



## The relationship between spatial planning and economic competitiveness: the 'path to economic nirvana' or a 'dangerous obsession'?

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# NEOLIBERAL COMPETITIVENESS AND SPATIAL PLANNING: 'THE PATH TO ECONOMIC NIRVANA' OR A 'POST-POLITICAL STRATEGY' AND 'DANGEROUS OBSESSION'?

## Abstract

This paper offers a contribution to contemporary studies of spatial planning. In particular it problematises the relationship between neoliberal competitiveness and spatial planning. Neoliberal competitiveness is a hegemonic discourse in public policy as it (allegedly) provides the 'path to economic nirvana'. However, commentators have critiqued its theoretical underpinnings and labelled it a 'dangerous obsession' for policy makers. Another set of literatures argues that spatial planning can be understood as a form of 'neoliberal spatial governance' and read in a 'post-political' framework that 'privileges competitiveness'. Synthesising these debates this paper critically analyses the application and operationalisation of neoliberal competitiveness in Northern Ireland and Belfast. In focusing on this unique case study - a deeply divided society with a turbulent history - the paper takes the debate forward in arguing that rather than offering the 'path to economic nirvana' neoliberal competitiveness is a 'post-political strategy' and represents a 'dangerous obsession' for spatial planning.

## Keywords

Neoliberalism, competitiveness, planning, politics, economy

## INTRODUCTION

Analysts argue there is 'limited critical commentary' on spatial planning and call for 'urgent critique and reconsideration' (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010, 2012; Newman, 2008). This paper addresses that gap in the literature by problematising the relationship between neoliberal competitiveness and spatial planning. Krugman (1996a, b) famously described competitiveness as a 'dangerous obsession' amongst policy makers. Hay (2012) came to the same conclusion (although for a different reason) labelling competitiveness a 'virulent obsession' in public policy. Drawing upon the literatures on neoliberalism, competitiveness and spatial planning this paper takes the debate forward in critically analysing the application and operationalisation of neoliberal competitiveness in Northern Ireland and Belfast. In particular, the paper attests that rather than offering the 'path to economic nirvana' neoliberal competitiveness is a 'post-political strategy' and represents a 'dangerous obsession' for spatial planning. The next section unpacks the relevant theoretical debates, defines the research objectives and explains the methodological approach. That is followed by a

theoretically informed analysis of the research findings, and the paper ends with a discussion of the conclusions and contribution to academic thought and planning practice.

## **THEORISING THE HEGEMONIC DISCOURSES OF NEOLIBERALISM AND COMPETITIVENESS, AND THEIR LINKS TO SPATIAL PLANNING**

### *Neoliberalism and competitiveness*

To contextualise this paper it is necessary to discuss neoliberalism: “the extension of market (and market-like) forms of governance, rule and control across – tendentially at least - all spheres of life” (Peck and Tickell, 2006, p. 28). There is an unfettered faith in the market to allocate resources within the economy, and a (rhetorical) hostility towards State intervention. Economic growth is achieved through free trade, a good business climate, privatisation, private property rights, fiscal restraint, financial deregulation, welfare reform and individual freedom. However, the interplay of the global spread of ideas and local contingency means there is no ‘pure form’ or settled geography of neoliberalism (Brenner et al, 2010; Harvey, 2006; Peck et al, 2009). It exhibits multifarious institutional forms, is socially produced and historically and spatially specific; place and politics matter as struggles over its local construction are played out. Peck and Tickell (2006, p. 31) explain: “Neoliberalism was not implemented by some *deus ex machina*, coherent, complete, comprehensively conceptualized, and ready to go...[it] evolved dramatically, and often in unanticipated ways”. As such, it represents “a bewildering array of forms and pathways of market-led regulatory restructuring across places” (Brenner et al, 2012, p. 27). There are also internal contradictions within neoliberalism, most evidently through State intervention creating markets and imposing market rule (Brenner and Theodore, 2002): “a measure of it is essential to bring about the foundation of a liberal economy” (Lovering, 2007, p. 349). Finally, the future path of (‘zombie/living dead’) post-neoliberalism (Brenner et al, 2010) is uncertain following the crisis of ‘casino capitalism’ (Castree, 2010).

Therefore, neoliberalism is “something of a *rascal concept* – promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise, and frequently contested” (Brenner et al, 2012, p. 28). Due to its “contradictory pattern of usage and signification, the life of this keyword has always been controversial” (Peck et al, 2010, p. 96). Experts prefer neoliberalisation which captures the ongoing transformation of ‘actually existing’ neoliberalism. To generate clarity and navigate the epistemological minefield ‘deep neoliberalisation’ seeks to “reconceptualize the process of neoliberalization outside the binary frame of inexorable convergence versus unpatterned heterogeneity” (Brenner et al, 2012, p. 40). Notwithstanding these controversies:

“Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse, and has pervasive effects on ways of thought and political-economic practices to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way we interpret, live in and understand the world” (Harvey, 2006, p. 145).

Developing the discussion further a central plank of neoliberalism is competitiveness (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Brenner et al, 2010; Lovering, 2007; Peck and Tickell, 2006). Bristow (2005, p. 298) explains how global policy elites “who share the same neoliberal consensus, have played a critical role in promoting the discourse of national and regional competitiveness”. Like neoliberalism, competitiveness is a hegemonic discourse within public policy because (allegedly) “improved competitiveness, as we all know, is the path to economic nirvana” (Begg, 1999, p. 795). Porter (1996, 2003) argues economic growth is driven by the competitive advantage of cities, regions and nations that is derived from the productivity of firms; here he translates the theory of competitiveness from micro- to macro-economics. A broader interpretation combines the competitiveness of an economy’s firms and the level of prosperity, wealth and standard of living in the economy (Begg, 2002a; Parkinson and Boddy, 2004; Parkinson et al, 2004). A third definition refers to the attractiveness or quality of place and a city, region or country’s ability to market itself and compete for mobile investment, major events and talented labour (Begg, 1999). This lack of consensus is, however, problematic because “these different conceptions typically get muddled together and confused” (Bristow, 2011, p. 345).

There is a transmission chain of ideas between credible researchers and policy networks (Boland, 2007; Bristow, 2010a). As the ‘doyen’ of the competitiveness discourse Porter exerted huge influence on the global dissemination of theory into policy (Kitson et al, 2004). In the UK Parkinson is an influential voice having conducted reports on the English city-regions (Parkinson et al, 2004), Scottish cities (Hutchins and Parkinson, 2005) and the capital cities of Wales (Parkinson and Karecha, 2006) and Northern Ireland (Parkinson, 2004, 2007). Their work, and others, helped legitimate a competitiveness toolkit involving agglomeration, clusters, knowledge, innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship (Boddy, 2003; Porter, 2003; Scott and Storper, 2003), plus facilitative governance, economic diversity, connectivity and quality of life (Begg, 2002b; Boddy and Parkinson, 2004). However, Kitson et al (2004) question the ‘assumed universalism’ of these economic drivers, stressing they are not applicable everywhere and the importance of place contingency. Therefore, there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to competitiveness, and in many instances the sources of economic success are endogenous factors. In particular, Bristow (2009, p. 27) highlights the danger with policy transfer, pointing to the “implementation failure...of many of the standard policy prescriptions that have come to define the competitiveness discourse”. Moreover, using

the same experts leads cities to adopt the same policies, pursue the same ends and so approaches to economic policy and spatial planning lack originality and specificity.

Beyond the discourse, there is a fixation with competitiveness league tables ranking the performance of cities, regions and countries (e.g. Cooke, 2004; Huggins 2003; Huggins and Clifton, 2011). This reflects the emphasis on 'measure and compare', benchmarking and learning from successful performers (Kitson et al, 2004; Malecki, 2007). For example, the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report 2012-13 places Switzerland top, the UK comes in at position number 8 and Burundi props up the table at position 144 (WEF, 2012). Closer to home, the UK Competitiveness Index 2010<sup>1</sup> ranked the City of London at position number 1 with a score of 603.9 while Blaenau Gwent in South Wales propped up the table at position 379 with a mere 70.2 (Huggins and Thompson, 2010). League tables have significance as they are closely monitored by local politicians, economic development officers and spatial planners (Boland, 2007). Proponents argue they have analytical value in enabling local stakeholders to compare performance against comparator cities, and identify economic deficiencies and priorities for future policy. The objective is to improve league positionality where, to use a football analogy, every city strives to emulate Manchester United rather than Queens Park Rangers<sup>2</sup>. However, Bristow (2005) is rightly critical of the methodological rigour of 'quick and dirty' league tables comparing diverse and therefore non-comparable spatial economies. To compare the City of London with Blaenau Gwent is nonsensical.

### *Neoliberalism, competitiveness and planning*

"Neoliberalism is not anti-planning. There is an important market supportive role for planning. Neoliberal planning involves the capture and reorientation of planning. In other words, planning is both the object and subject of neoliberalism" (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013, p. 10).

The first point to make is there has been a transition from land-use to spatial planning (Albrechts, 2004; Albrechts et al, 2003; Davoudi and Pendlebury, 2010; Faludi, 2010; Healey, 2004). Spatial planning, an 'ambiguous concept' (Faludi, 2002) with a 'variety of definitions' (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010), moves away from narrow regulatory decisions to a broader set of issues. It aims to produce shared principles of spatial development and "new forms of territorially-focused collective action" (Newman, 2008, p. 1371). Central to this is "a focus upon the qualities and management of space and place" (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009, p. 620) and "shaping economic, social, cultural, and ecological dimensions of society" (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010, p.

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<sup>1</sup> The last edition produced by the Centre for International Competitiveness.

<sup>2</sup> Football clubs finishing first and bottom in the 2012-13 English Premier League.

803). However, how this is played out across space varies due to place contingency because “there is scope not simply for discretion but resistance and alternative pathways” (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2013, p. 9). Whether there are alternatives to competitiveness-driven planning is a focal point of this paper.

Connecting to theory, UK planning represents a form of ‘neoliberal spatial governance’ (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009, 2010, 2013; Haughton et al, 2013). According to Lovering (2007, p. 350) “neoliberalism becomes not merely a practicable agenda, but the only legitimate strategy for the twenty-first-century planners”. To maintain its legitimacy planning has evolved through Thatcherism, New Labour and the Coalition Government<sup>3</sup> involving various stages of ‘roll back’ and ‘roll out’ neoliberalism - mostly market driven, but also interventionist (after Peck and Tickell, 2006). This can be seen in the ‘prioritisation of economic growth’, ‘privileging of competitiveness’, ‘marketisation of planning’ and ‘speeding up of planning decisions’. However, growth and competitiveness are not the only meta-narratives for spatial planning: “sustainable development [has] been deployed locally and nationally in ways that bolster rather than challenge the broad political project of neoliberalism” (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010, p. 808). This is part of the emphasis on ‘balanced development’ and ‘win-win-win’ approaches where spatial planning contributes to economic growth, social justice and environmental protection (for a critique see Jackson, 2009).

Developing a point raised above, competitiveness has become a prominent feature of UK spatial planning (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009, 2010; Parker and Doak, 2012; Tewdwr-Jones et al, 2010). Similarly, spatial planning in the European Union also focuses on securing competitiveness in world markets (Faludi, 2010; Tewdwr-Jones and Mourato, 2005; Vanolo, 2010). In a neoliberal interpretation excessive planning regulation stifles enterprise and entrepreneurialism, results in capital flight and inhibits competitiveness. As such, the planning system must be flexible and responsive to the market to attract investment and stimulate growth. Parker and Doak (2012, p. 213) discuss the positive and negative roles planning plays with respect to competitiveness:

“There are at least two applicable dimensions most relevant to planning in terms of competitiveness. The first relates to the role that planners can play in the facilitation of conditions for competitiveness; that is, the role of planning as an *enabler*. The other stems from the critique of planning as a brake or *obstacle* to growth, productivity and competitiveness”.

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<sup>3</sup> At the 2010 General Election no party secured a majority share of the vote so the largest party – the Conservatives – formed a Coalition Government with the minority Liberal Democrats.

The Coalition Government has instituted important reforms to the planning system. In 2012 the National Planning Policy Framework document was culled from over 1,000 pages to just 50. Government argues to deliver competitiveness for the UK economy the planning system, recalibrated to the local scale and away from New Labour's regional apparatus (Harrison, 2012; Haughton, 2012), must be less regulatory and geared towards investment and growth (DCLG, 2012). Indeed, the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, criticised planners as one of three 'enemies of enterprise': "The town hall officials who take forever with those planning decisions that can be make or break for a business - and the investment and jobs that go with it" (cited in Watt, 2011). With this view in mind, the "Coalition Government's Localism agenda took aim at the heart of New Labour's planning system as an emblematic arena of over-regulation, and quickly felled much of it" (Haughton, 2012, p. 99). In this neoliberal context "the planners' role is conceived here to be anticipatory: that is to provide the needs of industry and the economy in a strategic way to ensure efficient land supply and infrastructure provision" (Parker and Doak, 2012, p. 208).

#### *Problematising neoliberal competitiveness and its links to planning*

Despite the hegemony of neoliberal competitiveness (elevated to a 'natural law') it is 'complex and contentious', 'vague and slippery', 'chaotic and confused', 'lacks precision' and is thus a 'far from straightforward' concept (Bristow, 2005, 2009, 2010a, 2011; Kitson et al, 2004; Turok, 2004). Given these theoretical deficiencies Budd and Hirmis (2004) suggest it may represent a 'chimera'. The problem is it means different things to different commentators; as revealed earlier there is no agreed conceptualisation. Equally important is the distinction between *competitive* firms, place *competition* and city *competitiveness*. Too frequently, however, these are carelessly conflated in political rhetoric, policy thinking and spatial strategies. This leads to a problematic transition in thought and praxis from competitive firms seeking to maximise market share to place competition for investment to city competitiveness. However, they are not the same thing in theory or practice, yet they are treated by local stakeholders as though they are or at least natural extensions of one another. Whereas the first two possess some theoretical integrity and practical meaning, the latter poses a questionable approach to public policy. The reason, according to Lovering (2001), is that it is theoretically misguided and practically problematic to extend competitiveness from firms to spatial economies because it loses all conceptual coherence.

Then there is the uncritical acceptance of competitiveness as an unproblematic term by many elected representatives, policy communities and spatial planners (Boland, 2007; Bristow, 2005, 2010a; Budd and Hirmis, 2004). Due to the influence of key academic thinkers and the transmission chain of ideas competitiveness is a powerful and

seductive theory because it will (allegedly) deliver 'economic nirvana' (borrowing Begg's phraseology). On this, Harrison (2012, p. 90) argues "competitiveness...is so deeply embedded in policy thinking". This explains its continued appeal amongst politicians and policy makers as a universal fix to secure growth and prosperity. However, "policy has raced ahead of conceptual understanding and empirical analysis" (Kitson et al, 2004, p. 991) such that "the policy discourse on place competitiveness is equally, if not more, muddled and confused" (Bristow, 2011, p. 347). This is evinced by different stakeholders and even personnel within the same organisation adopting different conceptualisations of competitiveness. The real problem is a lack of critical engagement with the theory of competitiveness and its application to economies and planning.

Krugman (1996a, b) criticised competitiveness as a 'dangerous obsession' amongst policy makers. For him, spatial economies do not function like firms (as argued by Porter), the world's leading countries were not in any substantive manner engaged in economic competition and policies driven by competitiveness would lead to increased protectionism rather than free trade. His message was that "thinking in terms of competitiveness leads...to bad economic policies" (1996a, p. 5). More recently, Hay (2012) criticises Krugman for 'misdiagnosing the dangerous obsession' with competitiveness and highlights the absence of a rise in protectionism. The real danger with policy makers is that they interpret competition in all markets for different goods and services as equivalent to cheap consumer commodities. Therefore, the most problematic aspect of the competitiveness discourse is "a rather different and more virulent obsession of policy-makers - that with cost competitiveness" (Hay, 2012, p. 464). Bristow is another key contributor to the debate in presenting a robust critique of competitiveness and its application to economic policy:

"The discourse which has become so firmly ensconced in regional policy agendas is based on relatively thinly developed and narrow conceptions of how regions compete, prosper and grow in economic terms" (2005, p. 291).

"The use of...[competitiveness] not only betrays a serious failure to understand how local and regional economies actually work, but results in, amongst other things, invidious and damaging place-based competition" (2011, p. 344).

Developing the discussion in a different direction, scholars suggest we have entered a 'post-democratic/political' era characterised by a 'denial of' and 'intolerance to politics' (MacLeod, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2009). Allmendinger and Haughton (2010, 2012) apply this framework to spatial planning whereby, they contend, debate and disagreement is replaced with collaboration and consensus around 'universal themes' such as neoliberal



competitiveness and sustainable development. The problem is these “loosely defined and hard to refute ‘feel good’ issues and labels...in effect deny legitimacy and influence to more radical alternatives” (2010, p. 804). Given this, they argue spatial planning requires ‘urgent critique and reconsideration’ because “consensus-based politics...foreclose[s] all but narrow debate and contestation around a neoliberal growth agenda” (2012, p. 91). Moreover, in this ‘post-political condition’ there is a danger the planning system ‘legitimizes hegemonic strategies’ with a neoliberal focus. For this paper competitiveness is an obvious candidate for further investigation. Collectively, these criticisms and observations provide important framings for the forthcoming analysis.

### *Case study, research objectives and methodology*

This section sets out the case study justification. First, the planning process in Northern Ireland is different to other parts of the UK. Unlike England, Scotland and Wales local authorities do not have executive powers (McKay et al, 2003); instead, planning decisions, following statutory consultation with local government and other stakeholders, rest with the Planning and Local Government Group (formerly the Planning Service) in the Department of the Environment. Second, three decades of ethno-sectarian violence, political discord and social segregation markedly differentiate Northern Ireland and Belfast within the UK (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). More recently, however, in the transition towards a ‘post-conflict’ society Northern Ireland’s polity and institutions have adopted neoliberalism (Hillyard et al, 2005; Horgan, 2006; Murtagh and Shirlow, 2012; Nagle, 2009; O’Hearn, 2008). Given this, Northern Ireland and Belfast provides a distinctive laboratory to analyse the relationship between neoliberal competitiveness and spatial planning. This is particularly pertinent in the context of neoliberalism’s variegated geographies. Nagle (2009, p. 174) explains: “The possible manifestation of neo-liberalism in Belfast would be significant because it is a ‘divided city’, a city divided by the competing ethnonational aspirations of Irish Nationalists and British Unionists”.

Themes have been extrapolated from the literature to frame the empirical analysis; particularly the work of Allmendinger and Haughton (2010, 2012, 2013). The first investigates the transmission chain of ideas on competitiveness into the policy and planning arenas. The specific focus here involves interpreting competitiveness as a ‘post-political’ strategy delimiting debate around a narrow neoliberal growth agenda, and thereby foreclosing alternative and more radical approaches to the economy and planning. The second investigates the influence of competitiveness on economic development and spatial planning. The specific focus here is how planning represents a form of ‘neoliberal spatial governance’ that ‘prioritises growth’, ‘privileges

competitiveness' and provides a 'market supportive role'. The third investigates the fixation with positionality in competitiveness league tables, benchmarking and learning from best practice. The specific focus here is the use of external experts to assess and advise upon competitiveness strategy and league positionality. Adopting these research themes this paper offers 'critical commentary' on the effects of the discourse of competitiveness in Northern Ireland and Belfast and, drawing upon the empirical evidence, questions whether competitiveness represents a 'dangerous obsession' for spatial planning. In so doing, it addresses the need for 'urgent critique and reconsideration' of spatial planning.

The methodology for this paper involved two stages. Initially, the author undertook a desk study analysis of spatial planning documents and economic development strategies for Northern Ireland and Belfast. The purpose was to develop an understanding of the extent to which the theory of competitiveness is evident in public policy. This, along with the literature review, provided the basis for the second stage of the research process. This involved ten face-to-face semi-structured interviews, undertaken between September 2012 and January 2013, with respondents occupying senior positions in spatial planning and economic development in Northern Ireland and Belfast. These interviews, drawing upon a thematic guide extrapolated from the theoretical literature, allowed the researcher to drill down in significant detail and critically analyse the application and operationalisation of competitiveness into Northern Ireland and Belfast.

## **SPATIAL PLANNING IN NORTHERN IRELAND AND BELFAST: AN ACCESSORY TO NEOLIBERAL COMPETITIVENESS**

### *Devolution and neoliberalism*

Contestation over religious denomination, cultural identity and national sovereignty ripped Northern Ireland apart. During the 'Troubles' (1969-1998) communities were, and continue to be, segregated between Catholic/Irish/Nationalist/Republican and Protestant/British/Unionist/Loyalist<sup>4</sup> (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2006). However, the Good Friday Agreement set in motion devolution of power to the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Peace Process (remaining intact despite high profile murders linked to dissident Republicans). Devolution has ushered in a period of (relative) peace, decommissioning of weapons, political dialogue and power sharing between former 'ideological polar

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<sup>4</sup> Political parties reflect these divisions: Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) represent the Protestant community, Sinn Féin (SF, a Republican party) and Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP, a Nationalist party) represent the Catholic community, while the Alliance Party receives cross-community support.

opposites' whereby the Democratic Unionists (right wing free market) and Sinn Féin (left wing socialist) speak from the same neoliberal script (Murtagh and Shirlow, 2012). Interestingly, political groupings have different reasons for subscribing to neoliberalism. For pragmatic Republicans 'the realities of the free market' could benefit disadvantaged Catholic communities, generate equality and pave the way for a united Ireland, for enthusiastic Unionists neoliberal policies lead to wealth creation, economic success and societal normalisation (Nagle, 2009). Notwithstanding this, there is a belief across the political spectrum that free market policies – e.g. inward investment, urban regeneration (see Lovering, 2007) and private finance initiatives - can create peace and reconciliation (Nagle, 2009; O'Hearn, 2008). Hillyard et al (2005, p. 188) mention the "development of a neo-liberal tendency to represent economic reconstruction as being central to conflict transformation in Northern Ireland". However, the specificity of Northern Ireland's neoliberal project is shaped by ongoing dependency on British Government subvention and resource competition between Nationalists and Unionists:

"rather than a complete 'roll out' of neo-liberalism, it has developed in a hybrid form, partnered on the one hand by the over-reliance of the North's economy on state subsidies, and on the other, by the dominance of ethnonational-based politics and economic redistribution" (Nagle, 2009, p. 188).

Through devolution Northern Ireland is, rhetorically at least, moving towards a 'shared society' and Belfast's new image is that of 'post conflict city' (Shirlow, 2006). Indeed, the City Council is busy reinventing Belfast beyond bombs and bullets into a cultural and competitive city. However, periodic acts of violence from dissident Republicans and the (sometimes violent) Loyalist demonstrations in late 2012 and early 2013 over the Council's decision not to fly the Union flag permanently question this rhetoric. Connecting to theory, Murtagh and Shirlow (2012, p. 46, p. 51) explain how devolution, reconciliation and neoliberalism are entwined:

"Devolution in Northern Ireland emerged as a 'signifier' of conflict transformation, political stability, and economic normalisation...offering a progressive brand of consensus politics for a new postconflict order...promoting an increasing neoliberal order... The economic policies of SF and the DUP had, in many aspects, converged in terms of populist rhetoric...It is now difficult to see what the significant differences are regarding the economic and development policies advocated by SF and the DUP".

*Neoliberal competitiveness: 'post-political strategy'*

According to the Programme for Government, 2011-2015, the Northern Ireland Executive's 'top priority' is, unsurprisingly, the economy (OFMDFM, 2011). This is taken forward in the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment's (DETI) Economic Strategy. In her Ministerial Forward, Arlene Foster (DUP) states: "The overarching goal of this Strategy is to improve the economic competitiveness of the Northern Ireland economy" (DETI, 2012, p. 4). Strikingly, competitive, competition and competitiveness appear 69 times, with no definitional distinction, in a document totalling 92 pages. This is an example of the problematic elision between *competitive* firms, place *competition* and city *competitiveness* identified in the previous section. Similarly, the priority of Northern Ireland's economic development agency is "boosting the competitiveness of our economy" (Invest NI, 2011, p. 15). Like the Economic Strategy, Invest NI's Corporate Plan repeatedly cites competitive and competitiveness – appearing on 19 pages of a 20 page document. This reflects the ubiquitification, bordering on overdose, of competitiveness mentioned earlier, and indicates how competitiveness drives economic policy in Northern Ireland.

Respondents from DETI stressed the centrality of competitiveness to economic policy in Northern Ireland, and explained the definition employed in the Economic Strategy is taken from the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report. The latest edition elucidates: "We define *competitiveness* as *the set of institutions, policies, and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country*. The level of productivity, in turn, sets the level of prosperity that can be earned by an economy" (WEF, 2012, p. 4). Using this conceptualisation respondents explained competitiveness in terms of the productivity of local firms and making the Northern Ireland economy more productive (i.e. export-led growth). In addition, moving beyond narrow conceptions of productivity competitiveness also includes more tangible indicators such as well being and prosperity. Likewise, a respondent from Invest NI defined competitiveness as "combining hard end outputs and outcomes, such as GVA and productivity, with standard of living" (Interview, 2013). Therefore, from an economic perspective, competitiveness is primarily aligned to Porterian conceptualisations of competitive advantage, but also has connections to the second broader definition referring to an economy's overall performance.

However, other Government Departments adopted a different interpretation. Senior planners in the Department of the Environment (DoE, headed by Alex Attwood of the SDLP) explained competitiveness as Northern Ireland's ability to compete in global markets and attract investment. Likewise, a planner from the Department for Regional Development (DRD, lead by Danny Kennedy of the UUP) stated: "My understanding of this phrase in the context of what I and my colleagues do is, in simple words, to make our region more attractive to investors" (Interview, 2012). Reiterating this point,

respondents from Belfast City Council argued Belfast needs to ‘compete in a global environment’, ‘construct a positive city narrative’ and ‘distinctive marketable edge’ and ‘distinguish itself in the market place’. These views are more in tune with the third definition of competitiveness pertaining to quality of place and city marketing. Evidently there is not a coherent conceptualisation of competitiveness across Government Departments in Northern Ireland. Indeed, a respondent from Invest NI observed “the problem of clarity over what competitiveness actually is” (Interview, 2013). DETI has the most clearly defined understanding of competitiveness (as the Executive’s economic policy department this is to be expected). In contrast, the DoE and DRD do not adhere to the same interpretation; in fact, they conflate place *competition* with city *competitiveness*: as highlighted earlier, competing for investment is *not* the same as city competitiveness. In this sense, there is not a proper understanding of what competitiveness actually means. This lack of consensus and conceptual confusion amongst Departments exemplifies the muddled understanding of competitiveness within public policy (after Bristow, 2011). With Departments speaking from different starting points this raises concerns over the efficacy of public policy.

It was clear during interviews that competitiveness was *the* unquestioned policy lever in Northern Ireland and Belfast. This can be explained through the use of external experts, primarily Parkinson (2004, 2007) but also Hutchins (2003) and Tyler (2004), who provided important research into economic matters. One respondent also pointed to the politics of normalisation in a ‘post conflict’ society: “They offered important entry points into the academic world to give us kudos; they put a spotlight on Northern Ireland and Belfast and helped normalise us” (Interview, 2012). Over time, these researchers provided a transmission chain of ideas from the academe and created a policy bias towards competitiveness. It is particularly evident in the capital city where a plethora of local strategies are firmly set within the competitiveness discourse and draw heavily on Parkinson’s work (Belfast City Council, 2004, 2005a, b, 2006, 2007). Revealingly, at a recent Irish Planning Institute conference in Belfast the Chief Executive of the City Council informed: “Get the best experts and do what they tell you” (author’s contemporaneous note, 2013). This is an edifying example of the uncritical acceptance of academic advice on competitiveness that is so evident in public policy. The point is, however, had policy makers also sought the advice of more critically thinking researchers, for example Bristow, Hay, Kitson or Turok, this would have generated insightful debate and exchange of ideas. What we have instead is a narrow focus on one approach to the economy. This is captured in another revealing response, this time from a senior economic development officer in the City Council: “We are always competing, trying to achieve global recognition. It’s all about economic development and money. There are no alternatives to competitiveness” (Interview, 2012).

The last sentence indicates a limited and blinkered view of policy thinking emanating from the uncritical acceptance of neoliberal competitiveness. As a 'feel good' concept that important stakeholders subscribe to there is no dissent or disagreement only 'consensus-based politics' around a 'universal theme' (after Allmendinger and Haughton, 2010). Connecting to theory, we can therefore argue that neoliberal competitiveness reflects a 'post-political condition' in Northern Ireland and Belfast as it delimits any serious consideration of alternative economic and spatial policies beyond this 'hegemonic strategy' (after Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012). Contrary to the respondent's view *there are* alternatives to competitiveness in the social economy (Amin et al, 2002), alternative economic spaces (Leyshon et al, 2003), sustainable development (Jackson, 2009), sustainable de-growth (Martínez-Alier et al, 2010) and resilient economics (Bristow, 2010b). Whilst other respondents were not as categorical, there was a definite sense during the interviews that competitiveness was *the* unquestioned lever for economic policy. Some respondents attributed this to the politicisation of economic policy in Northern Ireland (also Barry, 2009; Murtagh and Shirlow, 2012; Nagle, 2009) whereby the mantra of neoliberal competitiveness is handed down from the Executive and Ministers of State and the lower tiers of governance have, as one respondent put it, 'to run with it'.

Of course, in Northern Ireland there are a number of policy initiatives based on developing the social economy (DETI, 2010) and achieving sustainable development (OFMDFM, 2006). However, they do not challenge the hegemony of neoliberal competitiveness. The social economy and sustainable development represent (reasonably) interesting and (relatively) important policy arenas for politicians and policy makers; however, they are peripheral add-ons when it comes to political commitment, policy priority and financial support. With regard to the lack of proper political and policy attention given to sustainable development in Northern Ireland, Barry (2009, p. 62) highlights the dangers of obsessing with neoliberal competitiveness:

"At most, and perhaps this is the thinking in Northern Ireland government, these putative environmental governance and regulatory systems may blunt and manage (rather than transform or challenge), some of the worst environmental excesses of the Executive's orthodox pursuit of 'economic growth and global competitiveness'".

#### *Planning for competitiveness: 'neoliberal spatial governance'*

The Regional Development Strategy (RDS) for Northern Ireland provides the strategic planning framework for spatial development over a 25 year period (DRD, 2001). Like the Economic Strategy the RDS is littered with references to competitive and

competitiveness (they are mentioned on 28 separate occasions), and one of the key Spatial Development Themes is 'Supporting a Competitive Regional Economy'. In particular, emphasis is placed on Belfast as a driving force in the competitiveness of the city, its immediate hinterland (Belfast Metropolitan Area) and Northern Ireland. This connects to contested debates on cities as 'powerhouses', 'engines' and 'motors' of competitive city-regions (Harding, 2007; Jonas and Ward, 2007; Ward and Jonas, 2004). The recently updated RDS reiterates the significance attached to competitiveness. The document emphasises being 'competitive in the global economy', developing a 'competitive advantage/edge', the importance of 'competitive cities and regions', the need to secure 'economic competitiveness' and the growing 'competition between places' - in total competition, competitive and competitiveness are mentioned 23 times (DRD, 2010).

Feeding off the RDS, Planning Policy Statement 4: Planning and Economic Development (DoE, 2010) provides guidance for land use and how urban and rural development can be promoted across Northern Ireland. In particular, it explains the planning system has a crucial role to play in delivering 'economic growth and competitiveness'. More recently, the Planning Act (NI) 2011 seeks to introduce "operational changes to streamline planning processes to allow for faster and more predictable decision making" (DETI, 2012, p. 46). At the time of writing the new Planning Bill is progressing through the Northern Ireland Assembly. Environment Minister Alex Attwood explained that a key element of the Bill aims to reform the planning system so it becomes "fit for purpose and delivers faster processing of planning applications" (Attwood, 2013). Somewhat controversially, proposals intend to place greater importance on the 'economic advantages and disadvantages' of future planning decisions (see Slugger O'Toole, 2013).

Taken together, these documents embed, and thereby legitimate, the hegemony of neoliberal competitiveness in Northern Ireland's planning system. Moreover, they reveal how spatial planning in Northern Ireland, like other parts of the UK, represents a form of 'neoliberal spatial governance' in that it prioritises competitiveness and growth and speeding up of planning applications (after Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013; Haughton et al, 2013). An instructive example of this neoliberalising of spatial planning is encapsulated in this quote from DETI's Economic Advisory Group:

"An essential feature of a business-friendly Northern Ireland is an efficient planning service and appropriate planning framework. Recent changes,

including through the implementation of a number of the IREP<sup>5</sup> recommendations in relation to planning, have resulted in improvements in the speed and predictability of decision making” (DETI, 2011, p. 23).

Evidence of the neoliberalising of spatial planning also emerged during interviews. Economic development officers in DETI and Belfast City Council claimed that excessive bureaucracy and long delays in the planning process frustrates firms and allows rival cities to steal a march in the market. This was also picked up in an important report for Belfast City Council where Parkinson (2007, p. 13) argued “planning was too slow” and not conducive to competitiveness. Interviewees called for more rapid responses from planners when making decisions on planning applications; it was important for planners to make it ‘easier to do business’. The proposed Reform of Public Administration (RPA) in 2015 was seen as a step in the right direction as it will transfer planning powers from the DoE to local councils. This, respondents argued, could provide the conditions for a faster and flexible planning system in Northern Ireland and enhance the ability to attract global capital. At a recent City Council conference the Chief Executive stated: “RPA is important. We need to get the best possible ‘can-do’ planning service we can for Belfast” (author’s contemporaneous note, 2013). However, an interviewee expressed concern that RPA will intensify the scramble for investment and jobs between local authorities; connecting to Bristow’s (2011) reference to ‘invidious and damaging’ inter-area competition.

DoE planners explained planning is about ‘creating certainty and reducing risk’ for investors and developers, ‘guiding activity for investment decisions’ and providing ‘adequate land supply and facilitating growth’. Returning to an earlier point, these views validate the claim that spatial planning provides an important ‘market supportive/facilitative role’ (after Allmendinger and Haughton, 2009, 2010, 2013; Parker and Doak, 2012). However, several planners expressed unease about the pressure heaped upon planning from politicians and DETI with respect to speeding up the planning process and making quicker planning decisions. This, they claimed, is driven by political pressure higher up the command chain to achieve competitiveness. From a DETI perspective, a faster planning system would enable Northern Ireland and Belfast to be competitive in global markets. Planners, on the other hand, felt the growing pressure to authorise approvals could undermine effective scrutiny of planning applications, stifle proper debate and maybe compromise the quality of decisions. Moreover, their role involved balancing the pressure to make quick decisions with the need for robust inquiry of planning applications from the community, voluntary and

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<sup>5</sup> Independent Review of Economic Policy conducted by Professor Richard Barnett, Vice Chancellor of the University of Ulster ([www.irep.org.uk](http://www.irep.org.uk)).



environmental sectors. One DoE respondent suggested that DETI adopted a simplistic view of planning as ‘a drag on the market’ and ‘overly regulatory’ (echoing Parker and Doak, 2012). Not only are there different interpretations of competitiveness between Government Departments, there are different interpretations of planning’s role in achieving competitiveness. An experienced planner was concerned about the impact of competitiveness on spatial planning. In so doing, he reflects Allmendinger and Haughton’s (2009, 2010, 2013) contention that spatial planning is a form of ‘neoliberal spatial governance’ exemplified in the ‘marketisation of planning’:

“Undeniably there is a danger of the drive for quick decisions, it’s all about approvals. Politicians see approvals as the way forward. Planning is in danger of becoming a mere accessory to competitiveness; pressure to make decisions to make the city more competitive. This affects the quality of analysis undertaken and the decisions taken. Planning is undeniably more market driven now” (Interview, 2012).

*Competitiveness league tables: ‘choreography of experts’*

The Economic Strategy explains that performance on competitiveness is important because it is “the international benchmark against which developed economies continue to be measured” (DETI, 2012, p. 9). Currently Northern Ireland does not have a definitive measure of its competitiveness; this is being undertaken by DETI’s Economic Advisory Group who monitors Northern Ireland’s competitiveness relative to other countries. DETI respondents explained they use the Global Competitiveness Index to discover which countries perform better, the reasons why and how Northern Ireland can learn from best practice (after Malecki, 2007). However, one respondent emphasised this did not involve lifting an economic development template from another country: “It’s about learning the lessons and not a cut and paste exercise” (Interview, 2012). However, the statement contains a presumption that what works elsewhere is portable and can be replicated in Northern Ireland. As noted in the literature (Bristow, 2009; Kitson et al, 2004), this is a dangerous presumption to make due to place contingency, highly differentiated spatial economies and implementation failure of policy transfer. Indeed, a respondent from Invest NI questioned the merit of transporting policies from other parts of the world: “What can we realistically learn from New Zealand and Singapore?” (Interview, 2013).

Taking the analysis down a scale, a respondent from Belfast City Council explained the importance of the benchmarking process: “Yes there is an obsession with league tables. It counts if you can measure it. Belfast was excited to be in the league tables so that it can compare itself with other cities” (Interview, 2012). This was reflected in contracting

out consultant reports assessing Belfast's competitiveness performance relative to other cities (see Hutchins, 2003; Parkinson, 2004, 2007; Tyler, 2004). These reports provided SWOT analyses of the Belfast economy and benchmarked its economic and governance performance, using standard competitiveness indicators, with the Core Cities (a selection England's largest industrial cities) and high performing European cities. Moreover, they firmly ensconced economic thinking in Belfast within neoliberal competitiveness even though Tyler's (2004, p. 2) report begins by acknowledging that "competitiveness is a vague concept". As in other places, the consensus amongst respondents was that in today's economic climate there is pressure to quantify progress - 'what matters is what can be measured' - and compare positionality in league tables. In Northern Ireland and Belfast there is an enthusiasm to be benchmarked in league tables; seemingly oblivious to their questionable ('quick and dirty') methodological foundations.

Parkinson's (2007) influential report revealed Belfast lagged behind comparable cities on competitiveness indicators, and its 'Achilles heel' was its contested governance arrangements (lack of trust and political leadership) and entrenched economic problems (unemployment and ill health). Notwithstanding this, the future was bright as he endorsed positive transformation and improvement in Belfast's competitiveness positionality:

"There is much good news. Belfast feels a very different place in 2007. It has been going through a very good period. Belfast is no longer a frozen place or society. Indeed it is hot. Belfast now feels a rather dynamic not static society and place...The 'UK Competitiveness Index 2006' calculates a competitiveness ranking for all UK local authorities. In 2006 Belfast ranked 99<sup>th</sup>. Of the comparator cities only Edinburgh and Bristol were higher. And it moved up eighty one places since 1997, the largest improvement of any of the comparator cities" (p. 14, p. 20).

Parkinson returned to Belfast in April 2012 and May 2013 as a keynote speaker for two high profile City Council conferences. In 2012 he applauded the urban transformation that had taken place and delivered these words of encouragement, tinged with a note of caution: "So far, so good, but more needs to be done on developing Belfast's competitiveness" (author's contemporaneous note, 2012). In 2013 he referred to the latest Cities Outlook Report that presents some positive but also worrying figures on Belfast relative to other UK cities. For example, Belfast<sup>6</sup> has the fourth highest

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<sup>6</sup> Combining Belfast City, Carrickfergus, Castlereagh, Lisburn, Newtownabbey and North Down.

employment rate, but has the lowest rate for innovation, bottom of the table on numbers of people with no skills/low qualifications and is 58<sup>th</sup> (out of 64) with respect to the Claimant Count (Centre for Cities, 2013). He offered this advice on how to improve: “The quality of debate is higher, and the ambitions are higher. The economy is fine, but you need to sort out the politics because trust and governance leads to economic performance” (author’s contemporaneous note, 2013).

We can connect the use of academic consultants to Allmendinger and Haughton’s (2012) identification of the ‘choreography of experts’ shaping cities’ approaches to planning and the economy. Related to this, a broader theoretical point can be made. At the most recent conference on ‘Belfast: Future City’ it was striking that all of the speakers<sup>7</sup> sang from the same neoliberal-competitiveness-growth script. There were no dissenting voices, there was no counter-argument, and there was no debate (at least in the public forum). For example, there was no discussion about what competitiveness actually means, or more importantly what it does not mean, about why and how, if at all, competitiveness is relevant to Northern Ireland and Belfast, about what kind of economy competitiveness will (not) deliver especially for the most disadvantaged people in society. All these big questions are left unanswered because the debate about economic policy and planning’s role within it is foreclosed through an uncritical acceptance of neoliberal competitiveness as *the* dominant policy lever. This conference, like others preceding it also attended by the author, adds further credence to interpreting neoliberal competitiveness as a distinct ‘post-political strategy’ and ‘dangerous obsession’. This type of showcase event, involving powerful local elites, policy makers and academic consultants, effectively *legitimizes neoliberal competitiveness* rather than providing a forum for *debate about neoliberal competitiveness*. Therein lays the problem.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has responded to the call for ‘urgent critique and reconsideration’ of spatial planning. The empirical content of this paper reveals how neoliberal competitiveness is *the* unquestioned lever for economic policy in Northern Ireland and Belfast, while spatial planning plays an important supporting role for neoliberal competitiveness. The hegemony of neoliberal competitiveness globally is replicated regionally in Northern Ireland and locally in Belfast. Although alternatives do exist, they are subordinate to the fixation with neoliberal competitiveness. Related to this, public policy lacks originality

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<sup>7</sup> First Minister Peter Robinson (DUP), Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness (SF), Lord Mayor Gavin Robinson (DUP), Deirdre Hargey (SF) Chair of the Council’s Strategic Policy and Resources Committee, Michael Parkinson (Liverpool John Moores University), Neil McInroy (Centre for Local Economic Strategies) and Alexandra Jones (Centre for Cities).

and specificity. The focus should be on discovering and then delivering what Northern Ireland and Belfast actually *needs*, rather than parachuting in policies from around the world. A second important finding is that there is no coherent conceptualisation of competitiveness between Government Departments in Northern Ireland. Given that Government Departments, who work together to achieve economic growth and job creation, adopt different interpretations of competitiveness is problematic. This can be attributed to the lack of clarity in theoretical debates. The absence of a clear conceptualisation in the literature allows different stakeholders to align themselves with different interpretations. In addition, in a number of cases there is conflation - in economic development strategies and spatial planning documents - between *competitive firms*, *place competition* and *city competitiveness*. This muddled and confused approach to public policy is inherently problematic.

Third, there are contrasting views between planners in the DoE and economic development officers in DETI about the role of planning in delivering city competitiveness. This inter-Departmental discord does not bode well for effective public policy delivery. There is enormous political pressure on planners in Northern Ireland to deliver competitiveness; this, it is suggested, is having damaging effects in compromising the proper role of planning. The 'public good' ethos is being overridden by the obsession to achieve competitiveness and improve positionality in league tables. The result is that planning is rapidly becoming reduced to an accessory to the market, it is there to efficiently authorise ('nod through') applications because what really matters is competitiveness and growth more so than effective scrutiny of planning applications. Generally, the dictates of the market take priority over what is good for the city, its populace and the environment; reflecting the increasing marketisation of planning.

The paper also contributes to theoretical considerations raised by Allmendinger and Haughton (2009, 2010, 2012, 2013). First, it shows that even in deeply divided societies like Northern Ireland and Belfast planning can be read as a form of 'neoliberal spatial governance' that, like elsewhere, legitimates hegemonic strategies, privileges competitiveness and provides an important market supportive role. This paper offers another theoretical insight into the geography of neoliberalism showing that in a 'post-conflict' era of consensus politics neoliberalism has the capacity to penetrate, albeit in a hybrid form, a segregated society to the extent that even a left-wing party accepted the 'realities' of this hegemonic discourse (admittedly to secure its own political interests). The case study demonstrates an important relation between conflict transformation, devolution and neoliberalism and adds another dimension to the variegated nature of neoliberalism. Second, neoliberal competitiveness has become a 'post-political' strategy in Northern Ireland and Belfast in that its dominance delimits debate around a narrow neoliberal growth agenda, and forecloses alternative and more radical approaches to

the economy and planning. The central idea of the transmission chain of ideas between the academe and policy makers – competitiveness delivers ‘economic nirvana’ - has been uncritically accepted by the Northern Ireland Executive, key Government Departments and Belfast City Council. The result is economic policy is narrowly focused on competitiveness. There is no serious or substantive ideological, political or economic counter-argument; there is limited, if any, national or local debate beyond neoliberal competitiveness. In Northern Ireland and Belfast neoliberalism has captured spatial planning and reoriented it to support and facilitate neoliberal competitiveness, thereby confirming that neoliberalism is, in important respects, not entirely anti-planning.

This author shares the serious concerns of others with neoliberal competitiveness. More critical reflection is required within political, policy and planning circles about what they understand by competitiveness, and how it affects what happens in cityspace. The concern expressed here is that influential local stakeholders uncritically accept neoliberal competitiveness as *the* economic policy tool. In so doing, they fail to appreciate its contestation and do not question its limitations. Not only does the hegemonic discourse of neoliberal competitiveness foreclose alternative economic policy agendas, it increasingly shapes and, as demonstrated in this paper, undermines the role of spatial planning. This paper has taken the debate forward in critically analysing the application and operationalisation of neoliberal competitiveness within a unique geographical and political setting. Finally, it shows that rather than offering the ‘path to economic nirvana’ neoliberal competitiveness represents as a ‘post-political’ strategy and ‘dangerous obsession’ for spatial planning in Northern Ireland and Belfast.

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