Book review

Soft Spaces in Europe: Re-negotiating Governance, Boundaries and Borders

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The past 30 years have seen a proliferation of experimental ways of 'doing' governance across Europe. As nation states selectively rework their powers both vertically and horizontally, new forms of governance have emerged that transcend existing political and administrative boundaries, assimilating new constellations of actors. As a result, efforts to understand how we are governed that concentrate solely on formal spaces of governance have, for the most part, been rendered specious. This edited volume brings together a collection of case studies that seek to understand these transformations through the concept of 'soft spaces' - a shorthand for non-statutory or informal governance processes that operate alongside traditional, formal institutions of government.

Early conceptualisations of soft spaces were predicated on planning reform in the UK under New Labour (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009), and *Soft Spaces in Europe* is the first significant international comparative effort to explore the concept. The volume comprises four sections that: establish a conceptual framework; explore soft spaces in various North-West European states; investigate cross-border soft spaces; and conclude with the editors' reflections. The book is ambitious in scope, seeking to explore six overarching objectives, including the rationalities of soft spaces, their formation and evolution, relationships with 'hard spaces', the 'actor, ideational and spatial selectivities' involved, their impact, and their effect on democratic structures. The breadth of these objectives reflects the desire to go beyond theory to examine practice through empirical examples. As such the volume as a whole is exploratory and research-led, with each case testing the boundaries and utility of soft spaces as an idea rather than seeking to provide a definitive exposition of the concept.

As you might expect from a comparative volume, a disparate range of soft spaces drawing on various 'selectivities' is presented. For this reason, the definition of soft spaces adopted is deliberately indeterminate - not least because such spaces are defined by practice, and are 'exercises in becoming, remaking and dissolving' (p.9) as 'differing assemblages of interests, materialities and actors' (p.14) combine to form different configurations in diffuse contexts. This open-ended approach means that it is difficult to know whether or not the cases presented are 'part of the same unfolding

phenomenon' (p.215), as the editors themselves attest. Nonetheless we can identify soft spaces as having four central attributes:

1. Soft spaces necessarily operate alongside formal territorial spaces of government - deriving legitimacy from this co-existence and the involvement of elected politicians and civil servants - but crucially allowing local actors 'room' for strategic and tactical manoeuvre.

2. They typically operate in and across new spatial scales, often employing 'fuzzy boundaries' that construct new imaginaries by eschewing existing political-territorial boundaries.

3. They involve new constellations of both public and non-state actors (although more commonly drawn from the private sector than civil society).

4. They are commonly delivery- or problem-focused, and have short-term/defined life spans (although longer forms have emerged).

Like all useful concepts, soft spaces encompass a set of phenomena that many in the fields of planning and governance would already recognise (see Stoker, 1998). Much of the 'real work' of planning occurs outside the formal planning system beyond the 'shackles of pre-existing working patterns which might be variously held to be slow, bureaucratic, or not reflecting the real geographies of problems and opportunities' (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009: 619). Therefore, the attraction of soft spaces for local decision-makers lies in the pragmatic and supposedly un-ideological 'what works' approach, and the ability to 'get things done' without worrying too much about conventional administrative boundaries. For researchers meanwhile, the concept appears compatible with a range of processes that increasingly define contemporary governance such as networked governance, public/private partnerships, fast policy, and 'post-political' processes.

Soft Spaces in Europe provides a significant advance on the early soft spaces literature (e.g., Haughton et al., 2010) by differentiating between spaces that result more or less from central government diktats, and those that result from more iterative (e.g. Deas et al.'s chapter on the Atlantic Gateway) or even unintended (e.g. Spaans and Zonneveld's chapter on the southern Randstad) processes involving various actors at multiple scales. The latter examples reflect not just the pressure on local and regional governments to be more entrepreneurial in their approach to governance, but also the ambiguity of 'the local' in neoliberal policy landscapes (Newman, 2014). The editors stress that outcomes stemming from a given soft space depend on the particular configuration of selectivities involved, yet undoubtedly a theme emerges from the majority of cases that coalesce around pro-growth and competition-based narratives. It may be disingenuous to suggest a simple or direct causal relationship between the proliferation of soft spaces and processes of 'neoliberalisation', indeed the expression of neoliberal logic in the volume's English case studies (notably the post-2010 localism agenda) can be contrasted with the use of soft spaces on the continent, for example in Hamburg (Chapter 3) and the Randstad (Chapter 5) where more informal governance arrangements have been used by the public sector to inhibit unwanted development and advance environmental policies. As a result it remains a matter for debate whether the increased frequency of soft spaces is a symptom or driver of broadly neoliberal spatial policy.

A number of drivers of soft spaces are identified throughout the book. One such driver has been the European Union's desire for transnational working. Walsh's dexterous account of spatial planning in Chapter 9 regarding the inter-jurisdictional, cross-border context of the island of Ireland illuminates how local and regional

boundaries can be at least as significant barriers to the development of genuinely co-operative soft space arrangements as national borders. The prospect of a reactivated hard border (or at least a significant reconfiguration of the current arrangement) between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in light of the UK's withdrawal from the EU has evidently radically altered the context in which this chapter was written; however, the contribution retains its value and may now prove a valuable illustration of how soft spaces can be swept aside by shifts in 'traditional' institutional boundaries.

A further driver of soft spaces has been the recent turn to localism witnessed across Western Europe. Unlike traditional interpretations of decentralisation that seek to empower local or regional levels of government or even citizens and communities, the real benefactors of the soft spaces identified here by the editors are those 'who purport to support development interests, be these private sector leaders directly, government development agencies or representative organisations for particular sections of private capital' (p.229). This may not be surprising given that narratives levelled against statist forms of public policy and *dirigisme* in the name of greater public participation often serve to facilitate processes of privatisation and the mobilisation of expert knowledge (Raco et al., 2016). As the editors recognise, soft spaces can result from either top-down impulses or voluntary bottom-up processes, or a combination of both. However, one shortcoming of the volume overall concerns how private sector actors are often alluded to but are subsequently largely absent from the case studies, despite their increasing involvement in all aspects of governance.

The notable exception is the exploration of the Atlantic Gateway in Chapter 2. Deas et al. adroitly set out the various spatial imaginaries promulgated as a means of better connecting Liverpool and Manchester in North West England since 1974, attempting to create an identifiable and therefore governable territory (particularly relating to environmental management and later economic development). An especially illuminating contrast is provided between the relative consensus achieved around the private sector-led Atlantic Gateway with its emphasis on inducing market-driven growth, and the political disquiet caused by prior, publicly-led incarnations designed to emphasise internal policy co-ordination and inter-governmental co-operation. The discussion of the Peel Group's resuscitation of the Mersey Belt expertly reveals how, in the absence of administrative boundaries, interested parties can mobilise narratives of international 'competitiveness', permeable sectoral boundaries (i.e., co-ordinated public and private sector investment), and 'relational thinking' to further their influence and interests.

Perhaps the key message of this text is the heterogeneity of soft spaces, with variations in their participating actors, scale, duration, aims and outcomes. Returning to the text's six objectives, this heterogeneity does make an overall analysis of the phenomenon particularly difficult. For example, in assessing the outcomes of soft spaces in the concluding chapter, the editors' can only employ a 'broad overview of whether they have made a difference in some way or another' (p.224). Although this does not undercut the significance of soft spaces to contemporary governance, it is hard to escape the conclusion that, valuable though the contributions to this volume are, it may have benefited from a structure based around a typology of soft spaces. For instance, cases might have been grouped by their overriding rationale, such as spaces designed to: advance economic competition (Chapters 3 and 7, the Atlantic Gateway in Chapter 2); develop spatial integration (Chapters 5 and 9); or construct political identities (Chapters 4 and 8). However, this is only a minor objection and does not detract from the valuable insight into how planning is undertaken across a number of international contexts. This volume will be of use to anyone with an interest in contemporary planning practice, but also to those wishing to understand the

increasingly diffused and fragmentary nature of contemporary governance throughout Europe.

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