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Theorizing the cynical professional: the public interest, urban planning, and the limits of ideology critique

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article

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abstract

A long-standing and foundational claim of professional groups is that they serve the public interest. Such claims are countered by two alternative lines of argument, which argue that professionalism is essentially an ideological construct. The first views professions as deliberately self-serving constructs designed to covertly advance the position of one occupational group. The second argues that professionalism is a disciplinary construct, used to render workers docile. Both rely to some extent on the idea that the ideology of professionalism operates by occluding reality and creating 'false consciousness'. We offer an alternative reading of the

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relationship between professionalism, ideology, and service in the public interest, drawing on Žižek's model of cynical ideology. Analysing a series of interviews with urban planners, we note that they both claim that their professional work is in the public interest, and simultaneously acknowledge that it is not. We argue that this ambivalence conceals the deeper way in which the public interest operates as a structuring ideological fantasy, upholding the profession's liberal commitment to the idea that it is possible to 'balance' interests and achieve socially just outcomes while working within the horizon of capitalism. Professionalism is thus ideological, but at the level of practice, not consciousness: it becomes a series of performative practices that run counter to the claim of working for the greater good. We argue that this offers a more sensitive understanding of the function of ideology for professions claiming to serve the public interest.

Introduction

Conventional readings of the relationship between professionalism and service in the public interest have tended to revolve around two sharply contrasting claims. The first is that professions by their nature, structure, and social function serve the public interest (Goode, 1957; Wilensky, 1964). The second is that professionalism based on a public service ideal is an inherently ideological claim designed to conceal a hidden 'reality' of power relations, where the particular interests of certain groups, rather than an overall public interest, are promoted (Freidson, 1970; Johnson, 1972).

In this paper, we seek to present a different model of the ideological relationship between professionalism and the public interest, illustrated by an examination of the urban planning profession in Britain. We argue the need for a tripartite understanding of ideology in the study of professionalism drawing on Žižek's work (Žižek, 1989). Using Žižek allows us to move beyond the notion that 'professional service in the public interest' is structured by a gap between claims and a reality that is not fully known, and towards a conceptualisation of ideology as something that enables professionals to manage their position at the crux of a number of inevitable contradictions generated

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by neoliberal capitalism. As an analytical tool, it allows us to delve into epistemic 'fuzziness' of professional self-justifications, in which a public interest defence of professionalism is both asserted and repudiated. Our work focuses on urban planners as an exemplary professional group because in both individual and institutional terms, their profession operates under a strong 'public interest' justification, yet is structurally and spatially embedded within capitalism.

The paper is structured in seven sections: section two reviews the existing literature on professionalism and the public interest; section three introduces an alternative model of ideology via the literature on 'decaf resistance'; section four outlines an alternative and tripartite model of ideology; section five introduces the politics of urban planning; section six produces empirical evidence to support our theoretical claims, with a conclusion in section seven. Our analysis is centrally concerned with the contradictory nature of the epistemic and discursive claims that professionals make about professional service in the public interest, and the way that the contradictions of capitalism are simultaneously acknowledged and disavowed in planners' understanding of their professional work.

Professionalism and the public interest

Mid twentieth century academic analyses developed various 'trait' theories of professions:[1] functional accounts, often drawing on Durkheim and Parsons, which sought to discover 'family resemblances' between a wider variety of different kinds of professional activity (see for a wider discussion Ackroyd, 2016). These shared traits often included the idea that professionals formed a monopoly group whose function was to solve social problems via the application of specialist (often state-legitimated) knowledge and/or expert practice, with attendant legal and ethical responsibility (a definition that continues to be influential, see for example (Adler, Kwon and Heckscher, 2008). In particular, these theories stressed ideals of public service, with the community of professionals acting to promote wider social goals (Goode, 1957) in splendid and untainted isolation from the need to pursue profit-seeking labour (Wilensky, 1964; for a discussion, see: Freidson, 2001; Stern, 2006). Disinterested altruistic service in the public interest signalled a gentlemanly distance that both gave the professional a kind of objective neutrality, and placed them outside of the class conflicts generated by capitalism (though in some cases, the

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distinction between professional and non-professional work was viewed as a difference of degree rather than kind (Hughes, 1958). Professionalism was seen as a force that could protect the stability of society (Carr-Saunders, 1933; Marshall, 1950), and shield the relations of community from rising individualism (Tawney, 1921; for a commentary see: Saks, 1995; Veloso et al., 2015).

Many professional bodies continue to claim that their members serve a concept of the collective good. These assertions are often formulated in codes of ethics, which echo trait model arguments. Firstly, there is the idea that professions serve wider public goals and address socially relevant problems: for example, the Chartered Management Institute's Professional Standard requires its members to commit to sustainability and 'balance the needs of people and society, planet and environment, and profit and economic sustainability' (Chartered Management Institute, n.d.). Secondly, such institutes promote the notion that the impartiality and neutrality of their professional members enables them to avoid conflicts of interest. The UK Landscape Institute[2], for example, states in its Code of Ethics: 'A conflict of interest can arise where an individual or entity's impartiality may be undermined due to the possibility of a conflict between that person's self-interest and their professional interest or the public interest' (Landscape Institute, 2021: 14). While the theoretical status of arguments about the relationship between professionalism and the public interest in the academic literature might be currently contested, the claim to an ideal of collective service clearly retains a persuasiveness for those bodies defining and defending professionalism in the present.

From the late 1960s, trait model accounts began to be critiqued in scholarship for their naivety concerning the operations of power and centrality of conflict in society (Halliday, 1987; Larson, 2017) and their lack of awareness of the role of the professional in explicitly political processes (Parsons, 1968; Bell, 1973). Two alternative lines of argument emerged, both of which argue that professionalism is essentially an ideological construct that obfuscates 'true' social relations. The first, which arose in the 1960s, viewed claims to professionalism as deliberately self-serving, designed to advance the position of one occupational group in relation to the rest of society, and to establish occupational dominance by effectively closing a field to non-qualified incomers.[3] For example, Freidson argues that

professions constitute a barely concealed attempt to increase the economic value and functional independence of specialist work: 'The nature of an occupation's training, therefore, can constitute part of an ideology, a deliberate rhetoric in a political process of lobbying, public relations, and other forms of persuasion to attain a desirable end - full control over its work' (1970: 80; see also Abbott, 1998; Johnson, 1972; Larkin, 1983). More recently, professionalism has been viewed as shoring up middle class hegemony by creating an elite type of skilled labour power which organises and controls the public or private sector conditions under which it is sold as a fetishistic commodity, creating 'a mystification which unconsciously obscures real social structures and relations' (Larson, 2017: xviii).[4] An important sub-group within this line of argument focuses on the structural role of professionalism within systems of governmentality that seek to establish legitimacy and construct docile citizen-subjects. In this view, professionalism reproduces dominant power relations in the liberal-democratic-capitalist state (Johnson, 1977; Perkin, 1989).

The second set of arguments, more recently made, build on interactionist studies and organisational theory to argue that professionalism is an ideology operationalised by institutions to subjugate professionals themselves to a form of labour discipline (Andersson-Gough, Grey and Robson, 2000; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Fournier, whose work is particularly influential in this area, draws on both Althusserian understandings of ideology as interpellation of subjects and Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine the ways in which a 'discourse of professionalism' works as an active and practical disciplinary device in a large private service company (1999). In this view, rather than imposing top-down rules, liberal governmentality uses professionalism to create a series of expectations for worker behaviour that are internalised by the workforce, ensuring a degree of self-regulation by these docile subjects (see Bourke, Lidstone and Ryan, 2015). Professionalism, in other words, ostensibly confers dignity on employees, but actually lends very little in the way of tangible status or improved conditions.[5]

Despite their differences, both of these critiques of professionalism pivot on an understanding of ideology as characterised by a separation between an obfuscating external appearance and a deeper underlying reality. Claims to operate in the 'public interest' become not a defining trait of the profession, but a kind of false content that is touted to

occlude a hidden truth of self-interest, be that the class-based interests of professionals themselves or a desire on the part of powerful institutions to subject their unwitting workers to discipline. Importantly, the defining feature of both arguments from the literature is that professionalism involves a claim about 'service in the public interest' that can be dispelled by better knowledge of the real relationship between professionalism and power.

Introducing cynicism: 'Decaf resistance'

An alternative model of ideology is provided by theories of cynicism. Oddly, this concept has seldom been applied to professionalism (for exceptions see Hearn-Branaman, 2014; Crawford and Flint, 2015), despite the fact that Sloterdijk's paradigmatic figure of the modern cynic is a middle class professional (a point to which we will return shortly). Instead, this understanding of ideology has been taken up by the field of organisational studies to theorise worker resistance, particularly amongst middle class groups engaged in knowledge-intensive work (Mumby et al., 2017). Rather than being the dupes of false consciousness, workers who dis-identify with the ideology of their workplace or profession are pictured as operationalising a clear-sighted 'cynical distance' from capitalistic organisational objectives. They therefore labour on behalf of a larger organisation in the service of surplus value creation, despite the fact that they are aware that their work is at odds with their personal values and commitments.

Within organisational studies, such cynicism is read in at least three ways (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). Firstly, it can be reduced to hypocrisy, or pictured pathologically as a psychological defect that requires correction. Secondly, it can be viewed as a defence mechanism, a way of coping in an otherwise corrosive working environment. Thirdly, cynicism can be pictured as a form of 'decaf resistance' in which workers still do the labour that is required of them (Contu, 2008; see also du Plessis, 2018), but hold on to mental reservations, or even commit small transgressions that preserve self-worth but do nothing to produce meaningful social, economic, or organisational change (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Contu, 2008; Willmott, 2013). As a consequence, the worker remains trapped in a kind of abstract negation: they engage in individualised acts of subversion yet the fact that they keep working means that their practice ultimately upholds the status quo.

The model of ideology in play in this idea of the cynical, resistant worker is dualistic, but in a very different way to the ideological arguments about professionalism above. The cynical worker is not the dupe of false consciousness, because they know what they are doing, but do it anyway. Indeed, they can be seen as the negative image of the professionals who actively adopt 'technologies of the self' to become 'become more professional and better selves' (Fournier, 1999: 300, see also Fournier, 1998, for a comparison between resistant and compliant professional subjectivities). This clear-sightedness means that there is less room for a corrective revelation of hidden truth (though there is still room for misrecognition in this model, and consequently some of these readings do premise a resistant worker who is not *fully* aware of the ways in which they are reproducing their status quo, see Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 160).

These theories of 'cynical distance' draw on two lines of theoretical work: an anti-liberal but non-Marxian conceptualisation of cynical reason associated with Peter Sloterdijk (1988) and a Marxian tradition which draws on a literature about real abstraction, running from Sohn-Rethel (1978) to Žižek (1989). However, very little of the organisational studies literature deals with the fact that these two bodies of theory are inconsistent in their philosophical, economic, and political assumptions. Further, the significance of an important structural concept, 'real abstraction', to the Marxian conceptualisation in Žižek tends to get lost, and his Lacanianism reduced to a matter of individual subjectivities (the worker engaged in 'decaf resistance' becomes an individual seeking to escape the idea that their selfhood is structured by lack). This strips away the parallel on which Žižek's reconceptualisation of ideology is predicated, between Hegelian-Marxian ideas of real abstraction and Lacanian ideas of the structuration of the real by a kind of collective fantasy. As a result, the idea that of cynical ideology involves collective, structuring forces that operate beyond the individual's belief system is lost. In the next section, we re-read the cynical ideology literature to restore these elements, in order to enable fuller analysis of the relationship between public interest claims and professionalism.

The cynical professional: They know what they do, but they do it anyway

In Sloterdijk's work, professionalism is almost a defining feature of the cynic. His figure of the modern cynic lives a life of bad faith as an average, well-off middle class professional, part of a 'universal, diffuse' mass of similar people (Sloterdijk, 1988: 3). They share a pessimistic, disillusioned, and cautiously detached 'realism', which recognises the existence of dominance and oppression yet accepts the current state of affairs as the condition of their comfortable lifestyle. Their position is therefore one of 'enlightened false consciousness': they can see the gap between their moral values and practice, but they nonetheless work to preserve it (Sloterdijk, 1988: 5). They exist in a state where: 'they know what they are doing, but they do it because, in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling them that it has to be so. Others would do it anyway, perhaps worse' (Sloterdijk, 1988: 5). They may suffer from mild melancholia as a result of this recognition, but they are able to keep it together so that they 'remain more or less able to work' (Sloterdijk, 1988: 5).

For Sloterdijk, cynicism neuters any idea that ideology can be dispelled with better knowledge. Instead, classes, races, genders, and sexualities confront one another across a table where hegemony always has the most powerful seat, and invariably proves hard of hearing. The cynic grasps all of this, but instead of feeling a need to act against it, to doubt their own relationship to power, or to be drawn into struggle, they are 'reflexively buffered' (Sloterdijk, 1988: 5). Professionally and personally aligned with capitalism, they accept the need to act against their better knowledge in order to 'get on'.

Ultimately, however, Sloterdijk's model is open to similar criticisms to the literature on 'decaf resistance' noted above: it is highly individualised and tends to rely on rather too-easy distinctions between 'inauthentic' cynicism and more 'authentic' ways of being (Shea, 2010). Sloterdijk's dislike of Marxian ideas also means that *Critique of Cynical Reason* leaves the reader with little precise sense of the relationship between the structural, concrete, and material workings of capitalism and a cynical psychology. Or rather: he sees capitalism and the logic of exchange as the problem, but at a vague level of liberal, middle class complacency and greed.

Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) offers a more radical treatment of cynicism in terms of the relationship between knowledge and practice. This work is a key reference for the organisational

studies literature on worker resistance, and yet there are significant differences between Žižek's model of cynicism and that outlined in section 3 above. Most significantly, Žižek is at pains to base his idea of cynicism in a wider model of ideology that is tripartite, not dualistic, precisely in order to avoid the 'fetishistic fascination of the 'content' supposedly hidden behind the form' (Žižek, 1989: 3). This moves his conceptualisation of ideology beyond the binary idea of a chasm between appearance and reality, or explicit and occluded content.

Key to understanding Žižek's conceptualisation of cynicism is the idea that ideology does not involve an epistemic illusion about the 'real world' that can be dispelled by better knowledge. His famous parallel between the psychoanalytic analysis of dreams and Marx's theorisation of the commodity argues that it is an error to focus on the gap between *manifest* content (the literal, often bizarre content of dreams/the neoclassical idea that value is dependent on supply and demand) and *latent* content (the 'normal', (pre)conscious thought that is articulated by the dream/the source of value in labour). Instead, in dreams it is the unconscious and repressed desire (which has nothing to do with the latent dream content) that is significant, especially the process through which it is intercalated into the space between the manifest and latent elements of the dream. Importantly, this *form* of the dream is not occluded as a deep, hidden truth: it occurs on the 'surface' of the way that the dream weaves itself together. Similarly, with the commodity, we cannot stop at the latent revelation that value is not really produced in exchange and circulation but actually depends on labour: we must examine the process by which value appears in this strange, fetishistic configuration of the commodity form in society. In both cases, the crucial question is not 'what secret is concealed here?' but 'why did this play between manifest and latent content *assume this particular form*?'

Answering this question involves a second concept: 'real abstraction', which tends to be downplayed in organisation studies literature on 'decaf resistance' and the cynical worker. This is the idea that reality itself - our practice and our everyday life - are themselves structured in a fetishised, ideological way. For example, when we exchange goods, we engage in a *practice* of abstraction. We act as if commodities lose their distinctive, sensuous characteristics and become timeless abstract entities that are rendered equivalent, and in the process, we make it appear as though circulation were the source of a commodity's

value instead of labour itself (this is the essence of commodity fetishism, see Arthur, 2009; Finelli, 2007; Jappe, 2013; Postone, 1993; Toscano, 2008).

Importantly, this is not a mental process that occurs in the realm of thought, but a practical process, something that we enact each time we buy something. In Žižek's view we know very well that when we exchange goods they do not become abstract entities, their qualitative aspects reduced to a quantitative value; yet we behave *as if* we thought that were the case. By pursuing practices of real abstraction (abstractions that go to work in the world, like exchange), we sustain and reproduce capitalism, weaving together the social via a series of things that we actually *do*, to create systems of everyday practice that are objectively fetishistic. This is a model of ideology where the problem lies not in false consciousness (a gap within knowledge), but in a gap between knowledge (which is clear-sighted) and action (which is fetishistic). Ideological distortion, then 'is already at work in the social reality itself, at the level of what the individuals are *doing*' (Žižek, 1989: 28). People are fetishists, but in practice, not in thought. For Žižek, this means that the place of misrecognition shifts: it lies in a failure fully to interrogate the illusions that structure practice:

What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. (Žižek, 1989: 30)

So how might we apply this to the relationship between professionalism and the public interest? Fundamentally, it has the potential to shift our understanding of ideology, such that the interesting question is not 'Does professionalism work in the public interest or is it an ideological smokescreen?', but 'Why do justifications of professionalism persistently take the *form* of ideas of service in the public interest, even though it is common to acknowledge knows that practice often, perhaps always, conflicts with this ideal?'. Professionalism, viewed through the tripartite lens (manifest content, latent content, form), is ideological to the core, but in a way that does

not depend on a hidden 'truth behind the curtain' of concealed interests that can be easily revealed. Asking this different question has the potential to open a novel space allowing us to understand the extent to which a 'double illusion' of professionalism exists, in which professionals both know that they are unable to challenge fundamental structural inequalities and differences of interest, yet simultaneously 'overwrite' that awareness with a fiction of public service that shapes and sustains their professional practice, blunting an awareness of their position at the crux of social contradictions generated by capitalism.

In the analysis that follows we will utilise Žižek's tripartite formulation as follows: the manifest element we define as the claim that professionalism serves the public interest. The latent element we define as the contradictory 'open secret' that professionalism does not serve the public interest, and in fact does harm by reinforcing the inequalities of capitalism. The form we define as the way in which these two contradictory ideas are held together simultaneously by the inherently liberal notion that a 'balance' can be struck between fundamentally contradictory interests in society (not least capital and labour). We are interested in the epistemically 'fuzzy' space that this creates, and the way that it enables planners to continue to act 'as if' their practice upholds the public interest, while simultaneously acknowledging that the overall tenor of their actions does harm.

	Manifest content	Latent content	Form (the 'as if') of the real abstraction guiding practice
Commodities	Value is set by supply and demand in circulation.	Labour is the true source of value.	We behave as if commodities embody relations between things, rather than social relations.
Money	Money as the immediate embodiment of wealth.	Money as an expression of social relations.	We behave as if money is the immediate embodiment of wealth when we know it really embodies social relations.
Professionalism	Professionals act in the public interest.	The social field is full of intractable social contradictions that cannot be balanced, and our professional work really serves the interests of capital.	Professionals behave as if a liberal balancing act is possible, when they simultaneously acknowledge that this is a fiction.

Table 1. The tripartite model of cynical ideology

Planning, professionalism, and the public interest

Žižek's conceptualisation of cynical ideology emphasises the need to look beyond knowledge, to practice. In the next sections, we will illustrate the utility of a tripartite approach to ideology by looking at the ideological work done by the claims and practices of one particular profession to operate in the public interest: urban planning. We draw on a series of interviews with planners to illustrate some of the discourses at play when claims are made about professionals serving the public interest, primarily to illuminate and deepen the theoretical argument presented above. These are presented in Section 6, but in this section we initially outline the wider position of planning, drawing on academic literature about the place of planning in capitalist societies.

In the UK, entry to the planning profession is controlled by a series of requirements (including higher educational training) with workers joining the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), a professional

association that recognises their status. Claims to serve the public interest are prominent in both academic and practice literature, and (as we shall see) in the discourse of planners themselves.

In common with a number of other UK professions, urban planning became established in the twentieth century, with a rationale that drew on ideas of the regulative state as a restraint on the more brutal features of capitalist markets (Cherry, 1974). Planning has therefore been described as a 'welfare' or 'semi-profession' (following Etzioni, 1969, see Evans, 1993; Evans and Rydin, 1997; Thomas, 1999), though its regulative functions have significantly weakened since the mid twentieth century (see Noordegraaf, 2016; Raco and Savini, 2019). More recently, the ranks of public sector planning professionals have been swollen by significant private sector involvement: approximately 45% of chartered planners in the UK now work in the private sector, often with developers as clients (Royal Town Planning Institute, 2019; Inch, Wargent and Tait, 2023). Despite these changes, however, the profession has never lost its claim to serve a public interest purpose (Lennon, 2022; Tait, 2016; Sturzaker and Hickman, 2023). We might contrast the assertion of researchers of accountancy, who stated 'In literally hundreds of interviews in the 1990s, in many countries and large accounting firms, we never heard an accountant refer to the public interest' (Cooper and Robson, 2006: 433), with researchers of planning who argued: 'The notion of planning contributing to public benefit emerged spontaneously in most interviews' (Murtagh, Odeleye and Maidment, 2019: 4). The RTPI lays great emphasis on service in the public interest: its Royal Charter states that it exists to 'advance the art and science of planning for the benefit of the public' (a phrase that is common to several other built environment professions).[6] This profession, with its strong public interest ethos, will enable us to trace the tripartite form of the relationship between professionalism and public interest claims, and the ideological work that this serves.

Key to understanding the form of the relationship between the public interest and professionalism is the idea that professionals are able to find a 'balance' between the highly conflicting interests involved in the development process in the collective good. This recent RTPI paper offers a classic formulation:

Good planning balances competing demands and interests over land development with a view to achieve sustainability and redistribute land value uplifts to advance environmental, social and economic objectives in the public interest. (Vianello and Krabbe, 2021: 14)[7]

The philosophical roots of this perspective are mixed, blending a utilitarian rationale of arriving at the greatest good of the greatest number with a wider, more paternalistic attitude towards promoting development in the public good (Taylor, 1998; Gilg, 2005). The idea of 'balance' has proven surprisingly resilient, surviving questioning from the left for ignoring the diversity of social groups (Simmie, 1974; Sandercock, 2003), and the right, for hindering the effective functioning of markets (Pennington, 2000). It is often expressed in contemporary discourse as a concept of 'sustainability', which emphasises a balance between social, economic and environmental objectives through a deliberative, democratic, and inclusive decision-making process (Innes and Booher, 2015). In the scholarly literature on planning, many academics continue to search for substantive public interest criteria for the profession, whether from a pluralist perspective (Alexander, 2002; Moroni, 2019; Dadashpoor and Sheydayi, 2021) or a communitarian one (Lennon, 2017; Salet, 2019), though critics have also claimed that the public interest service ideal is fundamentally ideological, following similar arguments to those outlined in Section 2 (Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015; Puustinen, Mäntysalo and Jarenko, 2017; Sorauf, 1962).

The idea of balance posits a view that the contradictions produced and reproduced by capitalism can be ameliorated by the right kind of professional labour in the service of the public interest. However, other theoretical positions on this question are possible: from a Marxian perspective, planning is imbricated in capitalism, as a system that now primarily seeks to promote the 'delivery' of development and the interests associated therewith (landowners, private developers, and real estate intermediaries), and secondarily to deliver socially reproductive goods that are required for the continuation of the current economic system (e.g. schools, hospitals, infrastructure) (see Holgersen, 2020, who argues for the contemporary relevance of a Marxist approach to planning). In this paper, we adopt a Marxian perspective on capitalism, arguing that its essence resides in the

exploitation of labour to create surplus value, which generates contradictions of interest that cannot be easily reconciled. As David Harvey argues, planning's ideal of the professional whose work strikes a 'balance' in the 'public interest' denies the depth and intensity of the social contradictions generated by capitalism:

The commitment to the ideology of harmony within the capitalist social order remains the still point upon which the gyrations of planning ideology turn.... Perhaps there lies at the fulcrum of capitalist history not harmony but a social relation of domination of capital over labour. And if we pursue this possibility, we might come to understand why the planner seems doomed to a life of perpetual frustration, why the high-sounding ideals of planning theory are so frequently translated into grubby practices on the ground. (Harvey, 1985: 184)

Further, from a historical perspective, UK planners since the 1970s have operated in an increasingly neoliberal space (Inch, 2018). This idea might initially seem counterintuitive, since planning still has a strong aura of state regulation of markets, and any kind of state intervention is seemingly antithetical to ideals of neoliberalism. However, as political economists have noted, 'actually existing neoliberalism' is heavily reliant on the de-regulation and re-regulation of markets, significantly complicating any attempt to draw a clear division between market and state functions (Brown, 2003; Clarke, 2004; Jessop, 2002; Peck and Tickell, 2002). As Brenner et al. (2010), put it neoliberalization processes are highly variegated and diverse, but their common feature across contexts is that they 'have facilitated marketization and commodification while simultaneously *intensifying* the uneven development of regulatory forms across places, territories and scales' (184).

In terms of planning, this process of neoliberalisation is admittedly incomplete and contradictory: the profession has undergone successive rounds of market-oriented restructuring, which have significantly weakened its redistributive functions and it now exists within a development context where the functions of the state and market are increasingly co-imbricated (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013; Lord and Tewdwr-Jones, 2014; Sager, 2015; Inch,

2018). Nonetheless, the self-image of planning professionals has tended to resist the idea that the profession is embedded in neoliberal capitalism, instead preferring to contrast the functioning of the market against a model of professional work that foregrounds a more regulatory expertise. As Sager (2009) argues: 'The prevailing attitude amongst planners has been to embrace neither politics nor markets, but rather opt for professionally good solutions' (70). This provides the ground on which we seek to explore whether the public service ideal of professionalism in planning functions fetishistically, enabling social contradictions to be acknowledged but then minimised. In the next section, we examine the ways that practising planners conceptualise the social contradictions of their work, their understandings of the public interest, and how these fit into ideas of professional balance.

Professionalism, the public interest, and the form of balance

A comment on methodology

To illustrate our argument we draw on extended (>1 hour) biographical interviews with 23 professional planners in the UK, undertaken as part of the WITPI project.[8] The 23 interviewees were selected as contacts of the research team and via snowball sampling, and represented a balance across locations, genders (11 men/12 women), career stages (6 had fewer than 10 years' experience, 7 had 10-20 years' experience, and 11 had more than 20 years) and sectors (6 had worked exclusively in the public sector/6 in the private/and 11 had mixed public and private experience). Semi-structured, biographical interviews encouraged participants to reconstruct their career trajectory and to reflect in depth on their contribution and professional practice (Chamberlayne, Bornat and Wengraf, 2000; Rosenthal, 1993).

Interviews explored the career histories of planners and asked about the contradictions and tensions they faced in their work, their perspectives on the profession and their understanding of the public interest. Recorded interviews were transcribed, and analysis included a team-based review of interview recordings which generated twenty themes (including 'purpose of planning', 'public service', 'public/private sector' and 'politics'). These were then used to code interviews. We have endeavoured, as far as possible, to avoid ascribing intention or motivation to individuals, focusing instead on interview responses as

examples of a 'discourse' on the public interest and professionalism, and thus seeking to avoid the issue of positive self-reporting (see Sturzaker and Hickman, 2023). Our interviews were reinforced by wider ethnographic work by the research team which revealed similar patterns of understanding of concepts such as the public interest (Schoneboom et al., 2023).

Picturing the contradictions of professional planning work

Following Žižek's tripartite model of ideology, in terms of 'manifest' content, the majority of our interviewees argued that planning work served the public interest, and reciprocally that professionalism was defined by a public service ideal:

I think, to be a professional implies that you have a public interest at the heart of everything you do and that overrides both your personal interest and preferences and the commercial pressures that you're under, so I think any professional that professes to have an ethical framework has to have a fairly clear idea of what the public interest is.

(Intw.9, male, late career, public sector)[9]

This reflects the arguments made by professional institutes, cited above, in which there is a strong emphasis on the professional's ability to resolve key social, economic, environmental and spatial problems via ethical conduct. Most interviewees (across both public and private sectors) also assumed that public interest decision-making in planning followed a social and economic logic that was opposed to the rationality of the market, developing a conceptual division between a laissez-faire idea of neoliberalism and the regulatory work of planning practice:

We take our decisions in the public interest which I suppose you could say is a trite sort of phrase, but I think it does have a meaning. Planning is there for the public good, it's a realisation that the market... and everyone accepts, there's hardly a country in the world that says the market can be allowed free reign. (Intw.5, male, late career, public and private sectors)

In the most simplistic terms, I've always seen planning as a system... with a purpose that exists to make sure that development is, in a broad sense, in the public interest and that private interest doesn't completely overawe the public interest to such an extent that society is worse off because of it. (Intw.6, male, early career, private sector)

However, in terms of 'latent' content, all of the planners we interviewed recognised that professional planning practice did not always result in decisions in the public interest. Interviewees were fully aware that society was not a harmonious unity, and that social contradictions were intractable and difficult to resolve. For some, the public interest was a chimerical concept that reduced an inevitable plurality of views to a univocal perspective:

There are multiple, public interests. There is not one, single one and public interest will often be in conflict. (Intw.8, male, late career, public sector)

Others argued that decision-making was ultimately political, with the 'public interest' a convenient rhetoric to conceal the ultimately partial nature of decisions:

You can produce all the evidence you want, but as we see from Brexit, the same piece of evidence means two things to different people, so determining what the public interest is, I think, is a political decision and you can say 'this is in the public interest' and they will tell you why it's not in the public interest, if they don't believe that politically. (Intw.7, male, mid career, public sector)

A smaller group of planners adopted a more overtly cynical perspective on 'public interest' claims. While they recognised the power of the idea of service in the public interest, they also acknowledged the intractable nature of the social contradictions pervading the planning system, with some explicitly denying that their work served wider social, economic, or environmental goals. Some

argued that the idea of the public interest could be used as a kind of convenient rhetoric or 'spin':

Interviewer: How easy do you find it is to identify public interest objectives in your own work?

Interviewee: Quite easy. You are often putting a spin on things, like coming back to this example, this is about an investment in the town centre.... That's saying that, altruistically, 'we're doing you a favour' to the council, so I think it can convey public benefit quite well. (Intw.6, male, early career, private sector)

Others shifted between a commitment to ideas of balance, and a frank admission that their work had sometimes done harm:

It is a balance between delivering a viable scheme that meets clients' needs with serving the public interest and I'll put my hands up, there have been projects where the public interest has been squeezed out. (Intw.16, male, late career, private sector)

I felt like I wasn't working in the public interest at [private consultancy name redacted]. (Intw.4, female, early career, public and private sectors)

One planner from the private sector reflected on ways in which their involvement in profit-making from land and development might restrict their claim to work in the public interest, while simultaneously arguing the neoliberal view that market logics had their own claim to operate in favour of a greater good:

Maybe I don't serve the public interest. More doctors' surgeries, more schools... I know that building new housing in vast quantities puts pressure on these services as well and at

the end of the day, having more houses to buy is also going to help the public in the future who would like to buy. More houses on the market means a fairer price can be reasonably asked... yeah, I don't know, really. (Intw.21, female, mid career, public and private sectors)

Indeed, for some, cynicism about balance represented a 'mature' attitude towards the profession, something developed over time and experience of seeing the results of planning in practice:

So every planner in the city, after a while, goes 'am I doing good? Am I not just helping big business and big finance?'...I don't lie awake at night worrying that I'm doing bad, but I don't go home with a rosy glow of feeling that I've done great. (Intw.7, male, mid career, public sector)

It is not really surprising that a profession that encounters conflicts of interest on a daily basis is aware that the social sphere under capitalism cannot be reduced to a harmonious totality. The notable point is that the manifest claim that the profession pursues an ideal of service is still made just as stridently, in spite of this clear-sighted sense that both the concept of the public interest and its execution in practice may be more complex. This is not to deny that planners believe that they are able to make a positive difference to places - indeed, many talked about their work in this regard. However, our argument rests on the wider claims that are made about planning as a force for good in society, whilst the outcomes of capitalist development continue to generate negative consequences for places and people. We are particularly concerned, therefore, to explore the means by which professionals navigate this tension. In the next section we will explore this contradiction in more detail, investigating the form of the ideological link between professionalism and the public interest in the idea of 'liberal balance'.

The form of balance

Throughout the interviews, 'balance' became a dominant theme linking ideas of public service to ideals of professionalism. In this section, we will argue that 'balance' constitutes the form of the 'double illusion' of professional service in the public interest for planners: it structures the

relationship between the manifest claim to act in the public interest, the latent but public knowledge that professional planning work frequently fails to uphold a public service ideal, and a series of practices through which planners continue to act 'as if' their practice upholds the public interest, when they know full well that in many cases it does not.

The idea that professionalism enables planners to find the 'public interest' as a point of social equilibrium that balances difficult social contradictions was strongly reflected in our interviews. As one participant argued: 'So much about planning is about balanced judgements between where there isn't actually a right or wrong answer' (Intw.9). For another, the centrality of the idea of a 'sustainable' balance to policy was positive: 'where the NPPF [National Planning Policy Framework] does get it right is planning is about balance, it's about balancing the environment, the economy and social' (Intw.3, female, late career, public and private sectors).

However, interviewees differed significantly when questioned as to how this balance was to be achieved. Several argued that professionalism entailed adopting a position of objective, expert neutrality above the political fray and at arm's length from personal convictions:

I think if you're professional, you have to be neutral to some extent and I know I said I believe in public interest and whatever, it's more values, my values more sit in public sector, but someone else's values might more sit in the private sector, but that doesn't mean that I can't argue both sides, that I'm not professional and I can see both sides of the case. (Intw.4, female, early career, public and private sectors)

You're there, you are a professionally paid adviser, you can make it clear that it is a balanced decision... you should be putting the pros and cons, you should not be writing just towards your recommendation. (Intw.3, female, late career, public and private sectors)

In some cases, participants argued that this was to be achieved by following the correct professional procedures, placing their faith in existing policy and due decision-making process:

So we try to do what we feel is right and we do what local, regional and national policy says is in the public interest and we obviously have to toe that line. (Intw.7, male, mid career, public sector).

Others emphasized the role of professional expertise, a highly technocratic vision of the professional that reduces the contentious social, economic, and political aspects of planning to a series of answerable technical questions:

I would just say the public interest is just looking out for them [the public], so they don't know how much a 13 storey building is going to affect them, but it's our job because we've studied planning and we know more about it, to assess how it will impact them and weigh up the options to say that it may take a bit of their daylight sunlight out, however it is going to have a community centre with some commercial units and it's going to get us a lot of Section 106 and CIL money and we'll be able to redo the roads outside their house. (Intw.23, female, early career, public and private sectors)

However, another perspective took the view that social contradictions were more difficult to resolve. For some, it was a matter of persuading wealthy private clients to 'do the right thing', pointing out the benefits of compliance with policy and regulation in economic terms:

I think you can have some real influence on public interest, as long as you do your job correctly, so you challenge your client and you tell them about policy and you tell them about being compliant – even going beyond compliance – and saying 'these are the benefits of doing it'. (Intw.19, male, mid career, public and private sectors)

For others, a more politically democratic approach to the idea of planning 'balance' was necessary, and they placed their faith in local political leadership to make representative decisions in the public interest (here identified closely with the interest of the local electorate):

I still believe that councillors are elected by their communities to represent their communities and the councillors are the best mechanism for the community to be represented and represented through planning. (Intw. 11, male, late career, public sector)

A more directly democratic logic was argued by others, emphasising the role of planning in listening to 'the public voice' (Intw.13). This could also become an argument for the planning professional as a social mediator in situations of conflict. As the same planner noted, when talking about planning a new waste site:

There was really, really nasty, abusive stuff going on between the local community and the council there, so I/we were brought in to resolve that. It took about 18 months to do it, so very carefully working with the community, what are their issues? Work with the authority, what are their issues? Slowly and slowly round in circles, looking at all the issues. (Intw. 13, male, late career, private sector)

These interviews reveal the extent to which the idea of 'achieving balance' was the fulcrum linking the concept of 'professionalism' to that of the 'public interest'. There was a surprising degree of unanimity on this overall point, though participants varied in their explanation of why balance was needed, and how it was to be achieved. We want to suggest, following Žižek, that the notion of a balance functions as the *form* that links the manifest content ('Planning professionals act in the name of an identifiable public interest') to the latent content ('We know that social contradictions are intractable, and that planning practice often, perhaps always, fails to serve the public interest'). It allows planners to maintain simultaneously that the social contradictions engendered by capital are resolvable by professionals who make an effort to 'balance' interests, while at the same time openly

acknowledging the opposite: that the public interest is a contested term, that capitalist society is full of irresolvable contradictions, and that much planning practice does not therefore pursue the public interest in any univocal sense of that term. In the next section, we will explore the extent to which the idea of liberal balance works to conceal the gap between the 'high-sounding ideals of planning theory' and 'grubby practices on the ground' (Harvey, 1985: 184). We will argue that the epistemic 'fuzziness' of the contradictions between latent and manifest claims about the public interest (a fuzziness that is shared rather than individuated) takes this form in order to prevent planners from fully acknowledging the imbrication of planning in the reproduction of capitalism.

The public and the private sectors: neoliberal bogeymen

A substantial number of the planners we interviewed noted the existence of the neoliberal idea that the public interest can be achieved through the rationality of a perfectly functioning and efficient market. However, all of them voiced scepticism about this, often drawing on the notion of balance to do so. For example, one private sector planner argued that there was a growing tendency to replace public service ideals with the assumption that investment in the built environment was synonymous with the pursuit of the public interest:

I think a lot of people in the private sector do see investment as a good thing, regardless of the details, so... the fact that [x developer] are going in and are wholeheartedly developing the whole area must be a good thing because it's money going into the area and I think they genuinely believe that and to an extent, I'm sure they're right, but I think the idea of a planning system for the greater good might have fallen away somewhat. (Intw.6, male, early career, private sector)

In the case of public sector planners, this association of the private sector and the market could become a critique of the work of private sector planners:

I do think working for a housebuilder would be quite difficult in as much as I assume it's principally financially driven, both for the individual and for the company... it's not working

particularly in the public interest in any way, I don't think so.
(Intw.1, male, mid-career, public sector)

We think that there is a whole bunch of consultancies out there that we would call the anti-planners that are not bothered about any of the public interest or whatever and are out there just to get money and screw people over (Intw.4, female early career, public and private sectors)

In particular, many noted that the private sector had sought to redefine the 'public interest' in terms of the quantitative delivery of new housing (Intw.8), with some arguing that private sector colleagues were the victims of a conventional type of ideological illusion, with public sector planners as the implicitly more 'enlightened' professionals:

People I worked with at [X planning consultancy] definitely thought that they were delivering housing in the public interest; if they build more housing, then they will be more affordable. (Intw.4, female, early career, public and private sectors).

Importantly, these arguments are predicated on a clear conceptual divide between the financial networks shaping private sector labour, and the supposedly financially disinterested world of the public sector professional.

Some planners working in the private sector also acknowledged that not all of their peers worked in the public interest, but tended to portray this as a matter of a few rogue consultants in an otherwise well-functioning system:

I have my suspicions or opinions about certain planning consultants, employees of volume housebuilders who will act in a particular way to suit their masters, so I think it's different, different for me, I don't feel constrained in any way, whether

it's by political masters or by managers. (Intw.1, male, mid career, public sector)

However, other planners working in the private sector endeavoured to undermine any automatic association of the public sector planning professional and service in the public interest, with one railing against the 'mythology, that by working in the public sector as a planner, you're working in the public interest' (Intw.13). In some cases, interviewees argued that public sector employees were constrained by a suffocating proceduralism that had stripped away a wider public purpose:

I think there's an awful lot of people in the public sector who, sadly, don't have that broader understanding of the public interest issue and they come in to it and it's a job, particularly with development management because it's a job where you've got an application in front of you, you put the notice up, you go out on site, you write it up and then another one, and then another one and you've got a sausage machine that you can forget quietly, it's so procedural. (Intw.3, female, late career, public and private sectors)

In this view, the private sector becomes the arena for visionary planning work that can take in public interest claims, with public sector employees as overworked and plodding bureaucrats. Interestingly, however, private sector participants who expressed these views did not identify themselves with neoliberal tendencies (e.g., claiming superior entrepreneurial skills in pursuit of efficient markets). Instead, they tended to argue that they possessed a broader skillset enabling superior forms of professional balance to be struck. For example, Interviewee 3 (female, late career, public and private sectors) argued that private sector ways of working led to the 'creation of the better place', admonishing an imaginary public sector interlocutor: 'you're staying within the parameters that don't enable the better place to be made because you're too narrow'. The arguments of private sector planners therefore promoted an argument for professional service in the public interest, rather than undermining that ideal.

Across all of the interviews, the idea of 'balance' enabled both public and private sector planners to argue for a professional domain of activity that was separate from the market, *contra* the increasing imbrication of contemporary planning in neoliberal governance and market transactions. Neoliberalism appears as a kind of bogeyman in the system, a threat to the 'as if' of balance, but one that can be comfortably located elsewhere, in a different part of the sector. When the issue of the increasingly entrepreneurial nature of public sector planning work was raised, the idea of the 'public interest' resurfaced to blunt any sense that the underlying rationale for professional service was being undermined:

Even when you're making money out of things, in a local government context, you're not making money to make money, you're making money to serve the public interest in some way... so our investment programme has two sides, it has to make a minimum return, but the criteria also requires it serves the objectives of the council, so public interest is served by both the schemes that you're investing in being schemes which will meet the public interest and meeting our objectives, but also it makes financial return and that money will come back in and be re-invested in public services, so on both sides, you are serving the public interest of the council and the people it represents. (Intw.14, male, late career, public sector)

If cynical ideology makes people 'fetishists in practice' rather than in knowledge, then the idea of 'balance', we contend, also makes planners 'liberals in practice', whatever their personal political convictions. Their professional activity is conditioned by the assumption that the social contradictions generated by capital can be smoothed out, and their more serious consequences resolved, a perspective that ignores the role of planning in the reproduction of capitalism, i.e., its intensifying imbrication in the creation and stabilisation of markets that widen economic inequalities via the generation of surplus value from land and development (Holgersen, 2020). It also overlooks the use of the planning system to secure the services that capitalism requires for its own reproduction (such as schools, hospitals, and infrastructure). Instead, it pivots on a separation between the professional working on behalf of 'the public

interest' and the pursuit of particular interests via the logic of the free market. This, however, is increasingly challenged in the field, both by the rapid growth of private sector planning consultancies, and by systems of neoliberal governance that increasingly demand that public sector bodies, like local councils, behave as entrepreneurial market-oriented institutions (Slade, Tait and Inch, 2021).

Conclusions

Our analysis seeks to move beyond more traditional ideological arguments, which rely on a binary model that is focused on a division between the apparent claims of professionalism and the hidden interests that it serves. By instead drawing on Žižek's tripartite approach to ideology, we have been able to contrast manifest, latent, and formal aspects of the relationship between claims to the public interest and professionalism, and to demonstrate the 'double illusion' on which professional practice pivots, set out in Table 1.

Drawing on our study of urban planners, we show that these professionals consistently make claims to operate in the public interest but which they understand, at the level of knowledge, are problematic because of the intractable and difficult nature of the social inequalities generated by capitalism and by the role of the planning system within it. However, the 'form' of balance enables this tension to be managed in practice, allowing planners to act *as if* their professional abilities enable them to discover a point of equilibrium between irreconcilably different positions within the economic, political, and social system, and thus to reach a decision that is 'socially just' within the horizon of capitalism. The reality that this fantasy occludes, of course, is a social domain riven by types of exploitation and inequality that are not only reproduced but actually deepened by a system that enables development to continue to be a source of surplus value.

Epistemically, then, planners inhabit a 'fuzzy' space, which is riven through with contradictions that go to the heart not only of professional identities, but of the function of planning itself. The overdetermined nature of capitalism becomes refracted through shared professional subjectivities, often in unhappy ways that bind professionals to an impossible fantasy of balance that requires constant adjudication, adaptation and improvisation in contradictory directions. This is not a straightforward matter of professionals doing an 'imperfect job in an imperfect world'. Indeed, such a description

comes startlingly close to Sloterdijk's description of the professional's own defence of their work. We have already quoted this above, but it is worth restating here in an expanded form:

They know what they are doing, but they do it because, in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling them that it has to be so. Others would do it anyway, perhaps worse. Thus, the new integrated cynicism even has the understandable feeling about itself of being a victim and of making sacrifices. Behind the capable, collaborative, hard facade, it covers up a mass of offensive unhappiness and the need to cry. (Sloterdijk, 1987: 5)

In the form of balance, then, we see the way that professionalism acts as an engine driving a commitment to reproduce the status quo. If this tripartite ideological structure of manifest, latent, and formal elements allows professionals to be fetishists in practice, planning in ways that they acknowledge do not serve the public interest, then the structure of this disavowal also has a particular politics. Whatever the personal beliefs of individual planners, their actions uphold an essentially liberal view that the sharp edges of the social contradictions produced by markets can be ameliorated by state regulation. In turn, this sustained a belief that there is a fundamental opposition between the state and the market and their respective roles in serving the public interest (*contra* the position that recognises that actually existing neoliberalism involves the deregulation and reregulation of markets by the state (see Peck and Tickell, 2002). The interviews with planning professionals showed that this opposition enabled them to argue, depending on which sector they worked in, that either the state or market were injurious to public service. Essentially, their arguments about balance enabled a displacement of responsibility for the latent content of planning work to be shifted elsewhere, enabling the fundamental contradictions of their position to be downplayed.

Further, while the planning profession has a distinctive history, organisation, and social place, we nonetheless believe that similar ideological work may be performed by claims to a public service ideal in other professions, structuring the nature and form of public service professionalism under capitalism. Much professional work is oriented

to serving the needs of capital, whether carried out by accountants, real estate professionals, lawyers, or architects. Many of these professions claim their ability to 'balance' between interests in society. The quote from the Chartered Management Institute in Section 2, clearly illustrates a similar formulation of 'balance' to those expressed by planning professionals, and there may be distinct value in exploring how a wider range of professional groups draw on this concept to justify their work. In turn, the tripartite conceptualisation set out here, may help to shed further light on professions' public interest claims. Many professional groups claim to serve the public interest, albeit with different degrees of intensity, highlighting the gaps between what is claimed by professions, what is known by professionals, and forms of disavowal that are operational in their actual practice. Moving beyond analyses of ideological claims to public service as obfuscating a 'reality' towards understanding the means by which such claims are sustained may help open up greater understandings of how professionalism and professional work is structured under neoliberal capitalism.

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[1] These articulated a series of shared 'traits' that a profession would exhibit, including advanced training, a collegiate professional body, autonomy in regulation, and an altruistic focus that served the public interest (Carr-Saunders, 1933).

[2] The professional body in the UK for landscape architects, landscape planners, and landscape managers.

[3] However, the identification of self-interest as a driving force shaping professional association is older: Corfield quotes J.C. Loudon in 183: 'The object of every association, either exclusive or open to all the public, is to accumulate power and to direct it to such objects as cannot be attained by individuals alone.' (Corfield, 1995: 202).

[4] Critiques of professionalism as exclusionary on the grounds of race and gender (positing the expertise of a universal white, male subject) could be classed as a special sub-type of this kind of ideological analysis (for example Davies, 1996; Whittington, 2011; Witz, 1991; Kurtz and White, 2022).

[5] Of course, there are many current analyses of professionalism that fall outside of the typology we have outlined here: work on professionals as institutional actors (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011; Muzio, Brock and Suddaby, 2013); on professionalism as a feature of organisational forms (Brock, 2006); on professionalism as a process that impacts work both in and outside organisations (Evetts, 2006; Cross and Swart, 2021), and the place of professions within increasingly dominant corporate environments (Noordegraaf, 2015; Collins and Butler, 2020). For reasons of space, we have focused on ideological theories of professionalism in this paper.

[6] https://www.rtpi.org.uk/media/3121/royal_charter.pdf . Similarly, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors in its Rules of Conduct states 'Members and firms must act in the public interest' (RICS, 2021 Rules of Conduct, Rule 5) <https://www.rics.org/globalassets/rics-website/media/upholding-professional-standards/standards-of-conduct/rules-of-conduct/roc-en-2021.pdf>.

[7] <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/new/our-campaigns/plan-the-world-we-need/>.

[8] The 'Working in the Public Interest' project investigated the changing environments in which planners worked, both in the private and public sector. It conducted in-depth ethnography in four organisations, supplemented by focus groups, biographical interviews, historical research, and workshops. Further details can be found at: witpi.sites.sheffield.ac.uk.

[9] Career designations as 'public' or 'private' reflect the fact that the interviewee has spent most of their career in this sector. Where 'both'

is noted, the interviewee has spent a significant period of their career in both sectors.

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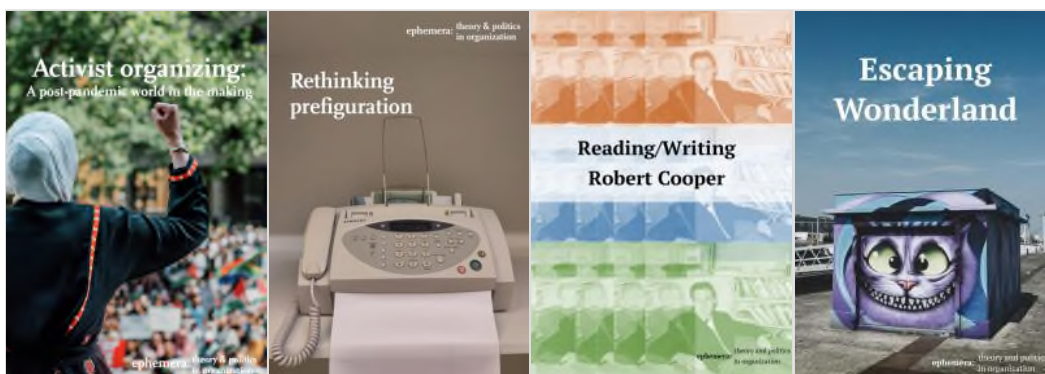
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