1. People, planet and place

Naomi Klein wrote in her recent book On Fire, that, if humanity is to survive the ecological crisis, we have to relearn the art of planning, public planning; ‘lots and lots of planning. Industrial planning. Land use planning. And not just at the national and international levels. Every city and community in the world needs a plan for how it is going to transition away from fossil fuels’ (Klein, 2019: 82). And, she makes clear, it must be a plan which contains social protection and social justice as much as environmental protection and climate justice.

I am a town planner. In my childhood I grew up with the 1947 UK Town and Country Planning Act: the act of an extraordinary, reforming British Labour government that lasted a mere six years but completely transformed the economy and society in Britain in a way that has never been completely abandoned.

After taking my planning degree at Strathclyde University I went to the London Borough of Hillingdon to work on the Council’s policy for the land in the Borough designated ‘Green Belt’.1 That experience showed me that what had been learned from the history and theory of town planning as it had developed up to the 1970s could be applied to the planning of policy across a wide range of fields and disciplines. It was that ‘essence’ of policy planning that interested me when I moved to Melbourne to take up a lectureship in planning at the University of Melbourne. But the idea of collective planning by the state on behalf of the people or a nation opened up the great questions of political sociology and economy with which I spent the following 45 years grappling.

I have come to the same conclusion as Naomi Klein. But when she advocates planning, it’s the whole box of questions that she opens. Planning cannot be separated from the society, economy and ecology in which it is embedded. We have to understand the processes, institutions, structures and values which constitute that society. And, I argue, we have to understand who we are as planners. That is what this book is about.

In this last respect, ‘who we are’, I have found, almost to my surprise, how useful is the phenomenology and revolutionary ontology of Martin Heidegger.

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1 Land never to be built over.
I read Heidegger’s *Being and Time* quite recently (in translation).² I have placed an exposition of Heidegger’s most important theses centrally in the book because it relates to other themes such as the ‘role’ of the planner and the relationship between humans and the other inhabitants of the biosphere. It has also made me think differently about culture and authenticity. We live culture, and it is no easy task to break with it. But that doesn’t mean that truth must always be relative to culture. Our ‘Western’ culture, like most others, has been shaped by men. I cannot in good conscience call myself a feminist, but I am uncomfortably aware of how much I am gender blind, how much the philosophy of women has to contribute to our understanding of society, and how readily we men shape the world by the philosophy of men.

This book is an attempt to understand the ‘DNA’, so to speak, of the organism in which ‘planning’ exists. It is the world-spanning organism that humans have built to consume and metabolise the natural environment of our planet for our human purposes – a mycorrhizal network variously called ‘capitalism’, ‘the economy’, or ‘liberalism’. We humans created it, and if we can understand it, we can perhaps also shape it to make it work better for us, and for the biosphere we live in: our terrestrial home.

The world more than ever needs democratic and inclusive planning at every level from the global to the local; planning of the places in which we humans shall live and coexist with each other, and with the ‘more than human’ world of what we call ‘Nature’. To take on that task there is much to be learned from the experience of planning towns, today nodes in global networks of production, exchange and power, and embedded in ecological systems of which 70 years ago few town planners were aware.

One who, more than a hundred years ago, was aware of something like the task we must face was the Scot, Patrick Geddes. I am still inspired by his simple concept of what has to be understood: ‘Place, Work, Folk’, or, as we might say, Environment, Economy, Society. In the last hundred years the bonds of ‘place’ have been weakened so that the Earth must be seen as our terrestrial environment, or more precisely the biosphere. Work and folk have both been transformed into an ever more closely knit global economy and society, yet, socially and economically it is a society as deeply divided as ever, and the division and divisiveness is getting worse. In this book I reinterpret Geddes’s dictum but I put People (‘folk’) first, for unless we address social inequality

² With Heidegger must come a caveat. He joined the Nazi Party and never repudiated his decision. That means he adopted a party whose most basic policies of racism, murder and oppression brutally contradicted his own philosophy of Being. But that fact does not vitiate the profound insights of his philosophy worked out in *Being and Time* any more than Marx’s erroneous political beliefs vitiate his insights into the nature of capitalism.
People, planet and place

and poverty we will not avoid ecological catastrophe. But people need a Place
to live, and that is no longer a place defined by administrative borders.

International mobility has increasingly been chosen by those who can afford
it: the exploration of the immense diversity of places on the planet. For others
mobility has been thrust on them by the need to escape war, poverty and social
breakdown. People who governments like to damn as ‘economic refugees’ are
simply those moving across national frontiers in the way people have always
moved within nations from places of low opportunity (for income, stability,
freedom) to places of high opportunity: typically from rural to urban areas.
Increasingly the heating up of the biosphere is creating climate refugees, and
that kind of mobility will increase dramatically as some places become ever
less habitable. Place, our homeland, is our planet and our locality. Nation states
may over the next hundred years become little more than municipalities.

In this book I have tried to consolidate, update and make more readable
some of the theoretical work I have published since the 1980s. The focus is
explanatory, delving into what is behind what is going on and can be observed
every day. I have occasionally referred to ‘what is going on’ – which is the
evidence of more profound shifts. But space is limited, and the volume of
evidence is enormous. So the book is designed to probe beneath the everyday
experience and make sense of it (as of course so many of the great scholars of
society, as well as an army of planning theorists to whom I am indebted, have
always done). The evidence to test the theory is published nearly every day in
the investigative journalism that can be found in the serious independent media
(the national broadcasters, the independent press such as The New York Times,
The Guardian or, in Melbourne, The Age). Investigative journalism has never
been better, uncovering egregious dysfunction and corruption of politics and
economics in post-industrial democracies. Unfortunately, the influence of such
sources, not of opinion but fact, is waning as more and more people draw their
knowledge of what is going on from the newsfeeds of social media designed to
match what they already believe, or want to hear.

The book moves from the role of planners in society, and the social powers
which both condition and empower planning, to the social structures and insti-
tutions in which planning is embedded – structures of class, politics and regu-
lation. As important to planning as the sources of power to effect change, are
those impediments which prevent benign change: path dependencies and belief
systems, including of course the belief promoted by the foot soldiers of neoliberalism that planning is destructive of freedom or impossible to achieve. That
belief, that government intervention in ‘free markets’ is always wrong, is what
unites the opposition to effective action to avoid social danger. As Oreskes
(2010) has shown, that theme runs across denial of social dangers from tobacco
smoking, asbestos and coal mining to global heating. It is the opposition to
public planning by democratic governments. Ultimately the denial of social danger leads to denial of democracy and the hegemony of capital.

The social forms that denialism embraces are far from the values promoted by the originators of ‘neoliberalism’. What has happened is a particular distortion of neoliberalism. I will use a biological metaphor. There is a kind of fungus that invades the bodies of certain kinds of beetle, feeding on the beetle’s body and colonising its brain. After a while the fungus throws out fruiting bodies from the body of the beetle, slender mushrooms that contain spores enabling the fungus to reproduce itself.

Certain kinds of modern states, particularly those of the Anglo-world, have been invaded and captured by the fungus of certain kinds of big capital. The capital fungus colonises the state without killing it. The state, like the beetle, looks very much the same as it always has. The political leadership of the state has no understanding of the fungus, and if it is conscious of it at all, regards it as an essential part of itself and to be welcomed as beneficial. The fruiting bodies of the capital fungus are everywhere to be seen: intense concentrations of massive towers, motorways cutting through the flesh of cities, investments full of criminal negligence, all resulting in gross inequalities and harms to the environment of citizens and Nature. In planning terms, the state-beetle captured by the fungus must manage politics, suppressing awareness of inequality, poverty and injustice to allow capital to achieve its fruits.

What is the answer to this situation? The captive state, like the beetle, must decay and die. Politics reasserting itself will eventually kill it. But there is the danger of more virulent forms of state control appearing. The answer cannot be to kill the whole genus of state-beetles or capital fungi. The democratic state as it once was is essential as a source of collective power. Capital is essential as the dynamic source of production. But to disempower the state is to disempower the citizen. To me the answer is first to understand the DNA of the benign, democratic state through theory and history, and then to look for state-beetles that have proved resistant to the capital fungus, and are living in a harmonious relationship with capital for the ecological benefit of society.

Finally, a few words on how to read this book. This is a work of political sociology. I intend it will be read by students. So, students, don’t feel you have to read the book from cover to cover. Use the book to help your own thinking and research, dip into whatever you find relevant. Skip over passages you find hard going, ‘academic’ – and there are many because it’s still a work of scholarship. But come back to them. Most importantly, use the book to steer you to original sources. Go to those sources and delve into those you find relevant.

I have tried to avoid putting ideas into compartments: the ‘isms, for instance Marxism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, contractarianism, communitarianism. In general the ‘isms create demarcations and distinctions that make it difficult to see the links and commonalities between and amongst ideas.
Sometimes these are much more important than the differences. Having said that, I cannot avoid using some ‘ism terms: ‘utilitarianism’ because it is so powerful a philosophy of our economy, and ‘feminism’ as it covers such a wide range of philosophical ideas coming from women.

I have not in this ‘introduction’ summarised each chapter. Such summaries are tedious both to read and to write. You can easily find out the topics of chapters from the contents list.

Always be critical and question everything. Pursue truth. But do not expect the whole truth about political society to be revealed by any single theory of any single philosopher: not Adam Smith, nor Karl Marx, nor Friedrich Hayek, nor even those I most admire such as Karl Polanyi and Val Plumwood. Assume that there is likely to be both truth and falsehood in every social philosophy. The same goes for my work too of course. Heidegger had a lot to say about truth in *Being and Time*. The pursuit of truth is central to the idea of democracy and both today are threatened. What is true and what is not true are the burning questions of our time.