

From participation to inclusion

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The Skeffington Report continues the trajectory of the UK's post-war planning system's interest in efforts to involve people in planning. The post-war planning system argued for the necessity of people to be involved in planning schemes that would affect them although the weight of decision-making remained firmly with the local state. However, the spatial imaginary invoked by planning during this period paid little attention to the increasing hostility towards Black and Minority Ethnic British citizens who had settled in urban areas.

Against the backdrop of increasing hostility towards British citizens with family ties to the New Commonwealth what form might participation take in an increasingly diverse society? Participation and inclusion, in a wider political sense, are often considered to be mutually supporting concepts. Public participation can be seen as a mechanism to include under-represented voices and viewpoints within planning decision-making. Participation sometimes emerges as a proxy for equality and inclusion yet there are critical flaws within British planning's approaches to ethnic and racial minorities. The most vociferous and well-organised participants often object to planning decisions and the majority fail to make their viewpoints known. The public find themselves divided into two broad groups: the "usual suspects" who participate but find their contributions unwelcome or questioned as partisan; and the "hard to reach" that seems to include the vast majority of the population but with particular attention given to a range of groups who are under-represented in all areas of policy-making and politics.

This characterization of participation is not new. The Skeffington Report holds such perceptions. Whilst the Committee was highly supportive of public participation it considered that only certain viewpoints and organisations are reflected within it and fretted about those who had little interest in engaging with planning. On the question of inclusivity, the committee notes that: “[I]t is possible for people’s views to be narrow, bigoted and ill-informed as it is for local planning authorities to be autocratic, insensitive and stubborn”. This acknowledgement of the problem of reactionary views is notable but there are limited insights into how this might be tackled. Within the report is a sense, one that persists, that planning and planning authorities ultimately move towards fairness. Understanding of racial and ethnic difference as socially and politically contested categorisations does not deny that there are material and life inequalities for different groups. Planning has a part to play in these everyday experiences. Yet research continues to find that the spatial needs of ethnic and racial groups are considered to be “special requests” that are difficult to accommodate within planning frameworks. Here without a clear sense of what inclusion means, objections to mosques have led to Far Right mobilisation or, in the case of eruv and other religious signifiers, racist objections that draw on a white British Christian imaginary (see for example Gale, 2005).

Planners are reticent to engage with these issues for numerous reasons. For a start there is limited guidance available as to how to deal with racially charged participation. Unfortunately, British planning’s engagement with ethnic and racial diversity has been brief and arguably largely uninspiring. Although the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) considers equality to be one of our core values, its guidance on equality and dealing with racist viewpoints is problematic and naïve. In their general

guidance published in 2017 they state that they consider equality to be a matter of treating “people equally”. This is surprising to read considering that such definitions were criticised during the 1980s in a report commissioned by the RTPI and the Commission for Racial Equality. That report was highly critical of the “colour-blind” approach taken within the planning system and suggested that much racial discrimination persisted. Continuing research demonstrates the unequal spatial experience of ethno-religious groups within the planning system (see Gale, 2005; Watson, 2005).

Perceptions in the UK are of a “fair minded: and tolerant island nation, wrapped around a collective imaginary that is intolerant and resistant to our long multi-ethnic history. It is sustained through a continuing collective disassociation with Empire and sidelines decolonialisation debates. Scholars and activists have increasingly drawn attention to planning’s role in the violent dispossession of territory through settler colonialism and the insidious practices that supported European notions of property and ownership whilst dismissing other systems and viewpoints (Barry and Porter, 2012; Bhandar, 2016). Far less work has engaged with the specific racial dynamics of British planning and its part within a colonial project, surprising given our long and far-reaching imperial history.

Planning is one facet of this wider malaise but has an important and significant spatial dimension that directly impacts upon people’s everyday quality of life. Continuing to be concerned about racism in society is a starting point and challenging racist viewpoints within the system is a public duty. But assuming that participation will overturn deeply embedded societal prejudice when we are reticent to even mention

racism, anti-semitism, or white privilege in British planning debates is misguided. Here one of the critical issues has been the inability to engage the racialised nature of British society including white privilege and racism. Inclusion also implies that there is a pre-existing polity to join. In the British context ethnic and racial minorities often find ourselves urged to assimilate but it is neither clear that this is possible or desirable given that British history and belonging remains strongly centred around whiteness.

The Skeffington report remains a key reference point for debates about public participation in the UK. The report is more than an historical artefact and emphasises the continuing problems for public participation in planning. However, it is important to consider Skeffington within the politics of the time. The Report was written during a time of rising social unrest in urban areas and increasing racial tensions but has nothing to say about these urban conflicts, instead it situates itself within a continuing narrative of what we could term “civic rights”, confined to public comment on people’s immediate quality of life as defined by planning schemes.

The Report is a reflection of a distinctive British path that envisages ethnic and racial division as forms of cultural and malleable difference. The pressing racial concerns of the time are not explored even though it was published just one year after Enoch Powell’s infamous and racist “Rivers of Blood” speech. Powell’s political rhetoric cast ethnic and racial minorities as an unwanted facet of British society and called for these groups to be repatriated. These British citizens faced racism and discrimination creating interlocking degraded and degrading urban experience for many racial and ethnic minorities.

The Skeffington Report's concerns about matters of inclusion are slight but not out of step with planning practice. Institutional and historic structures, contemporary societal debates and tensions are subsumed through aspirations that participation is a force for positive change that brings out the best within people. The language of inclusion masks continuing deep divisions within society. Planning does not hold sole responsibility for these issues but we must reject naïve constructions of racism and equality that consider these to be individual actions to be countered or placed as outside of planning. We need to take a more nuanced and reflective understanding of the contribution planning can make to address racial and ethnic inequalities. Such efforts include participation but inequalities cannot be addressed solely through invitations to inclusion distanced from the racial narratives that underpin British ways of belonging

1. Within the UK the proportion of people from ethnic minority groups varies considerably with London being composed of around 41% BME people (Trust for London) but a national average of around 19.5% although data for the UK as a whole remains based on the 2011 Census and the list of ethnic and racial categories is problematic. See Race Disparity Unit (Cabinet Office). *UK Population by Ethnicity*. Available at <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/uk-population-by-ethnicity> [date accessed 2 September 2019]

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