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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 and Marshall, 2002, 181). 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 neo-liberalised since the 1970s.

Introduction

A large 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 and 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 et al, 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) highlights 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 power which can be achieved by instituting a complex system of filters' and through 'terms of political discourse [which] are designed to prevent 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 et al, 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 McGuirk and MacLaran, 2001; Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2011). In this sense, the Irish case serves as something of an archetype for planning systems 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 and 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 and Haughton, 2013a, 2013b; Haughton et al., 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

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

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 Jarneko et al (2012, 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 is 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 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., 2010). 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 richest diversity. Generally though, liberal theory emerging from Mill's work tends to postulate that no one is better placed to define what is good for a person than themselves and that no section of society can enforce a specific concept upon the individual; broadly speaking, this view is central to ideas of utilitarianism. Under this rubric, 'individual interests are paramount and the public interest is either the summation of all individual interests in a community or the 'greatest good of the greatest number'. Utilitarianism makes no moral judgement about individual preferences' (Campbell and Marshall, 2000, 308). Of course, liberal theory also requires political neutrality in order to provide for universal means that allow equality in pursuit of individual ends; this neutrality emerges from the community's social contract. Thus, in liberal theory, the basis for political authority and legitimacy 'is not the common good but, rather, the free contract among rational individuals for the protection of their natural rights' (Smith, 1999, 625). In recent times, these views have fallen under consistent attack not only

from anti-positivist and anti-enlightenment critiques of postmodernists but, more concretely, from Marxist scholars who argue that the notion of political neutrality cannot be realised in a state political economic system that is in servitude to the market forces of capitalism (MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003; Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2011). Critics coming from this end argue that state objectives tend to consistently reflect the interests of capital and/or the socio-economic elite of society rather than any notion of the common good (Harvey, 1985).

Empirical studies that have looked at the concept of the common good in planning practice have revealed interesting results. The most important is Howe's (1983) study which used qualitative interviews to investigate (as part of a larger study with other objectives) how planners use the concept of the public interest. She found that planners had no unanimous definition of the public interest - 61.4% spoke about a concern with benefits to the whole community not a narrow constituency; 40.9% expressed concern with long-term effects of planning decisions on the community; 22.7% used prevailing laws and policies as a guide to understanding and using the concept of the public interest in planning. Indeed, Howe (1992) has asserted that in the US, planners continue to place a large degree of faith in the concept of the public interest despite them having no dominant conception of its meaning and role in the planning system. In the late 1990s, Campbell and Marshall (1998) found (using focus groups of planning professionals in the UK) that the 'public interest' had little meaning in practice given the move towards entrepreneurial forms of governance in the UK. More recently, Tait (2011) used an ethnographic approach to investigate trust and the public interest in planning practice. His research uncovered the fractured nature of perceptions of the common good among stakeholders in the planning system. Specifically, planners often defined the public interest in very specific contexts while also viewing it as a physical space of which they were the natural guardians. On the other hand, councillors often defined it simply as 'economic growth' assuming that growth was quite obviously in the best interests of all. All of this points towards a contested view of the common good or public interest among professional planning practitioners and stakeholders in the planning system more broadly.

Aside from empirical studies, there has been significant debate around the concept in the literature. For instance, Campbell and Marshall (2002) have sought to provide a frame of categorisation of the public interest based on a consequentialist and deontological version of the public interest although even they are critical of it. Moroni (2004) has called for a rethinking of the public interest concept in planning that is relevant to theory and practice. He argues that it is possible to construct an (egalitarian) 'liberal' conception of the public interest as 'social primary goods' that are relevant for spatial planning. Alexander (2002a) takes a more pragmatic approach by devising public interest criterion for use in specific cases of plan evaluation. He argues that for the public interest to have any real meaning for the future of planning, it must be applied as a core criterion in the evaluation of plans.

The interesting dichotomy in the literature is that despite only a small number of empirical studies analysing the role of the common good in practice, it has long been considered an important concept for the institution and also for planning practice. Campbell and Marshall (2002) inform us that, despite the concept not being specifically defined, it was central to the deliberations which produced the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act establishing the modern planning system in the UK. Moreover, in the planning literature, there is a prevailing view that the common good continues to be an important concept for planning theory and practice. For example Campbell and Marshall (2000, 181) posit that it 'remains the pivot around which debates about the nature of planning and its purposes turn' while Mazza (1990, 48) asserts that 'historically, the only standard common to different planning forms has been the public interest'. This suggests that the common good is a central principle in planning theory and also for the justification of planning itself. As Moroni (2004, 151) asserts: 'The justification for planning intervention has traditionally centred on the concept of the public interest'. Ultimately though, 'for planners and the planning profession, the public interest has always remained relevant as a legitimising principle and a norm for practice' (Alexander, 2002a, 226). Indeed Alexander (2002b, 226-27) suggests that the concept has three roles in the planning profession: 'one is to legitimize planning as a state

activity; another is as a norm for planning practice and in professional ethics; and the third role is as a criterion for evaluating planning and its products – policies, projects and plans.

In Ireland, the notion of the common good was prominent in the Local Government (Planning and Development) Act, 1963 which effectively established the modern Irish planning system 'in the interests of the common good'. Despite not being clearly defined in this Act or in the Irish Constitution (where the concept is also evoked), it has been utilised as a notional concept for generating public support for important pieces of legislation. In other words, while the concept is loosely defined in legislation and policy it has nevertheless often been utilised in historical and indeed contemporary planning legislation. However, Fox-Rogers et al (2011) note that in recent years the term has been replaced with that of the 'national interest' in planning legislation such as the 2006 Planning and Development (Strategic Infrastructure) Act while the concept was not referred to at all in the recent post-crash Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2010.

Yet despite the rhetoric surrounding the evocation of the concept of the common good, relatively few studies examine the role of the concept for informing planning practice. In this sense, this paper is interested in questioning whether the common good is, in reality, a 'norm' for practice? Moreover, we question whether or not it is a legitimatising principle for planning as an institution? If it is not, what then are the principles that drive practice? Can we see the impact of hegemonic ideas in perceptions of the common good in planning? In our view, these are precisely the sort of questions that are important for critical scholars to engage with.

Methodology

The Irish context

This research focuses on the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) consisting of seven administrative authorities, each being a separate planning authority² (see Figure 1). The region was selected on the basis that it has experienced the highest levels of pressure for residential and commercial development over the past decade nationally as indicated by the scale of planning decisions in the GDA relative to other regions (see Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2014). The region also displays various geographical contexts as it consists of a diverse mixture of urban, suburban and somewhat rural planning authorities.

Moreover, the recent development boom and bust in Ireland has led a number of commentators to question the role of the planning system in facilitating overdevelopment (Kitchin et al, 2012; Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2014). Indeed, since the onset of the so-called 'Celtic Tiger' era, the Irish planning system has become increasingly development-led and has been reconfigured in line with broader neoliberal ideals of market facilitation (see Murphy et al., 2014). This system allowed housing construction to rise from a figure of 19,000 in 1990, to an incredible 93,000 in 2006 (Whelan, 2010). In comparison, the UK only produced 160,761 for a population of c.60 million (for the same year). One example is that county Monaghan, which had a housing stock of 21,658 units in 2006, had enough serviced land zoned for an additional 18,147 units, which would cater for a household increase of 83% and last over fifty years – but only if households continued to grow at Celtic Tiger rates (Kitchin et al., 2012). The Irish planning system has also been at the very centre of various controversies regarding corrupt practices between property developers, politicians and planners - issues which are at the heart of debates around whether or not the common good is being served (see Cullen, 2002; Clancy et. al., 2010; An Taisce, 2012; Government of Ireland, 2012). Furthermore the Irish state has come under increasing scrutiny in terms of its failure to effectively regulate the financial and development sectors, particularly during the

² The seven administrative authorities that make up the GDA are: Dublin City Council; Fingal County Council; Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council; South Dublin County Council; Kildare County Council; Meath County Council; and Wicklow County Council.

so-called 'Celtic Tiger' years³ where an overinflated property bubble emerged with devastating consequences (see Fraser et. al., 2013; Kitchin et. al., 2014; Murphy and Scott, 2014).

Figure 1. Map of Greater Dublin Area



Source: www.dra.ie

Sampling approach

Qualitative interviews were carried out with 20 local authority urban planners in order to obtain rich and detailed insights on issues relating to the common good from the perspective of planning practitioners. The planners were drawn from four separate planning authorities in the GDA, which were selected on the basis that together they provided a range of planning contexts, development pressures, socioeconomic profiles and geographic locations (i.e. inner core, outer core and periphery).

Non-probability or 'snowball' sampling methods were adopted to generate respondents from each of the four planning authorities. An important issue to consider in the generation of any snowball sample is that respondents may suggest others who share similar characteristics or outlooks. It was therefore important to ensure that the respondents displayed varying characteristics to reduce the possibility of biased accounts being obtained. This was particularly important in instances where respondents suggested people 'who might be worth talking to'. As a result, three core qualifying criteria were established in order to assist in objectively identifying suitable respondents: (1) the respondent's local authority; (2) their professional grade; and (3) whether they worked in development management or forward planning. In terms of (1), a quota of 5 planners was sought from each of the four

³ The Celtic Tiger years are generally taken to be from the mid-1990s under 2007. They were characterised by high rates of economic growth and low unemployment. This boom period can be divided into two phases. The first (1995-2001) was based on improved competitiveness and productivity and driven by exports. The second was fuelled by credit growth and was characterised by a massive development boom. For a good summary of these developments see Kitchin et al (2011).

local authorities, thus equating to 20 respondents in total. The sample size was considered adequate as Mason's (2010) survey of 2,533 studies that employed qualitative approaches found that the most common sample sizes observed were 20 and 30. For (2), variations in the employment grade (i.e. assistant, executive and senior executive) was sought to ensure that responses were not skewed in any particular direction on the basis of their level of experience or position. For (3), a mix between planners working within the development management (DM) and forward planning teams (FP) of their respective local authorities was also sought⁴. This was to ensure that responses were not biased on the basis of the respondent's specific role within their respective planning authority and that we could investigate if there were significant differences of opinion in relation to their respective roles. In this regard, 13 planners were interviewed with forward planning (FP) experience while 12 were interviewed with development management experience (DM) (i.e. five planners had experience in both). Table 1 provides a breakdown of the respondents based on the foregoing criteria.

Table 1. Breakdown of Target Group 1 by local authority, grade and expertise.

Local Authority 1	Local Authority 2	Local Authority 3	Local Authority 4
P1- Executive (DM & FP)	P6- Senior Executive (DM)	P11- Senior Executive (FP)	P16- Assistant Executive (FP)
P2- Senior Executive (DM)	P7- Senior Executive (FP & DM)	P12- Senior Executive (DM & FP)	P17- Executive (DM)
P3- Assistant Executive (FP)	P8- Executive (FP & DM)	P13- Assistant Executive (DM)	P18- Senior Executive (FP)
P4- Senior Executive (FP)	P9- Executive (DM)	P14- Executive (DM)	P19- Executive (FP)
P5- Executive (DM)	P10- Executive (FP & DM)	P15- Executive (FP)	P20- Senior Executive (FP)

In terms of the possible methodological limitations of the approach, we were conscious of the traditional problems associated with qualitative interviewing, not least the gaps which can arise between what people say takes places in the interview setting, and what *actually happens* in reality (see Dunn, 2007). As such, several steps were taken to help ensure that transparent and frank accounts were offered by the respondents. First, respondents from a wide range of positions were interviewed as planners with more authority or experience may be more likely to distort their accounts in order to protect their reputations. Second, the interviews were anonymous to encourage the respondents to be as open and transparent about their views as possible. Third, considerable attention was paid to ensure that the respondents did not feel in any way threatened by the researcher. In this regard, professionally presented letters were issued to prospective respondents which set out some ground rules about how the information would be gathered and used. The respondents were informed that interviews would be: recorded digitally and subsequently transcribed; that their anonymity would be protected; and that the project was being undertaken as an independent piece of academic research.

Each of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and a systematic in-depth review of the interview transcripts was then carried out on a line by line basis to develop codes that were used to sort the data. 'In vivo' codes (Mason, 1996), which are derived from the words/phrases used by the respondents, dominated the coding strategy. In this regard, the coding scheme closely reflected the information emerging from the transcripts thereby ensuring that the analysis was data driven. In order to systematically identify the most dominant themes emerging from the data, descriptive statistics were used. This involved

⁴ In some instances, planners had relatively equal levels of experience working within development management and forward planning.

documenting and quantifying the number of planners which made reference to particular codes and themes. While these figures are offered in discussing the key results, we do not claim that they offer any statistical generalisability. Rather, they are included to unambiguously demonstrate the dominant issues at play and highlight instances where interesting divergences or similarities emerged amongst the planners interviewed with regards their ideas on issues surrounding the common good.

Results

Defining the common good?

The two most prominent categories that emerged when coding definitions of the common good referred to the common good as 'Balancing different competing interests' and 'Avoiding/minimising negative effects of development' (Table 2); 11 (55%) planners interviewed cited each of these as being part of a definition of the common good in planning. The common good as 'Balancing different competing interests' reflects the strong influence of collaborative planning ideas on planning practice over the last two decades. Under this rubric, the collaborative planner is considered a neutral arbitrator or facilitator of debate whose role is to foster styles of deliberation that can lead to shared meanings and collective decisions being arrived at by competing groups. For Healey (1992, 144) collaborative planning and '...the conception of planning as a communicative enterprise holds most promise for democratic forms of planning'. The data emerging from interviewees broadly aligns with this conception with planners associating the idea of the common good with the need to reach more balanced outcomes. In this sense then, it is interesting that contemporary planners mobilise a process-oriented vision of the common good in practice. This approach provides planners with a method of deciphering what the common good might be in specific contexts, and in a manner which does not present a unitary vision of what a common good might entail. In effect, this approach tends to be more accessible to practitioners because of the inherent fuzziness of the concept of the common good generally, but more specifically in planning practice. These views are illustrated by the following quotes:

"[It is about]...civil society, public goods, and juggling between private needs and public needs; I suppose that they would all fit into the common good." (P2: 7)

"...it's about finding that space between the three circles you know that way; the environment, the economic and the social." (P4: 17)

"...we have to balance the public and the private; I suppose that is what we're trying to do" (P6:4)

"It can be difficult, you do need to strike a balance...so it's a bit of a balancing act all of the time..." (P16:5)

"I think it means a balance of everybody within a particular locality with a nod towards national issues as well" (P19:5).

Indeed, the foregoing quotes clearly indicate that planners seek to balance different interests in the planning process. The quotes refer to 'juggling', 'finding space' and striking 'balance' in defining the common good in planning which highlights the complexity of the tasks being faced by everyday practitioners (see Forester, 1989). Indeed, perhaps one of the main reasons why such ideas are evoked in their definitions of the common good not only relates to the prevalence of the collaborative discourse in planning education and practice, but to the fact that the rapidly shifting knowledge requirements of their practice often leads to confusion over the nature of the planner's role in local government (Underwood, 1980).

Table 2. Definitions of the common good

Categorised Definition of the Common Good	#	%
Balancing different competing interests	11	55
Avoiding/minimising negative effects of development	11	55
Serving the interests of the public at large over the individual/localised interests	9	45
Difficulty defining the common good	9	45
Planning gain	3	15
Sustainable development	1	5

The second category of planners defining the common good as ‘Avoiding/minimising negative effects of development’ offers a somewhat worrisome view of what planners’ consider as the common good. Here, the common good is seen as preventing the worst impacts of unequal power in the planning system. What the following quotes highlight is the extent to which planners associate the common good with achieving outcomes which do not (1) negatively affect local communities and (2) provide something of benefit to the general public. However, this is something of a conservative view of what planners can achieve in the interests of the common good. To some extent at least, this is likely to be related to the manner in which market-led neoliberal ideologies have become normalised and embedded within western planning systems since the 1980s (see Sager, 2011). In the specific case of Ireland it also highlights the extent to which the institutional constraints imposed upon practicing planners forces them to adhere to practices that tend towards facilitating rather than challenging the interests of power (see Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2014):

“From a practical point of view I would see the common good as kind of a development that is not going to necessarily impact too much upon a community, that is in some way going to provide something for, we would say, the common good...provide something for the public.” (P3: 9)

“They [the community] will fight it, fight it, fight it and absolutely so but there is a greater good that you have to look at and pull that back and say from a strategic point of view, this may be a bit crap for you- we’ll find a way of compensating whether it’s a community levy or whatever it is and try and ameliorate as many impacts as possible. But at the end of the day, these things have to go ahead and they have to go ahead for the sake of everybody in the city you know...” (P4: 16-17).

Moreover, what is striking about the foregoing quotations is that the examples of the common good in practice provided by respondents are highly localised in nature reflecting a broader trend in the results whereby local small-scale planning concerns were often utilised to assist in defining the common good. Indeed, Howe (1983) found similar trends in her study of five US states and these results indicate, perhaps, the degree to which ‘bigger picture’ notions of planners’ collective role in shaping broader scale spatial development outcomes are lacking within the mind-sets of planners. Indeed, the quotes suggest very narrow considerations of the role of common good in planning and points towards a lack of broader reflection among planning professionals irrespective of whether this is normalised institutionally or otherwise. Indeed, similar observations were made by Campbell and Marshall (2002) who found that planners’ were unwilling to talk normatively about the values which underpin the planning system.

More traditional conceptions of the common good in planning also held a significant role amongst respondents. For example, 9 (45%) planners suggested that the common good involved ‘Serving the interests of the public at large over the individual/localised interests’. The following quotes highlight an Aristotelian conception of the common good where the collective is placed above the right of the individual. Examples of these conceptions include the following:

"I think it [the common good] should be self-evident - in the interest of the public. And what is the interest of the public? The public interest is collectively of the public not the interests of the individual within the public. It's in the interests of the collective in its entirety and then you work back to the right of the individual I think. " (P1: 12)

"Well I think, say for example with a planning application where there might be no third parties involved in it, our job is to ensure we have protected their interest even if they're not aware that their interest needs to be protected. So...you're looking to the broader, you're not looking at the individual. You have to keep away from NIMBY and all that. You're looking at the broader good and what is broadly the way to go for a particular town or village or whatever it is" (P12:7).

"...the common good is in the best interests of the population as a whole so you kind of accept that it's not going to suit all people but it should be in the interests of society rather than an individual community and it's also in the best interests environmentally, socially. I feel that they would come ahead of economic constraints" (P15:8)

It is notable here that a number of planners who held this view also held views associated with planners 'Balancing against different competing interests' and 'Avoiding/minimising negative effects of development'. This suggests that planners' views of the common good in planning is varied and can often be contradictory. However, the fact that 9 (45%) planners define the common good along traditional lines indicates that the unitary view of a common good or public interest (Campbell and Marshall, 2002) continues to influence conceptions of the common good among practicing planners. Moreover, it is also interesting that a greater number of planners involved in forward planning (7) ascribed to this version of the common good compared to those working in development management (1). This may reflect the more strategic nature of forward planning where broader issues of the common good are considered to be more important in framing policies and the development plan as opposed to development management which is more administrative in nature where such issues are not to the forefront of planning considerations. However, further research would need to be carried out to confirm such an assertion.

The results also show that 3 (15%) respondents suggested that the common good can be seen as a form of 'planning gain'. Here, a number of planners felt that the common good is about achieving token gains through the development process. In many respects this highlights the weak bargaining position planners often find themselves in when confronted by economic and political power so that planners are forced to accept 'crumbs from the table' rather than push for more extensive redistributions. Nevertheless, the quotes highlight the extent to which planners do attempt to achieve some form of redistribution in the system and thereby utilise their own position of power in an attempt to achieve some public goods from the development process. Indeed, this view of the common good also reflects the fact that it is indeed a contested term, one that is not 'black and white' but something that is negotiated in the planning system. The following quotations are illustrative of these tensions:

"Like going back to the Spar...that a shop can be something in the common good where there is a deprivation for food choice or something like that. And perhaps that's the problem: we think of the common good as something that's black and white." (P2: 7-8)

"Well from a practical point of view I would see the common good as kind of a development that is not going to necessarily impact too much upon a community that is in some way going to provide something for we would say the common good...provide something for the public. I mean some people would say that the common good is schools and crèches and cultural facilities or community offices or

something like that but I would also see common good as the public realm. You're talking about proper planning, good footpaths, cycle parking, seating all those kinds of things. It's not just something that's going to be totally insular and all for them. You're giving something to those outside as well." (P3: 9)

It is interesting also to note that issues such as planning gain are not seen as a standard part of proper planning and development; rather, for these planners the planning process has been reduced to scrapping for elements of social gain in a system that has been heavily neoliberalised since the 1980s (see Murphy et al, 2014).

One of the most striking results to emerge from interviews was the fact that almost half of all planners interviewed (9) had difficulty defining the common good in planning (Table 2). Even though Campbell and Marshall (1998) have pointed to the concept being poorly defined, this is still quite a surprising finding. Recall the point made earlier that planning theorists have asserted that the common good is (1) a legitimising principle for planning intervention (Campbell and Marshall, 2000; Morini, 2004); and (2) a norm for practice (Alexander, 2002a). That almost half of planners had real difficulty defining the common good in planning undermines the extent to which (1) and (2) are realistic principles underpinning the planning system. On the contrary, the evidence emerging here would appear to suggest that the extent to which the common good is a 'norm for practice' is overplayed. If it was a norm for practice, then surely planners would have no trouble in providing *their* working definition of the concept. The following quotations highlights the difficulty some planners had with defining the common good:

"So yeah the public good is about having cognisance. I think democratically elected policy in terms of councillors is very important because it's the one of the open and transparent areas of democracy that's been put to the planning system because you know I'm not elected, the councillors determine the biggest policies and you know sometimes community groups can wield power and can often get it wrong. So you know, the public good...I'm struggling with that one (laughs)..." (P2:7)

"God, that's a hard question (laughs)! I don't know, you could spend all day talking about this or write a thesis on this". (P10:6)

"...the phrase the common good is actually rarely mentioned day to day in the office; we don't even write it much at all. Not to say it's a bad word but it's a word that doesn't fall into many people's lexicons at all or even know what the hell the common good means..." (P19:5)

Of course, one of the difficulties here is that the planning establishment has historically failed to clarify what exactly it means by the idea that the common good is a legitimising principle for the system. While there have been recent attempts to clarify the idea for plan evaluation (see Alexander, 2002a), the fact remains that there is really no specificity to the concept. That being the case, it is therefore open to being deployed and indeed re-imagined in ways that are shaped by neoliberalised notions of development. In the case of Ireland, which likely transfers elsewhere, the new neoliberal common sense has succeeded in persuading the planning system that what is deemed to be 'good' is invariably associated with market-led notions of development. Indeed, this may help explain why planners find it so difficult to explain what the common good is or to reconcile it with more progressive views they might hold of what planners do.

To summarise, it seems that definitions of the common good among planning practitioners have three key dimensions. The first sees the common good through a pluralist lens where notions of collaborative planning and planners as mediators are closely correlated with definitions of the common good. The second dimension defines the common good equally from a bureaucratic/managerialist perspective where the common good is related to a planners' professional ability to minimise the worst impacts of development. The

final key dimension is bound up in traditional perceptions of the common good in planning where it is seen as something of a unitary concept where the interests of the public at large are put before private interests.

Considering the common good

Table 3. Considering the common good

Is the CG actively considered in planning practice?	#	%
Yes	17	89
No	2	11

Bearing in mind that planning theorists (Alexander, 2002a) have suggested that the common good is 'a norm for practice', respondents were also asked whether they actively considered the concept of the common good when making planning decisions⁵. Our results show that planners overwhelmingly felt that the common good is actively considered in practice (Table 3). This is evidenced by the following quotes:

"I'd say they're actively considered in both planning applications and in local area plans...both times you are putting in something that's going to be there for a very long time and you need to consider those who are going to be seeing it on a daily basis. It absolutely is actively considered." (P3: 9)

"I think it's central" (P7:4)

However, two respondents felt that the common good was not actively considered in practice with one of them asserting that:

"No I think it's purely a matter of taking out your development plan and going through that, going through the standards. I don't think people get into any real, I suppose big picture, in-depth thinking about them" (P15:8)

Despite the foregoing results, it is particularly notable that amongst those who declared the common good as being actively considered in practice, over half (53%) were also respondents who had difficulty in defining the common good. It seems quite impossible that those who cannot provide a working definition of the common good can actively consider the common good in practice. This observation suggests that there is an element of the 'pufferfish' phenomenon (see Dunn, 2007) at play, whereby respondents portray themselves and their profession in a positive light when the reality on the ground is that they do not actively consider the common good as a matter of practice. For instance, several planners who claimed to actively consider the common good subsequently made reference to institutional constraints which are likely to prevent them from doing so. To take an example, one planner highlighted the issue of staffing shortages within local planning departments (particularly during the 'Celtic Tiger' years) and how such issues hampered planners from evaluating applications more comprehensively:

"I would think that the lack of resources or the shortage of resources definitely did impact in terms of the quality of some of the decisions and some of the recommendations that were being made. It wasn't the time to think, because you had admin going 'Where's that recommendation?'. They were shouting at you - 'Come on I want that recommendation. It has to go in the post!'. You didn't have time to sort of go back in to check if it follows this policy or recommendation....and that wasn't a good thing" (P14).

⁵ One planner did not respond to this question.

While planners may be seeking to present themselves in a positive light, the findings might also reflect the fact that an inherent desire exists among planning professionals to consider the common good in practice, but a series of institutional barriers exist which prevent them from exercising their professional and moral judgement. This aligns closely with the recent work of Fox-Rogers and Murphy (2014, 261) who demonstrated how informal interactions between development interests and senior officials can lead to decision-making processes where planners' formal recommendations are used as 'a vehicle of power irrespective of their professional views on a specific application'.

Achieving the common good

Respondents were also asked whether they felt the common good was achievable in planning practice in order to gain insight into their views about the practicality of the common good as a useful working concept in planning practice as well as to obtain information about potential institutional or other constraints limiting the potential for achieving the common good in practice. The results are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Achieving the common good

Is the CG achievable in planning practice?	#	%
Yes	9	45
No	6	30
Unsure	3	15

The results show that 9 (45%) planners believe it is possible to achieve the common good in practice. The arguments presented for this position are interesting. One planner felt that the common good is achievable simply because formal processes exist which should allow that to be the case:

"I would say by and large. Because I mean, we have a reporting structure in here that you're not just making a recommendation in isolation; you're making a recommendation being counter-signed by two other professionals. So there's very little chance for somebody to have a specific views that's contrary to the framework of the development plan and the development plan is arrived at by a democratic process. So yeah I think in terms of local authority planning that the common good is very well represented and generally is the key element in decision making" (P5:5)

What is interesting here is that it is clear that there are established reporting and procedural mechanisms within planning authorities that attempt to prevent poor decision-making and this is asserted by the foregoing quotation which makes reference to the development plan process. Yet there is little doubt that planning outcomes have been systematically poor throughout Ireland's Celtic Tiger boom period pointing towards a breakdown in the system (Government of Ireland, 2011; An Taisce, 2012). This can be explained, to some extent at least, by the results from recent work by Fox-Rogers and Murphy (2014) who point out that powerful interests are increasingly bypassing the formal structures of the planning system and utilising informal avenues to achieve planning outcomes that reflect their interests but do not adhere to proper planning principles.

Other arguments put forward for this position include an almost faith-based position where one respondent feels the common good simply must be achievable if their job is at all relevant. This highlights the extent to which many planners still cling to the notion that they are making a difference and that their role as planning practitioners has a broader societal benefit:

"Yes, otherwise what on earth are we doing? What are we employed for?" (P18:9)

Indeed, the view reflects the fact that many planners do indeed join the profession wanting to 'make a difference' (Knox and Masilela, 1990) and are often unwilling to relinquish the ideal that planning outcomes that are in the interests of the common good can be achieved.

There was also a large cohort who responded negatively to this question (6) while an additional 3 (15%) were unsure as to whether the common good is achievable in practice. A number of planners were quite cynical in their response highlighting specifically that in reality the state does not operate for the greater good, while others suggested that it is run in the private interest:

"No. Does the state operate for the greater common good? No it doesn't. You know it might do overall in theory terms but it doesn't do it certainly in specific terms" (P1:18)

"I don't think our system is set up to be in the interests of the common good in any way. Like when you have public representatives representing certain people, how is that in the interests of the common good?" (P13:5)

These ideas closely align with Marxist political economy perceptions of the state which takes the view that the state is not neutral but is class-based and thus planning as an institution of the state is also biased towards a particular societal class. Indeed, the following quotes also indicate the erratic rush towards securing development-at-all-costs through the planning process during the boom period which seems to have clouded the judgement of planners and removed principled-based decision-making:

"I suppose during the boom it would be hard to say that...there was just such a hurry to get development underway and it was a steamroller kind of effect..." (P12: 7)

What this demonstrates is that during the boom period, there was considerable pressure on planners to make timely decisions on applications and because of this appropriate consideration was not afforded to individual applications thereby leading to a planning system which tacitly supported overdevelopment (Murphy et al, 2014).

Discussion and Conclusion

The results emerging from this study are important because they are one of only a few studies which have attempted to empirically decipher the nature of the role that the common good or public interest plays in the day-to-day practice of planning professionals. Of course numerous authors have discussed the role of the common good in planning from a theoretical perspective, but the fact that theories of the common good in planning have been tested rather infrequently is surprising. In this regard, the current study offers a significant contribution to the existing planning literature. But our results are important from another perspective; that is, they call into question the assumptions made in the academic literature that the common good is 'a legitimising principle' for planning and 'a norm for practice' (Alexander, 2002a) because the results uncovered in this study provide, at best, only limited support for the assertion of these principles in practice.

In more specific terms, our results demonstrate that those planners who offered a definition of the common good in planning tended to offer a view that was multi-dimensional. On the one hand, planners felt that the common good in planning was about balancing competing interests (i.e. a pluralist view) in the planning system, while on the other they saw it as minimising the worst effects of the development process. A number of planners also saw the common good as serving the interests of the general public over private interests. Indeed, it is notable that a significant number of planners simultaneously held the views of 'balancing competing interests' and 'minimising the negative effects of development'. What this shows is that there is a considerable proportion of professional planners that can be characterised as hybrid planners when it comes to how they view the common good in planning. This would appear to align somewhat with scholarship that emphasises the

increasingly hybrid nature of the planner's work (see Sehested, 2010) which is likely to produce varying perceptions of the common good in planning. Moreover, it also suggests that planners are somewhat confused about the normative principles which underpin the planning system and the purpose of planning as a state activity.

More clearly though, the findings also reveal that while planners do indeed feel that the common good is a guiding principle for practice, our results show that close to half of all planners have difficulty in providing a definition of the common good in planning. For the vast majority who consider the common good to be actively considered in practice, more than half of them cannot define it at all. It is difficult to believe that planners who cannot provide a working definition (i.e. *their* view) of the common good in planning can actively use it as a guiding principle for practice. The only logical conclusion to be reached then is that the common good is not, in fact, utilised as a guiding principle for practice. The fact that the reasons for this may be institutional and/or ideological matters little for planning outcomes and highlights the urgent need for a reassessment of the principles underpinning modern planning systems.

Quite strikingly, less than half of the respondents felt that the common good was achievable in practice highlighting quite a large degree of cynicism among professionals towards one of the guiding principles of planning as an institution. Thus, despite the majority saying it is actively considered, there is less conviction amongst planners as to whether it can realistically be achieved in planning practice. The reasons for this are unclear but a number of planners did point to institutional constraints with one stating "...as planners...that's what we're trying to do [serve the common good] but it's just that sometimes the system and the constraints that are there I suppose don't really allow you to do that", while another pointed to political interference in the system which undermines the ability of practitioners to operate on a principled basis. Indeed, research conducted by Fox-Rogers and Murphy (2014) has shed light on the way in which institutional constraints not only limit the ability of planning practitioners to act in accordance with their own professional and moral judgement, but coerces planners into acting in support of economically powerful stakeholders in the system. While Forester's (1989) work suggests ways in which planners can develop strategies to plan more progressively in the face of power, there is little evidence to suggest that the planners interviewed here have begun to identify informal 'soft spaces' which might be used to overcome the institutional barriers which are hampering more equitable planning outcomes from being achieved. To do so effectively however, planners simply cannot be blind to relations of power (*ibid*). More specifically, they must become more critical of not only the planning system within which they operate, but also their role in supporting a system which has been heavily neo-liberalised and is inherently development-led (see Fox-Rogers et al, 2011).

Looking at the specific case of Ireland, the results also unearth some interesting findings. Perhaps most striking is the Irish context in which planners responded to the questions we posed relating to the common good in planning. Ireland is currently recovering from one of the worst property crashes not only in the history of the state, but also one of the worst in the history of capitalism. Property values plunged by more than 50% (Murphy and Scott, 2013) and the state has only recently emerged from an EU/IMF restructuring programme (i.e. bailout). This was a direct result of profligacy in the property market which resulted in a massive transfer of private debt (mostly development-related) to the general population. The planning system has been heavily criticised not only for its supporting role in over-development, but for its sheer ineptitude at regulating the development industry in any meaningful way. Yet within this context, five years after the property crash and economic crisis began in 2008, the vast majority of planners still feel that the common good is actively considered in practice and almost half feel that it is achievable. This is a strange result because it suggests that professional planners clearly feel that they are principled decision-makers that work towards a common good and yet they work within an institution of the state where corruption 'was both endemic and systemic' and its 'existence was widely known and tolerated' (Government of Ireland, 2012: 1). In this sense, it is very difficult to reconcile planner's views of their role with planning outcomes on the ground.

Since the 1980s, the neoliberal ideology has been a spectre haunting the planning system. During this time, the planning system has been gradually neoliberalised; that is, its governance arrangements and associated planning practice has been moulded and shaped in such a way as to be highly facilitative of powerful political economic interests. Its ability to adequately regulate development has gradually been eroded and the system has become (almost) devoid of its socially progressive roots as a redistributive institution. The problem is that the proponents of neoliberalism have been so incredibly successful at colonising the world of ideas, at shaping debates about the past, present and future so that policy and regulatory practice supporting neoliberal ideology have become the departure point not only for debate but, more importantly, for policy and practice-related action. As Peck (2010, 9) informs us 'neoliberalism has always been about the capture and reuse of the state...' and its institutions for pro-corporate ends. Indeed, Peck and Tickell (2002) point out that state institutions globally have succumbed to the transformative capacity of the neoliberalisation process at a range of different socio-political contexts and spatial scales. In an Irish context, Murphy et al (2014) have recently pointed out the extent to which this process of neoliberalisation is occurring within the regulatory apparatus of the planning system.

Within this broad context, it is interesting to question the extent to which ideas such as collaborative planning have influenced notions of the common good. In Howe's work in the 1980s (Howe, 1983), there was no mention of planners' viewing the public interest as a concept based on mediating or refereeing; yet in our study it was synonymous with the common good for more than half of the planners interviewed. While our research does not answer this question definitively, it suggests that the principles driving practice in the modern planning system are principles associated with collaborative planning and these tend to provide the 'grubby practices' of planning (Harvey, 1985) with an air of moral and ethical legitimacy. As Haughton et al (2013, 222) have noted, collaborative planning arrangements 'allow for particular demands to be voiced and negotiated, as long as they do not question and disrupt the overarching framework of market-led development'. Indeed, perhaps the most striking aspect of our results is the extent to which planners' ideas of the common good are bound up in pluralist notions of collaborative planning where the common good is about refereeing between stakeholders rather than attempting to act more radically to transform relations of power. This is a notable shift in the ideological principles of planners over the last two decades and it suggests that planning in the neoliberal age is legitimised by principles of the common good which appear to be (more or less) apolitical (i.e. supportive of power imbalances) on the one hand and non-regulatory on the other (i.e. planners are facilitators). As Purcell (2009) has asserted, the ideas of collaborative planning have been co-opted by neoliberal proponents in a manner which tends to favour powerful interests and maintain hegemony and political stability and this should lead planning scholars to question more vociferously the usefulness of these ideas for practice.

Perhaps because of the ideological strait-jacket imposed by neoliberalism, scholars have only recently begun to question the explosion of literature which suggests that planners should be neutral. It is difficult to reconcile why this is the case given that a very good argument exists for advocacy in planning (Davidoff, 1965), for planners taking a position in direct opposition to the interests of power that is more focussed on issues of human well-being, reducing inequality and promoting environmental and ecological sustainability (see Rydin, 2013). In many respects planners have a moral obligation to work in the interests of marginal and disempowered stakeholders especially when they are competing with 'market-movers' (i.e. developers) that are equipped with enormous economic and political power. If they took positions as advocates it would help, albeit not guarantee, to ensure that there is adequate redistribution of the riches associated with the development process. On the other hand, if planners act simply as neutral observers and intermediaries, power will find it much easier to manipulate the planning system in a manner which disproportionately benefits its own interests which, almost invariably, are at odds with that of the common good.

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