

Making sense of urban policy failure in complex times

Alyson Nicholds argues that critical approaches to discourse analysis have the capacity to unearth assumptions lying behind shifting patterns of governance which bring a hegemonic, market-informed mentality to every aspect of regeneration practice.

Introduction

The persistent message that regeneration has thus far failed to tackle the root cause of deprivation has led to claims about its highly symbolic nature and highlighted the need for more narrative approaches, based on exploring the role that different actors play in interpreting policies in competing ways. This 'interpretive turn' in the policy sciences has led to a growing interest in discourse analysis in understanding the way that policies are framed.

But more traditional approaches to discourse ignore the important role that context plays in shaping and constraining what is privileged. Drawing on the work of critical theorists Laclau and Mouffe (2001) and empirical research with 50 regeneration practitioners in the UK, in this paper I seek evidence of not only the types of taken-for-granted assumptions which exist in urban policy discourse but also the way they play out in terms of the contradictions and tensions which emerge and how these might arise.

The context of UK regeneration practice

UK regeneration exists amidst a 'burgeoning' literature which states or assumes an ongoing desire to improve the outcomes of urban policy (Henderson, Bowlby and Raco 2007). However, concern about persistent unintended consequences (Atkinson 2004, 2008) has led to claims about the highly symbolic nature of urban policy (Wilks-Heeg 1996). Some have suggested that the gap which exists between policy intentions and outcomes is indicative of an overly-rational response to policy (Stone 2002).

Discourse analytic approaches begin from a perspective that policy is best understood not as a transparent and obvious decision, but as something that is interpreted differently by different actors (Fischer and Forrester 1994). In urban policy this broader interest in discourse analysis has largely tended to focus on exploring the way that policy goals might have been 'framed' in response to neoliberal and third way 'higher level discourses' (Atkinson and Moon 1994). However, critics in urban geography are increasingly starting to challenge this notion of dominant discourses based on the increasing complexity that shifting patterns of governance brings to the policy debate (Raco 2004).

For instance, McCann (2007) offers a critical examination of the way that concepts like 'city regions' and 'liveability' are used interchangeably in policy, giving rise to tensions when a single concept can encompass two quite different notions, seeking to improve economic competitiveness of business at the same time as improving quality of life for residents:

'The disjuncture between these two views of regional liveability creates a tension in contemporary city regionalism that is worked out through political struggles over such mundane issues as housing affordability and infrastructure provision' (McCann 2007, p189)

As a consequence, Diamond and Liddle (2005) have noted how such shifts have left the responsibility with actors to make sense of these new forms of governance. In response, this paper seeks to operationalise Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) notion of 'discursive lack', as a means of exploring the tensions and contradictions which emerge in regeneration practice and understanding how efforts to improve effective regeneration are negated.

A full overview of the different approaches to discourse and their ontological assumptions is beyond the scope of this paper (see Nicholds 2011). However, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) highlight the contingent, precarious and anti-essentialist nature of discourse which is not bound to any societal structure and whose meaning can therefore never be fixed (Howarth 2000).

As a result they imply that discourse has a somewhat negative character known as 'lack' which instead requires temporary meaning to be assigned through a process known as articulation. Here, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) suggest that discourse constitutes a range of possible meanings which stretch from 'something more' (i.e. a vast array of concepts) to something less (i.e. a disarray of unlinked concepts) and that meaning is actually assigned in this process of brokering between these different concepts.

In developing their theory of socialist hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe (2001, p93) suggest that ambiguity emerges as an 'elusive form of reality' out of trying to locate these 'relational links' which cannot ultimately be fixed. Cederstrom and Spicer (2007) suggest that such lack is witnessed in the rival discourses which emerge. Hence it is possible to look for these in the form of 'nodal points' and 'floating signifiers' by asking:

- Where is the lack in this discourse?
- Where are there tensions and contradictions expressed?
- Where do stakeholders assign multiple meanings?
- Which signifier acts as a nodal point (linking together floating signifiers?)
- What key words are used as a 'supreme justification' for the way things work in the field?

Discourse analysis: a case-study approach

The planned research involved fifty regeneration practitioners working in the design, delivery and management of regeneration across three UK cities in a Midlands region. The regional scale offered access to a wide range of actors involved in a range of major policy portfolios including Neighbourhood Renewal (SEU 1998) and the Sustainable Communities Strategy (ODPM 2005). Staff involved in the 'design of regeneration' included Government Office and the Regional Development Agency. Those involved in the 'strategic management of regeneration' included councils and regeneration partnerships. Those involved in 'delivery of

regeneration' included areabased initiatives such as New Deal for Communities projects (NDC) and the Neighbourhood Management Pathfinder (NMP).

The selection of three cities within this Midlands region provided a sufficiently large and bounded site for study at the same time as ensuring relative ease of access to agencies which covered just below 10% of the UK population. The region had a marked experience of economic change, not least owing to the recent economic downturn resulting in the decline of local manufacturing industries and mass unemployment. It was also characterised by a relatively even mix of urban conurbations with rural localities, and was in receipt of several major government regeneration funds with just under £2m in Neighbourhood Renewal Fund allocation and nearly £1m in European Structural Funds.

Discourses and contradictions of regeneration management

Discourse 1: City Regions - Tackling economic inequality through growth

From the analysis of interviews with over fifty stakeholders, around eighteen actors could be said to subscribe to a 'city regions' discourse in which the urban problem was seen in terms of economic decline rooted in industrial decline and job loss. Solutions rested in stimulating economic growth through competition, based on generating inward investment (floating signifier); education and skills in an attempt to raise aspiration (floating signifier) and building entrepreneurial communities to build economic opportunity (floating signifier).

Central to the notion of 'city regions' was a shared discourse about the territorial importance of cities as important places in driving the 'engines of economic growth' in tackling the economic inequality which was perceived to result from the past decline of local industry (CSW 2002). Hence, in both regional and local documentation, the discourse focused on the notion of the 'growth agenda' in line with moves towards the development of a globally competitive city'. However, in keeping with a critical approach, three contradictions emerged *within* the narratives:

- a lack of investment due to recession (contradiction 1);
- a lack of 'real jobs' due to a skills mismatch (contradiction 2) and
- a failure to generate entrepreneurial communities because of the inability of 'stressed communities' to take advantage of the opportunities on offer (contradiction 3).

Discourse 2: narrowing the gap in life expectancy through service improvement

The second narrative can be described in terms of 'narrowing the gap' in life expectancy in which it was perceived that inequalities in health could be tackled through investment in service provision. In contrast to the previous discourse which focused on the role of city-regions in tackling economic inequality through growth, a second discourse emerged in which regeneration was seen very much in terms of tackling health inequalities through service improvement (floating signifier); by securing resources for public investment (floating signifier); and involving the community in service planning (floating signifier). However, in keeping with a critical analysis approach, as was apparent in the first discourse, contradictions and tensions emerged around:

- a failure to secure adequate resources for public investment (contradiction 1);
- a failure to strategically coordinate the involvement of communities in service planning (contradiction 2); and
- a failure to communicate the benefits of any improvements in service provision, to communities (contradiction 3).

Discourse 3: Building community capacity through social enterprise

The third narrative to emerge placed a high value on adopting a needs-led approach to securing resources for communities. Here the urban problem was seen in terms of a failure to meet community needs through existing service provision, invoking a storyline about the requirement for development work to build community capacity (nodal point) by having a thorough understanding of the needs of deprived groups (floating signifier) using networking to develop creative approaches to responding to need (floating signifier) and securing suitable funding in the form of grants (floating signifier) in order to plug gaps in service provision (floating signifier). However, contradictions emerged around:

- a lack of autonomy to make decisions about the nature of development work because of the statutory requirements of partner organisations (contradiction 1);
- a perceived lack of trust in responding to needs creatively (contradiction 2); and
- a lack of sustainable funding to co-ordinate and maintain a flexible response to needs because of short-term funding regimes (contradiction 3).

Table 1: The three competing discourses of economic regeneration

Lack	Discourse 1	Discourse 2	Discourse 3
Nodal Point	CITY REGIONS: "Tackling economic inequality through inward investment"	NARROWING THE GAP: "Tackling inequalities in health through service improvement"	BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY "Tackling social inequality through communities"
Floating Signifiers	Inward investment Employment and skills Increasing economic opportunity	Service improvement Securing public investment Community involvement in service planning to increase access	Social enterprise Plugging gaps in service provision
Tensions & Contradictions	Lack of investment due to global recession Lack of local jobs for local people Lack of entrepreneurial community	Lack of public sector investment Lack of strategy in community involvement Lack of communication	Lack of autonomy to address 'real' needs Lack of trust to take creative risks Lack of funding to respond flexibly to need

Taken-for-granted assumptions in UK regeneration management

By highlighting the presence of three rival discourses in UK urban policy discourse the utility of discourse analysis is highlighted in revealing the taken-for-granted assumptions of policy about the causes of deprivation.

In the first discourse, 'city regions', the cause of deprivation is linked to the past failure of the private sector in generating sufficient economic growth whilst successful regeneration is seen in terms of partnership between the public and private sector to generate inward investment through competition between cities to generate wealth through inward investment and job creation.

In the second discourse, 'narrowing the gap', the cause of deprivation is linked to the past failure of the public sector in providing adequate public services whilst successful regeneration is seen in terms of partnership with the private sector to improve the quality of provision around health, education and leisure.

In the third discourse, 'building community capacity', deprivation is linked to a failure of the state to invest in the third sector. Here, solutions are seen in terms of partnerships between the voluntary, public sector and private sector in order to plug the gaps in public service provision.

By interpretatively bringing these three rival discourses into view, it is possible to see how actors use different storylines based on their different world views in a sharing a common view of the causes of deprivation and also in framing potential solutions. However, by focusing on this notion of 'lack', what a critical analysis also highlights is the potential for contradictions and tensions to exist *within* each discourse.

For instance, despite the role of 'city regions' in promoting growth through inward investment there is, at the same time, evidence in actors' discourse of a lack of growth due to recession, a lack of jobs due to a local skills mismatch and a lack of entrepreneurial communities. This implies the possibility that it is indeed this discursive lack which serves to negate the outcomes of regeneration in this case.

On even closer inspection, what we also begin to see is the way in which each apparently rival discourse actually draws on similar mechanisms to regeneration in the form of enterprise (i.e. private, public and community); inequality (economic, health and social) and joint working (partnership, joint working and networks).

This can potentially be explained in terms of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of socialist hegemony, which suggests that instead of a neo-liberal dominant ideology, what now exists is rather a 'new-right hegemony' which pervades all aspects of social life. In the context of persistent urban policy failure this manifests itself in terms of market-informed ways of seeing and doing to all aspects of regeneration.

Such conclusions speak to Raco's (2005) dominant ideology critique in addition to raising some important questions about the ongoing need to explore the impact of political and institutional change on outcomes for urban policy (D'Albergo 2010).

In adopting a critical approach to exploring the 'lived experience of actors', the aim of my research is to show how, faced with leadership in such complex times, actors invest in different approaches to regeneration depending on their world view. However, the presence of multiple

contradictions and tensions which privilege similar forms of enterprise, inequality and joint working are suggestive of a hegemonic force which pervades all aspects of social life and thus prevents regeneration policy from reaching its full identity in terms of outcomes.

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