse of the "housing crisis".

In this regard, the political ideology of the Conservative Party played an important role in ensuring that *the* "housing crisis" was presented in simplified terms as a *particular* kind of problem (supply of new housing being stifled by an overbearing state), requiring particular forms of intervention (deregulation and incentives to better respond to market signals). It thus sought to legitimise planning reforms aimed at encouraging housebuilding to create more homeowners and so help secure the continuation of the neoliberal settlement in the aftermath of the financial crisis. However, where such planning reforms were enacted in England, 'various forms and intensities of struggle*'* (Hall, 1988a, 51) have been apparent, struggles closely linked to the contested and contradictory nature of the political ideology of the Conservative Party as well as the broader, material and political-economic contradictions of the financialisation of housing and the geographies of uneven development they have generated.

The tensions between the localism and growth agendas in the early years of the 2010 - 2015 government highlighted a persistent fault-line in Conservative Party attempts to govern planning for housing and exposed planning as a site where competing ideological agendas struggled for

dominance in response to broader economic, social and political pressures, notably those generated by the "housing crisis". The flexibility (or incoherence) of the ideological amalgam of the Conservative Party enabled it to legitimise various policy agendas, and to obfuscate their sometimes contradictory nature. The role of ideology in these processes has been both *active* and *reactive* - active in the powerful legitimisation of the integrated policy reforms in the early years of the Conservative-led coalition after 2010, and more reactive when its sense of coherence and legitimacy was challenged, most obviously when the economic growth and housing delivery agendas risked bringing the government's core neoliberal drives into conflict with local communities on whose political support it relied.

If ideology is always contradictory and seeks to stitch potentially disparate developments, lines of argument and emotional commitments together, it is possible to conclude that the distinctive Conservative articulation of neoliberalism and localism from 2010-2015 proved a relatively successful means of "holding" a position, containing the potentially problematic politics of new housebuilding and enabling the roll-out of a new phase of neoliberal restructuring (Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, 2018). The planning system played a significant role in this ideological formation, positioned as both an ideological "scapegoat" (Gunder, 2016) for the supply shortages "causing" the housing crisis and a means of placating opposition to new housing development through appeals to "localism".

These contested processes of planning reform, their intersection with the "housing crisis" and the importance of housing delivery and homeownership to securing the neoliberal settlement point to the ongoing challenge of securing hegemony as a 'process of ideological framing, institutional restructuring, political struggle and social adaptation' (Peck, 2017, 14). Neoliberal hegemony is not unilaterally imposed, but must be constantly re-made in the face of challenge and contestation arising from its own contradictions and the ways in which these are distilled and become manifest in particular struggles. Ideological struggles around planning are thus related in complex, mediated ways to wider processes without being wholly determined by them. This open and dynamic conception challenges conjunctural analysts not to reproduce accounts of hegemonic domination but to explore how particular sites (such as planning) might become locations of ideological struggle from where alternatives can be articulated as part of a "war of

position".

Indeed, there are now signs that the core neoliberal problematisation of planning as a key cause of the *housing crisis* has begun to break down under significant pressure from both its own internal contradictions and wider political and material realities with roots in the 2007/08 *financial crisis*. The United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union seems likely to generate an extended period of *political crisis* with significant but as yet uncertain implications for the future of the neoliberal settlement. As discussed in the previous section, this may have further significant implications for prevailing constructions of both the housing crisis and planning. In this context, it is important to be alert to emergent possibilities to articulate progressive positions from which to rework dominant conceptions of planning. It is to such possibilities that we turn next.

'Reading' possibilities for political action

For Stuart Hall (1991) theory was always "a detour" on the way to "somewhere more interesting", valuable to the extent it contributes to the *practice* of theorizing in aid of political insight. His interest in "reading" conjunctural dynamics was closely related to the importance of the "war of position" for contesting and rearticulating what Raymond Williams (1977, 110) called the 'lived system of meanings and values' through which hegemonic power is constantly being reestablished across diverse sites. This emphasis aligns with planning theory's long-standing orientation towards action, but what are its implications and how might they be related to the contemporary historical moment?

The first thing that must be said is that it is, of course, incredibly hard to see how the contemporary political crisis in the UK will be resolved - there is presently little sense of a stable settlement around a "dominant and effective system of values" in Britain. The ongoing struggle of political ideas will ultimately help determine whether new phases of neoliberal hegemony follow the creative destruction of Brexit or whether an alternative hegemonic settlement emerges to   secure a new conjuncture.

Within the uncertainty created by this broader political struggle in the UK, it is correspondingly challenging to read the potential for political action around planning in England. However, its nature as a relatively autonomous space of ideological contestation suggests potential does exist to articulate progressive alternatives to the dominant neoliberal problematisation of planning, rather than passively responding to the ideological agendas of successive national governments as has been the case over recent decades. This potential for progressive ideological renewal is arguably stronger in periods of crisis and uncertainty, although, as immediately following the global financial crisis, they can also be swiftly closed off.

Due to these contingencies, any progressive project for planning would require active *ideological work* to shape a fundamental rethinking of planning, away from long-standing technical or professional understandings, and towards a more progressive political sensibility. Following Hall, it would need to work 'on the grounds of already constituted social practices and lived ideologies' (Hall, 1988b, 56), articulating positions that resonate with and rework the sphere of popular common-sense where hegemony is constantly renewed. This would require associating planning with a form of "populist" reason, and the "emotional investments" that ideology seeks to mobilise, securing popular support for new understandings of planning and bringing political pressure for change to bear on   policymakers.

In this regard, the emergence of active political struggle over land, the profits of private sector house-builders, the exclusion of increasing numbers of people from adequate housing and the negative consequences of deregulated development all have the potential to tap into significant strands of thought and feeling at the intersection of contradictions which potentially challenge aspects of the neoliberal settlement. The historical roots of contemporary planning as part of broader movements for reform of housing and land, spurred by widespread popular support, suggest the potential to reposition planning in such a way (Ward, 2004, ch.2). By "thinking conjuncturally" about the ideological appeal of planning could progressive planners once again open opportunities to move beyond theory, towards "somewhere more interesting"?

Conclusion

This paper has explored the potential value of Stuart Hall's approach to conjunctural analysis as an analytical orientation for exploring the complex relations between ideology and planning. We have argued that Hall's approach offers a style of analytical thinking attentive to key *problems* that must be confronted in order to understand how ideology frames the dominant forms of reason through which planning might aspire to "guide history". The paper has made three main contributions to planning theory in this respect.

Firstly, through an account of hegemony attentive to the continuous contestations involved in its reproduction, we have tried to *position* struggles over planning within a broader conjuncture whilst resisting any idea that planning ideas are straightforwardly determined by any hegemonic ideology. We have therefore shown how employing conjunctural analysis as a "style of analytical thinking" has the potential to illuminate both the role of planning as a site of struggle for hegemony in the broader conjuncture, and the role of political ideology in influencing, legitimising and responding to change in planning ideas and practices.

Secondly, we have shown the importance of exploring the role of ideology in relation to a range of other determinants of historical change. We have illustrated this by exploring the role of the political ideology of Conservative-led governments in securing continuity and change in planning ideas and practices in England since 2010. This has enabled us to focus on both the well-remarked tensions and inconsistencies in a particular government's ideological agenda for planning, but also to relate these to the material forces and political pressures the ideology has encountered and been articulated against, particularly with regard to the politics of planning for housing. The paper has therefore drawn attention to the ideological not as a realm where dominant power relations are unwaveringly reproduced but as a terrain of struggle and contestation; part of a "war of position" whose stakes include the definition of the proper role and purpose of planning.

Thirdly, the paper has sought to respond to planning theory's foundational commitment towards action by illustrating that conjunctural analysis has practical political value as a means of

"diagnosing the present" to inform strategies for reshaping planning ideas and practices, not least by rethinking the ideological appeal of planning itself and its "positioning" on the grounds of popular common-sense.

Conjunctural analysis therefore positions planning as a space where ideological struggle takes place within the frame of an always contingent cultural hegemony. This struggle may result in the reproduction of dominant forces but it can also open space for alternative articulations which have the potential to transform dominant logics for both planning and the wider conjuncture, revealing routes to progressive political action. In this sense, we have argued that ideology matters for planning and must remain central to a political analysis of planning ideas, not in order to resign ourselves to the unyielding dominance of omnipotent forces like "neoliberalism" but as a path to understanding how better ideas of planning might be shaped. That such spaces could presently be opening up around both the pressures of the "housing crisis" in England and the wider political crises enveloping the neoliberal conjuncture illustrates the opportunities - it is up to those who would like to see more radical change to seize the moment.

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