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Regulation and Planning: Practices, Institutions, Agency

by Rydin, Beauregard, Cremaschi & Lieto [Eds], (2022), Routledge, 2021, 234 pp. 11, B/W Illustrations, ISBN 9780367559557

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BOOK REVIEW

Regulation and Planning: Practices, Institutions, Agency, by Rydin, Beauregard, Cremaschi & Lieto [Eds], (2022), Routledge, 2021, 234 pp. 11, B/W Illustrations, ISBN 9780367559557

Regulation and planning may not seem like the most thrilling title to external observers. Either it evokes the dry bureaucratic, quasi-legal, rational technical depiction of planning, an image which those who promote the profession or idea of planning as something creative, visionary and enabling try to disassociate from, or it seems like a tautology. What is planning if it is not regulatory: the exercise of rules over development – monitoring, management and codification?

However, both of these perspectives are equally misplaced as the content of this book illustrates. There are two aspects to this. First, the book contains a wealth of international case studies about the operation and impacts of regulation across planning. None of these are cases of dull technicalities (although such things do impact on practice in many places and ways), and much vision, change and creativity can be seen in the exercise or practice of regulation. Secondly, the book raises several important questions about the nature of both planning and regulation, their mutually constitutive aspects and where the borders of each idea may lie. As it asserts in its opening line, “urban planning is the collective imagining of a shared future” (p. 1), but it is the steps and tools which bring this imagination into development that is where the interest in regulation lies.

Regulation, or in its most common English incarnation, development management, remains widely overlooked and under-researched, despite calls stemming from at least the mid 1990s (Booth, 1996) that this needs more attention. It remains slightly baffling to me that this area of planning that directly impacts both people’s experience of planning, and the quality of new development remains a ‘Cinderella’ in planning research. For this reason alone, this book is an extremely welcome addition to the literature.

The book is made up of three parts respectively titled Varieties of Regulation, Practices of Regulation and Beyond Regulation; and within these, fifteen chapters overall. It has case studies from England, Scotland, France, Italy, Sweden, the USA, Canada and America. They are each short but informative, detailing specific planning stories where the idea of regulation is evoked, utilised or challenged. Topics and theoretical perspectives are varied: in an English context deregulation via permitted development (Clifford), post-consent public involvement in national infrastructure (Natarajan), the comparative role of artifacts in England and Sweden (Rydin), Brownfield land (Friere Trigo), professional bodies and the market (Raco, Brill and Firm) are all discussed. This is not to privilege the contribution of the English cases, but to demonstrate the breadth of approaches relevant to ideas of regulation in just one country. Chapters engage with ideas of democracy, definitions, design and decision-making, how these intersect, and their impact on the making or inhibiting of aspirational shared futures. I found it particularly useful to have two chapters drawing on French experiences as there is too little engagement in this context in the Anglophone literature. Further, Hoai Ahn Tran’s discussion of a proposed Apple Store in a park in Stockholm, and how planners’ ideas and mindsets shape development possibilities was particularly insightful in the intersection of regulation and imagination; and the subtle ways this shapes societal values.

This in itself is highly valuable as an international (if dominantly Anglophone and entirely Global North) ‘reader’ on planning: exploring contexts and possibilities on a more global scale always helps to highlight the issues closer at hand; and how the power of framing an issue, or what counts as an exception to a rule is vital in defining the possible (Rydin, 2020; Harris, 2021). The chapters collectively contribute to our understandings of what comprises a regulatory setting, who a regulator may

be, or (putting this in a slightly different way) who may operate the regulations and what issues may emerge from this. This is not only of interest at the level of constructions of meanings or discourses, but also for opening up practical possibilities of doing things differently and their impact on both physical and social outcomes of planning.

The editors set out the conceptual context for this work in detail in the introduction but leave it more to readers to bring together conclusions from the collection. They initially identify five different approaches to defining regulation – rules, governance, knowledge, power and assemblage based, and then four cross cutting themes: reflective practice, institutions, multi-level governance and materiality. The discussions of these approaches and themes do demonstrate the scope of debates which ideas of regulation impact, a scope which is explored widely and diversely in the chapters themselves.

The closing remarks are short and rather abstract and for me did not entirely highlight emerging research areas coming from the dialogue in the book. As important as this volume is in establishing international exchanges and empirical evidence, this feels like a beginning. By further understanding the workings of regulation in the different contexts (and maybe also considering those contexts and continents not covered here) we develop a much deeper understanding of this thing called planning; its operations, or to use the book's terms "practices, institutions and agencies" but also how, when and why it can (or cannot) impact on the provision of collectively imagined better futures.

This is where I come back to the second point I made in my opening remarks. The amount of different definitions and structuring concepts presented does illustrate the breadth of relevance of the topic, but it also makes it hard to grasp overarching conclusions or narratives. When scoping widely, there is a sense that regulation can be everything, all planning acts and actors can be regulatory. Although this is a valuable theoretical insight, it also makes specific conclusions or comparisons more difficult. The book does not aim to do this, so it is not a criticism per se. Nonetheless, if we are to be aspirational, as the editors rightly say, and collectively imagine a shared future, specific focused comparisons of how regulation can enable or disable these seems like a valid topic for further research.

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