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Book Review

Willem Salet

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Mike Raco, *Building Sustainable Communities: Spatial Policy and Labour Mobility in Post-War Britain*, The Policy Press, Bristol, 2007, p. 267, ISBN 9781861347435

Although the metaphorical title of Mike Raco's newest book seems to promise an exploration of the ecological potential of communities, the subtitle immediately clarifies his real intention: to examine the mobility of labour in post-war English spatial policies. The book is well structured. After conceptualising sustainable communities with respect to place-making and labour-market-building in the first part, the high points of post-war spatial policy are empirically investigated in two periods: 1945–1979 and 1979–2006. Raco systematically examines the labour policies that were to change the quality of labour in certain places in order to create more balanced communities. Surprisingly, this labour-focused spatial policy appears to be almost absent from the spatial scientific research agenda. Of course, since Alan Scott and in particular Richard Florida successfully injected the urban agenda to promote the 'creative class' and its 'knowledge workers', the meaning of labour cannot be said to have been neglected in spatial research. But Raco's sound empiricism demonstrates the historical differentiation of making spatial policies by binding key workers to urban communities. He analyses the most important episodes of spatial labour policies in England since WW2.

After a conceptual explanation of the coherence of labour and space, the empirical analysis starts in the first stage of post-war spatial policies (1945–1979). During the war, labour had been successfully distributed in order to serve the extraordinary needs of the war economy. After the war, some of these experiences were to be continued for the enhancement of regional growth in peripheral developmental areas. The goals of regional economic development required the relocation of particular types of workers, namely those possessing the necessary skills and entrepreneurial drive to enhance economic growth. Directed mobility of key workers became a crucial instrument of national policies on behalf of *regional development*. At a local level, however, these policies were not without

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controversy. Bringing external key workers into a privileged position on a tightened housing market is not the quickest path to popularity among the local population. Also declaring some jobs as 'key work' creates envy in other branches. The spatialisation of labour policy appeared to be far from uncontested.

The next episode of playing the labour card in spatial policies regards the *new town* policies. New town policies wrestled from scratch with the high ambition of creating a balanced social order. There was a clear recognition that industries and their workers were key objects for the new town policies. Here again, Mike Raco's investigation reveals the sensibility of mobility policies that attempt to seduce selected groups of key workers and entrepreneurs to selected spaces and to get these groups settled in certain new towns. He points at the selective character of place imaginations and at the contested and controversial politics of mobility. Eventually it turned out to be almost impossible to control the actual movements on the labour market, and instead of getting balanced communities the new towns developed far more selectively. The next trajectory in this fascinating voyage of discovery concerns the post-war *emigration* and *immigration* policies. Since the 1950s, migration policy became closely related to the agenda of 'rebalancing' labour markets in expanding areas. Balanced community-building got more political priority in many cities because of the racial and cultural differences of migrants. The visible concentration of immigrant communities in poor urban areas became politically contested and gave rise to spatial dispersal policies. On the other hand, powerful tendencies on the expanding economic market required more unskilled—or relatively low-skilled—hands in order to fill the vacancies that were no longer filled by native workers. Both divergent pressures on the labour market impacted spatial planning. Also the movement of UK migrants to the Dominion territories became subject to spatial planning policies. It appeared to be impossible to prevent the out-migration of persons who were considered key workers of British industry, but efforts were made to prioritise the migration of surplus workers.

In the final stage of post-war spatial policy (1979–2006) *regional competitiveness* became the leading political mission. Regional divergence was no longer considered a problem by the Thatcher government but an outcome of the selection of market processes, which had to be sustained by spatial policies rather than being constrained via redistribution. Labour mobility was conceptualised as a product of market changes and individual choices of workers. In the same spirit the Major government focused on the creation of a reliable investment environment on behalf of entrepreneurship, regional capacity-building and local autonomy. Also the Labour government (Blair) accepted the reality of the modernising economies and embraced the economic conditions of new regionalism. The out-migration of key workers to areas with higher wages was considered as a vital adjustment to economic requirements. The government accepted the regional variation of skills but simultaneously developed a very active skills policy as a vehicle to meet the conditions of international competitiveness. So, in the final post-war stage, all governments moved from the spatial distribution of labour to new strategies of capacity-building within spaces. The movement of labour became to be considered a 'natural' process instead of a vehicle for distribution policy. At the same time however, places were encouraged to develop the qualities that might attract the best mobile workers in extremely competitive circumstances. Whereas the government no longer sponsored the movement of labour, the crucial role of key workers (in particular creative workers) in regional economies had become even more important in new regional policies.

Overall, Mike Raco has produced a very impressive study of post-war labour-related planning policies. Its sound empirical base carries many lessons for contemporary policies. The book unfortunately only demonstrates the English experiences; the findings certainly

deserve a wider international scope. He makes clear that labour policy has been an active part in all episodes of post-war spatial planning, although never as a central focus. Labour is always dependent on its role in economic processes; it does not stand on its own feet. He also demonstrates that the interrelationships between labour policy and spatial planning are far from uncontested. It is highly sensitive stuff and certainly does not automatically lead to sustainable communities. Actually, the metaphorical profiling of 'sustainability' or the 'balancing of places and communities' is often an alibi for a straightforward economic mission to make places more competitive in the outside world. This dependency of labour as a 'social category' on economic power is sometimes a bit neglected in the recent hype in urban strategies to establish favourable conditions for the settling of a 'creative class' in certain places. The spatial differentiation of key workers and creative classes reflects the spatial differentiation of economic specialisation and the interconnectivity of economic networks, rather than the social aims of local and regional policies.

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