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**BOOK REVIEW: Localism and neighbourhood planning: power to the people? Edited by Sue Brownill and Quintin Bradley, Bristol, Policy Press, 2017, pp. 288, £26.99 (paper- back), ISBN 978-1447329503**

Neighbourhood planning is participatory initiative designed to increase community control over local land-use planning policy, thereby hopefully reducing local opposition to proposed housing development. First implemented by the UK Coalition government in 2010, the initiative has been taken up enthusiastically by over 2200 communities in England<sup>i</sup>. By this metric at least, neighbourhood planning represents one of the most significant instances of localism in the UK in recent years. Lying at the heart of debates around housing provision, decentralisation, and reforms to the planning system, neighbourhood planning has generated a significant amount of research literature<sup>ii</sup>; however, *Localism and neighbourhood planning: power to the people?* is the first book that examines the policy in depth, bringing together empirical research with critical perspectives on empowerment, governance and spatial planning.

Taken as a whole, this volume does an excellent job of defining and exploring the ‘creative tensions’ that mark both the theory and practice of neighbourhood planning. As the sub-title suggests, at the heart of this volume is the question that every analysis of state-sponsored participatory democracy wrestles with: is this initiative a means of genuine popular empowerment or is it a means to achieve government targets? Neighbourhood planning certainly goes further than recent iterations of participatory planning in England by allowing communities to author statutory development plans, however these must be in ‘general conformity’ with higher tier policy such as Local Plans and the NPPF, suggesting that the policy is more akin to a form of centralism wielded at the local level. Unsurprisingly, there is no definitive answer to this question, and to a large extent the purpose of this book is to problematise interpretations that overemphasise one side or the other.

The editors, Brownill and Bradley, emphasise an emerging landscape of ‘localisms’ (p. 4) as a way to discuss the contradictory potential inherent in neighbourhood planning. This circumvents the dichotomous tendencies commonly found in localism literature, where communities ‘sink or swim’ in the tides of localism. This argument is notably advanced in Chapter 9 through Brownill’s use of assemblages, underpinned by a topological understanding of power to describe how different actors and interests, policies and discourses are ‘folded in’ to emergent spaces of neighbourhood governance. Examples of elite allies and evidence from elsewhere ‘reaching in’ to neighbourhoods demonstrate how social equity and environmental justice can be advanced despite neighbourhood planning’s ‘constrained freedoms’ and the wider ‘growth-dependent paradigm’ within which it is situated. This contribution and others adroitly demonstrate how the present articulation of localism cannot be simply read as a neo-liberal technology that seeks to govern through communities, nor are its outcomes inevitable. A further example comes in Chapter 4, where Bradley, Burnett and Sparling detail how new spatial practices have allowed some communities to prioritise local needs over strategic planning priorities, thereby challenging dominant market rationalities to some extent, for example by challenging speculative housing and promoting community-owned land and assets. Such examples, they argue, underline the structural weakness of a housing industry dominated by volume house-builders, who account for 44% of new homes in England.

However, the same authors note how major regeneration is beyond the capacity of neighbourhood planning, which can only serve to ‘reinforce the spatial inequalities of uneven

capitalist development' (p. 71). Indeed, many of the contributions here reflect how the progressive potential of neighbourhood planning has been tempered by constraints placed on communities, and the discrepancy between expansive government rhetoric espousing community control and the reality of land-use planning at the neighbourhood scale. Despite the statutory weight afforded to neighbourhood plans and the undoubted enthusiasm of thousands of citizen-planners, evidence of progressive community influence on planning outcomes remains the exception rather than the rule. Nor is neighbourhood planning like to ameliorate the housing crisis: central government's overarching aim was to increase house-building over and above the Local Plan process, however even Panglossian estimates suggest that of the neighbourhood plans that provide housing numbers, they on average only plan for 10% more houses than the relevant Local Plan<sup>iii</sup>. This claim is in fact highly questionable due to the selective sampling adopted, a criticism recently endorsed by the High Court<sup>iv</sup>.

There are first rate contributions throughout this volume. Colomb's research on the formation of neighbourhood areas in Hackney highlights the challenges of participatory planning in urban spaces marked by hyper-diversity and stark socio-economic inequalities. The construction of communities as autonomous and homogeneous entities in central government policy is often recognised, but how such exclusionary dynamics play out remains under researched. At the opposite end of the scale, Parker's chapter sets out the socio-spatial inequalities of localism at the national level by detailing neighbourhood planning's uneven geography, confirming early fears that the voluntaristic nature of neighbourhood planning serves those with the capacity, rather than need, to participate. A further valuable contribution comes in a different guise in Chapter 7, which relays first-person narratives of citizens, local government planners, consultants and developers involved in the neighbourhood planning process. These frontline accounts deftly reveal the interplay of motivations, opportunities and difficulties faced by key actors, and are a valuable starting point for anyone seeking to understand how planning policy is produced under the present regulations.

In their closing reflections, the editors return to the question posed by the book's subtitle. They argue that the barriers to participation and subsequent uneven geography of neighbourhood planning can 'in no way' detract from the significantly reconfigured power relations between citizens, the state and the development industry (p. 263). Here, the desire to go 'beyond dichotomies' is problematic since – despite the progressive potential inherent in any participatory space – the disregard of social and spatial justice evident in post-2010 localism does seriously undermine the incipient and episodic signs of empowerment currently confined to those communities able to participate. This analysis may have benefited from a consideration of the significant range of neighbourhood-scale democratic innovations introduced under New Labour as a way to contextualise the subsequent shift away from state interventions targeting the most disadvantaged communities post-2010 (a point well highlighted in the French context by Gardesse and Zetlaoui-Léger's chapter that foregrounds the state's role in defending the *bien commun territorial*).

However, this is a minor aberration in an excellent and nuanced volume. Brownill and Bradley have brought together a comprehensive and timely contribution to the debates surrounding localism and neighbourhood planning. This book will certainly prove useful to a range of audiences, notably planning students and practitioners, as well as academics interested in empowerment, governance and localism, and also to citizen-planners themselves.

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<sup>i</sup>As of September 2017, it is thought that 13 million people live in areas covered by a completed or emerging neighbourhood plan, with 411 plans having passed community referendum and over half a million votes cast (figures provided by Locality).

<sup>ii</sup> See the crowd-sourced neighbourhood planning bibliography: <https://goo.gl/vkUzNC>.

<sup>iii</sup> DCLG (2016) 'Neighbourhood Planning: progress on housing delivery', October 2016: [https://mycommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/161013-made-neighbourhood-plan-housing-delivery\\_Oct2016.pdf](https://mycommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/161013-made-neighbourhood-plan-housing-delivery_Oct2016.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> Planning Resource, 31 October 2017, Court rejects government claim that neighbourhood plans provide 10% more homes: <https://www.planningresource.co.uk/article/1448782/court-rejects-government-claim-neighbourhood-plans-provide-10-homes>