



Spaces of sustainable development in the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy: An application of the ‘cultural sociology of space’

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable development was introduced as an approach to overcoming growing concerns about consumption and the limitations of the natural resource base upon which society depends. It advocates a system in which economic growth can still occur, but within natural resource limits and such as not to disadvantage either current or future generations. However the implementation of sustainable development has proven problematic due to definitional problems, institutional constraints and unresponsive socio-political systems. This paper examines the mechanisms through which an aspatial policy such as the Australian Government's *National Strategy for Ecological Sustainable Development* is reinterpreted through the recent spatial planning processes of *Lower Hunter Regional Strategy*. This paper applies the cultural sociology of space theoretical framework which considers the dialectical relationship between material practices and the symbolic meanings that people attach to their environment. The framework provides insights into how within this spatial planning process, through a combination of language and representation, spatial practices and power rationalities produce discourses and spaces. Applying the framework also shows how a desired “sustainable future” is achieved through the predominance of land development rationality.

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1. Introduction

The implementation of sustainable development exists in tension with economic growth rationalities. In recent decades there has been an imperative to transform urban and regional spaces such as Newcastle and the Lower Hunter in Australia away from Fordist modes of production into sites of capital accumulation consistent with the “new economy” (Krueger and Gibbs, 2007). This involves the promotion of economic development via the attraction of new industries, greater economic competition, urban entrepreneurialism and the promotion of consumption-based urban and regional landscapes. At the same time there is an imperative to create urban and regional spaces in line with the specific Australian approach to sustainable development through the *National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development* (NSESD) (Australian Government, 1992). Despite the apparent tension, the very regions that are transforming their modes of production into ones consistent with the ‘new economy’ are also promoting their credentials as more sustainable cities and urban regions (Krueger and Gibbs, 2007).

Enacted in 1992, Ecological Sustainable Development (ESD) is a broad aspatial policy framework which involves balancing economic, social and environmental outcomes to “enhance indi-

vidual and community well-being”, “provide equity within and between generations” and “maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems” (Australian Government, 1992). The NSESD is aspatial in the sense that it does not have a specific spatial outcome in itself, rather it is a manifesto that is intended to influence the formulation of legislation, policies and plans, many of which have spatial outcomes.

The concept of sustainability is such that it can be moulded into forms that fit existing belief systems (McManus, 1996). Thus rather than implementing stronger forms of sustainable development that might consider resource availability, consumption patterns and the capacity of ecosystems to act as sinks, weaker forms of sustainability have been adopted that involve the protection of certain natural systems, substitution of natural capital and new types of consumption (Carter, 2001). The transformation of urban and regional spaces to meet the challenges of sustainable development can be considered, therefore, as another element of the new modes of production associated with the new economy.

There has been a substantial focus on the “sustainable development paradox” (Krueger and Gibbs, 2007) which claims that sustainable development can never achieve the necessary outcome where human activities operate within ecological limits whilst it operates within or is implemented by a capitalist system that also favours economic growth. Related to the sustainable development paradox is the well documented mismatch that occurs between sustainable development policy and its implementation (Coffey,

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2005; Crabtree, 2005; Freeman, 2004; Gibbs, 2000; Unsworth, 2007). However, less attention has been given to the mechanisms through which the ideas of sustainable development are reworked to reflect more normative economic development paradigms. Through an application of Jensen and Richardson's (2004) "cultural sociology of space", this paper explores how the "reworking" of the NSESD occurs in the *Lower Hunter Regional Strategy* (LHRS) through the dialectical relationships between "socio-spatial practices and the symbolic and cultural meanings that social agents attach to their environments" (Jensen and Richardson, 2004, p. 45).

2. Emerging urban spaces and sustainable development

Over the last three decades the competing ideas of the "new economy" and "sustainable development" have emerged to influence the shaping of urban and regional spaces (Krueger and Gibbs, 2007). The new economy, based on high technology sectors and knowledge production, is concentrated in specific localities and has had some measure of success in bringing new prosperity to some of the traditional manufacturing cities particularly within North America, Britain and Europe. Accompanying this emerging economic focus are discourses promoting economic competitiveness and urban entrepreneurialism. These involve creating new identities for cities and regions so they are more able to participate in activities associated with the new economy and hence become sites of new forms of investment (McGuirk et al., 1996; Krueger and Gibbs, 2007; Yigitcanlar and Velibeyoglu, 2008). However this process of economic transformation is not without many adverse consequences. Wheeler (2009) sums up the environmental implications of the new economy in relation to expanding urban regions in North America as involving issues of mobility, land and resources, equity, community, and economic development. According to Wheeler (2009) the development of regions in relation to the new economy not only encourages the redevelopment of inner city areas, but also the expansion of urban areas which in turn encourages the greater use of private motor vehicles and associated traffic congestion, high levels of resource consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, the expansion of cities utilises land resources for new residential, industrial and commercial estates, and also threatens resources such as water, forests, biodiversity and agricultural land.

The drivers for economic competitiveness also tend to cause uneven development between regions and within regions with some regions treated as the "engines" of economic growth (Whitehead, 2007) whereas other regions are not considered to be making a substantial contribution or are perceived as being in a supporting capacity. There are also social and community issues, as planning for neighbourhood or local areas has been increasingly occurring at regional scales (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009). The connections of existing communities to place and local identity have arguably been assigned a lower priority compared to the interests of business elites who seek to redevelop urban space or regions into forms that are more likely to attract capital. In these circumstances the form and function of existing urban areas are problematised and re-positioned in terms of their potential to align with spaces of the new economy.

Sustainable development sought to provide a compromise between economic development, social equality and environmental rationalities, rather than a refocus towards more systemic understandings (Campbell, 1996; Krueger and Gibbs, 2007). Yet at both regional (city-region) and local (urban precinct or neighbourhood) scales, approaches to sustainable development focus on the spatial arrangement of increasingly urbanised regions to achieve more efficient use of space and resources through better integration of activities (Whitehead, 2007). At the regional scale, sustainable

development initiatives tend to include spatial solutions such as urban growth boundaries, city centre revitalisation, protection of environmental quality, green spaces or corridors and transit initiatives (Wheeler, 2009). At local scales these translate into specific elements such as mixing land uses, compact housing, walkable neighbourhoods, transport options, redevelopment of old urban areas or industrial sites and public open space (e.g. Krueger and Gibbs, 2008; Unsworth, 2007; Lindsey, 2003; Szili and Rofe, 2007). Often the approaches involve putting in place elements that are considered to be more sustainable without considering how these will work within the whole urban system.

Sustainable development in urban planning might be better understood as the centre of a triangle of tension between the goals of economic development, environmental protection and social equity (Campbell, 1996). While the ultimate goal of sustainable development can only be reached through confronting and resolving the conflicts (Campbell, 1996), in practice such a confrontation is avoided by the segregation of issues. The segregation of issues becomes possible by the lack of conceptual clarity and ambiguity (Evans and Jones, 2008), inadequate agency, institutional and regulatory frameworks (Freeman, 2004; Goodman and Coote, 2007; Wheeler, 2009) and mainstream political institutions geared towards problem management modes and depoliticisation of sustainable development (Counsell and Haughton, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2007).

3. Analytical framework – the cultural sociology of space

I turn now to a theoretical framework called the 'cultural sociology of space'. This framework was devised by Jensen and Richardson (2004) in their analysis of the *European Spatial Development Perspective* and is derived from critiques of the social production of space and power and rationality (Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 1996, 2000; Flyvbjerg, 1998). It considers the relations between socio-spatial practices and the symbolic and cultural meaning people attach to their environment and is based on three dimensions: socio-spatial/material practices, symbolic meaning and the politics of scale. The first dimension, spatial practices, is based on the notion that social relations operate within a realm of spatialities that are socially constructed (Jensen and Richardson, 2004, p. 45). These practices can include: planning maps, assessment criteria, priority lists and planning principles in that they constitute spatial privileging processes which construct particular forms of knowledge about space and create a legitimate basis for action. Yet they also operate within power relations and create the institutional environments "within which symbolised spaces are produced and attributed meaning" (Jensen and Richardson, 2004, p. 47).

Social agents also appropriate and give significance to space by attributing meaning to particular spaces through symbolism and representation (Jensen and Richardson, 2004). This use of representation and symbolic meaning reflects power relations, as it allows certain aspects of the material world to be brought into the foreground, while other aspects are left in the background or excluded. The forms of representation that are particularly relevant to spatial planning include the use of language and map infographics. These influences the way space is perceived in order to progress particular interests.

The politics of scale is the third dimension to the framework and is concerned with how spatial practices and representation are manifested at specific spatial scales. Through this dimension the "cultural sociology of space is sensitive to the way social agents relate to spaces and places in terms of identification" (Richardson and Jensen, 2003, p. 13). Thus social agents may utilise a range of scales from the body to the global in a way that is fluid and subject

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