

Everyday island bureaucracies: spatial planning in the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man and Shetland

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The planner as faceless bureaucrat?

- City, urban or spatial planners are perhaps the quintessential bureaucrat, with planning often a highly visible function of government involving regulation, policy and direct contact with communities; also, directly enacting state attempts to know and control territory
- My own work has been concerned with various elements of planning reform and state modernisation in the UK including how various reforms have been put into practice, devolution and policy mobility and impacts of deregulation
- In studying this, I have been particularly concerned with the role of the planner in implementing reform at what we might term (after Lipsky, 1980) the ‘street-level’

Importance of bureaucratic practices

- As Kuus (2015: 432) argues, “a modern society is a bureaucratized society, and so the study of our time is bound up with the analysis of bureaucratic processes and institutions... contemporary human geography analyzes bureaucracies mostly in terms of how they interact with political actors outside the formal structures of the state. We know less about how bureaucracies act on themselves”
- My own work has tried to take seriously the way that state territoriality is produced by day-to-day practices of state personnel (Jones, 2011) and take seriously the (situated) agency of the state in the careers of its officials (Robbins, 2000)

Need to focus on everyday practices

- Importance of taking a ‘decentred’ view of ‘the state’ (Bevir, 2013). As Mountz (2003: 626) argues, ‘the state’ can often appear definitive and rational because “higher-level bureaucrats and communications employees construct coherent narratives for the public, which tend to provide narrow insight into what actually takes place”
- Incoherence and messiness of state plays out in micro-political struggles as reform initiatives are implemented
- This is at once well recognised, but easily forgotten: the very notion of ‘the state’ is symbolically singular and the term all too often used unthinkingly despite long-standing calls to rethink this contested concept (Coddington, 2011)

Need to focus on everyday practices

- Writing about prosaic practices of the state, Painter (2006: 761) argues: “Passing legislation has few immediate effects in itself. Rather, its effects are produced in practice through the myriad mundane actions of officials, clerks”
- States “are based upon the mundane and decentred practices of state officials and ordinary citizens” (Jones, 2012: 807). The state is thus *embodied*: behind each decision are individuals with their own complex webs of social relations, operationalising government policy against the backdrop of their own thought worlds, personal histories, working practices, institutional cultures, values and identities (Jones et al., 2004; Sartorio et al., 2018)

Need to focus on everyday practices

- An everyday perspective is often used in relation to social life apparently beyond the state, an imagined sphere of the informal as opposed to the official, but can equally be applied to practices within the state, focusing on the mundane (Burkitt, 2004).
- In unpacking the peopled performance of the state, it is important to consider how seemingly objective standards involve countless judgements calls, negotiation, common sense, professional judgement and ‘feeling through’ a task. Can think of the state as “social construction... looking at the bureaucracy as a site where the nation-state is produced ... and where the everyday relations ... bleed into the dimensions of bureaucratic life’ (Mountz, 2003: 626)

Bureaucrats and place

- This perspective has informed my previous research (e.g. Clifford, 2022) however, “the production of bureaucratic knowledge is a spatial process ... [with a] place-specific context of its production” (Kuus, 2015: 433) with this place dimension requiring further attention from geographers as an essential contest of policy (Kuus, 2019)
- Considering urban policy, Keenan and Dehaan (2024: 241) argue that policy “is also very much created and analyzed around the municipal worker’s own subjective understanding of place. The subjective understanding of place has a long history of development within geography ... though the role that this concept plays in policy analysis is largely undeveloped” (but see also Beer, 2009)

Bureaucrats and geographical imaginaries

- Keenan and Deehan (2024) argue that because place is everywhere, its often taken for granted but when studying policy we should begin by asking how place matters
- Raises the spectre of geographical imagination (Gregory, 1995): “the imagination has conventionally taken up a location somewhere between the domains of the factual and fictional, the subjective and objective, the real and representational” (Daniels, 2011: 182)
- Need to consider “the power of assumptions, stereotypes, and expectations associated with space and place” (Giesecking, 2017: 1) with values, visions, expectations, and aspirations shaping individual and collective action (Chhetri et al, 2023)

Island imaginaries

- Can consider this further with respect to islands as a particular type of place
- “The metaphor of the island is foundational to Western thought” (Gugganig and Klimburg-Witjes, 2021: 321) with deeply held spatial imaginaries
- “The island seems to have a tenacious hold on the human imagination. Unlike the tropical forest or the continental seashore it cannot claim ecological abundance, nor – as an environment – has it mattered greatly in man’s evolutionary past. Its importance lies in the imaginative realm” (Tuan in Riquet, 2017: 215)

Island imaginaries

- Often seen to be characterised by isolation (Dodds and Royle, 2003) and a microspatiality predicated upon differences to the ‘mainland’ (Baldacchino and Royle, 2010)
- “Islands occupy a prominent place in the geographical imagination of politics ... frequently shrouded in discourses and practices of exceptionalism” (Mountz, 2014: 637-639)
- What is ‘islandness’? Perhaps the sense of boundness produces a particular form of ‘territorial legibility’, also frequently linked to ideas of close and cohesive communities, smallness, remoteness and littorality (land–water interactions) (Grydehøj, 2018; 2020)

Island imaginaries and spatial planning

- Such island imaginaries are relational and contestable but such ‘mental islanding’ can have real-world consequences for how people live their lives (Grydehøj, 2018) and this would include bureaucrats in an embodied, decentred reading of the state
- Inspired by this session, have tried to apply this place specific lens to my previous work (Clifford and Tewdwr-Jones, 2013 and Clifford and Morphet, 2015) which included interviews with 3 planners in the Shetland Islands, 2 in Jersey, 2 in Guernsey and 1 in the Isle of Man but which did not focus on the islands as places of consider implications of island imaginaries in their performance of the state

Small islands around the UK

- Jersey and Guernsey (collectively the Channel Islands) and the Isle of Man are self-governing possessions of the British Crown. Not part of the UK, have own legislatures
- Shetland Islands are a part of the UK and have the status of an ordinary local authority, however had been part of the Kingdom of Norway until 1470 and strong Norse heritage



Islands as particular types of place

- Looking across the interviews, the fact they are working on, and planning for, island territories is strongly present in all interviews
- A strong sense of place identity was also present in small talk with interviewees before interviews
- This often included a sense of **remoteness**, e.g. the Shetland planner who met me at the ferry port talking about the rough crossings he had experienced and times the boat could not dock because of rough seas. In interview he described the islands more than once as a *“barren rock with the North Sea on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other”*

Islands as particular types of place

- Similarly, one of the Jersey planners spoke about it being *“easy living on an island to lose contacts”*
- Another feature of this was a sense of islands as clearly **bounded places**, feeding very directly into everyday work for planners: *“I think planning on an island is quite different isn’t it, to planning for some kind of authority or whatever it might be in the UK because you had to deal with everything, you don’t have an option of pushing something to the neighbouring jurisdiction... [there’s] a huge range of competing land uses within the island. We need to make more land for office development ... but at the same time need to safeguard agricultural land ... You know you can’t do anything to affect the Guernsey cow”* (Guernsey planner)

Islands as particular types of place

- Similarly, affordable housing was “*a big challenge in Jersey ... and you know it’s not as though you can move, to go to move somewhere cheaper unless you want to leave the island*” (Jersey planner)
- There was also discussion of the **coastal nature** of island planning work: “*we have a hundred and fourteen islands, 12 of which are actually inhabited ... we have something like 10% of the UK’s coastline... so coastal issues are a big issue here*” (Shetland planner)
- These issues of the islands as remote, bounded and coastal places were then tied to the everyday work and challenges for performing the role of a planner there compared to the mainland (a regular source of “othering” comparison)

Island communities

- Islandness was present in interviews in terms of human geography as much as physical, most strongly in terms of a presentation of them having **small communities**
- Telling me how unhappy residents may go straight to the Minister: *“Everybody is a lot more accessible here ... people can talk”* (Isle of Man planner)
- *“The politics here is much more immediate”* (Jersey planner)
- There was discussion of the local cultures: *“There’s a strong cultural attachment to the idea that you do just let things happen ... That could well stem back to the old Guernseyman [sic] entrepreneurial spirit”* (Guernsey planner)

Island communities

- Interestingly, smallness did not always apparently equate to cohesion: *“I’ve been to an island community dealing with an access improvement project. The community would not meet us all in the community hall, they were fragmented over this proposal. What we had to do was go round the fifteen houses individually and speak to all the island households and say exactly the same thing to each household. And by the time we flew off the island, made it back to the office, we were getting out first phone calls saying ‘you told him this, and you never told me’” ... “There is a whole concept of Shetlanders ... as somebody that has lived here for 25 years, I still won’t be seen as a Shetlander. That’s quite an interesting working environment”*

Policy mobilities and sense of connection

- Policy mobility was important for all the island jurisdictions: *“the opportunities for collaborative learning are bugger all, to put too finder point on it ... so we basically lifted a lot of the UK legislation”* (Jersey planner)
- Wide recognition of need to learn for elsewhere and sometimes bring in outside expertise, but in Isle of Man and Channel Islands felt this had to be adjusted to local circumstances (which they could) and frustration in Shetland that this was not possible
- Language and culture influencing where they looked, e.g. Jersey / Guernsey looking to the UK and not France but Isle of Man preferring to look to Scotland or Wales than England within the UK if at all possible

Island imaginaries: personal and language

- All planners freely commented as to whether they were “a *local*” or “*off island*” (*Channel Islands*) or “*from across*” (Isle of Man, i.e. across the sea – Great Britain)
- The knowability of islands was a feature of how their planners spoke about their role: “*we all know our own islands better than anybody does*” (Jersey planner)
- “*Islands you know do exist as entities*” (Jersey planner)
- It was also interesting to see languages described in a language less common with other types of territory: “*clearly the island is seeking to make sure that its own interests are represented*” (Jersey planner); “*it was culturally quite difficulty for the island to accept in many ways*” (Guernsey)

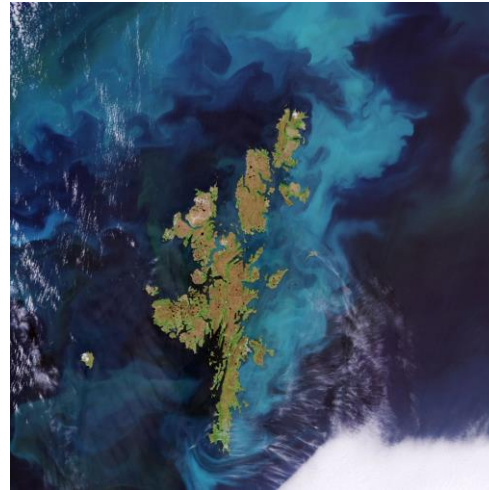
Conclusions

- A sense of island imaginaries was strongly present in my interviews with planners in small islands around the UK, including ideas of bounded places, remoteness, knowability, small communities and language infused with particularity
- Some elements of this island imaginary might be questioned, for example some issues might be common in rural communities. There were also numerous similarities with ‘mainland’ planning hence having originally included the interviews in that analysis
- Can consider overlapping frames including that of professional planner and government official in a UK style. Nevertheless, ‘islandness’ clearly important to the mental geographies of work-related worldviews of interviewees

Conclusions

- Such imaginative geographies clearly were influencing the way the planners – the quintessential state bureaucrat – approached their work and everyday practices
- Taking as my starting point the importance of further interrogating everyday practices within the state, given that a peopled state is performed and realised through the prosaic activities of its bureaucrats, the island imaginaries present here demonstrate the importance of considering imaginative geographies as part of that understanding
- This aligns with calls to consider the spatial and place contexts for bureaucratic knowledge (Kuus, 2015; Keenan and Dehaan, 2024)

Questions / comments?



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