

# City

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# Community action, counter-professionals and radical planning in the UK

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*This paper reconsiders the roles of 'counter-professionals' (Goodman 1972) in urban social movements, focusing on the generation of students, activists and planners involved in the UK's community action movement from the late-1960s. The paper therefore provides the first historical account of the ways community action stimulated the development of a distinctive counter-tradition of radical planning in the UK, inspiring experimentation with new, activist roles amongst a generation of young professionals who sought to support community-based movements seeking to challenge the post-war state, develop new models of participatory planning and lay the foundations for a more democratic society. Drawing on oral history interviews with key figures and archival materials from their personal records coupled with analysis of Community Action magazine (1972–1990), we track how many of those involved developed careers 'working the spaces of power' in and against various state projects (Newman 2012). The paper explores three key, interconnected dimensions of our participants' experiences that we argue are central to counter-professional practice and the politics of radical planning: their relations with the state;*

Keywords **planning, community, professionalism, direct action, empowerment**

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*their relations with community-based movements and organisations; and thirdly, the ways these relations shaped the political horizons of community action. Our empirical work concludes by accounting for the relative decline of community action in the 1980s. Through reconsideration of the UK context, the paper contributes to debates about the politics of radical planning and the roles of activist-professionals within urban social movements. It concludes with reflection on the seemingly constrained conditions of possibility for counter-professional practices today and the wider lessons of the community action moment for attempts to build collective alternatives, in, against and beyond the neoliberal state. By reconsidering the role of radical planners in community action in the UK we hope the paper can inspire further debate about the contributions future generations of counter-professionals might make to ongoing movements for urban justice, both in the UK and internationally.*

## Introduction

**I**n February 1972, the first issue of a radical magazine called *Community Action* was published in London. It emerged during a period that had seen action groups organising against state-led redevelopment plans across the United Kingdom, a local expression of the spread of uprisings and urban social movements sweeping cities internationally (Castells 1978; 1983). Orientated towards the struggles of working-class communities, the magazine can be understood as an attempt to build networks of solidarity and support between myriad local campaigns demanding change to urban conditions and a more direct say in the ways the post-war welfare state was shaping their lives.

The founding editorial and advisory boards of *Community Action* included a range of young, politically engaged professionals, motivated by heterodox leftist political commitments. In a brief *Editorial Statement* in Issue 1 they described themselves as ‘a group of planners who have been involved with action groups in both Britain and America’ and went on to explain that ‘our basic concern is that the lives of low-income groups are being planned actively or by default without their agreement or participation’.

The editors of *Community Action* were part of a generation of students and young professionals radicalised by the counter-cultural political atmosphere of the late 1960s and were actively questioning both a paternalistic state and the roles of experts in administering social change (e.g. Illich 1977; Marcuse 1964). Ideas of advocacy planning and community-organising emanating from the United States were influential in framing their critiques of prevailing planning approaches and their own professional training (Davidoff 1965; Marris 1982). Rejecting apolitical claims to technical expertise, they were committed to using their knowledge and skills to pursue radical democratisation and social

transformation (Friedmann 1987), working in solidarity with working-class and low-income communities involved in increasingly high-profile struggles over life and change in cities.

Also borrowed from the US, the term community action<sup>1</sup> signified a new form of place-based and issues-focussed activism, channelling discontents that were not being recognised by established political parties or the trade union movement. It attracted considerable interest, particularly through its early influence in blocking planned slum clearance and motorway building. However, its history has not been afforded much attention in the UK, amidst questions about whether the highly localised and episodic character of community action prevented it from ever becoming a fully-fledged social movement (Ellis 2015).

This paper provides the first historical account of the ways community action stimulated the development of a distinctive counter-tradition of radical planning in the UK, inspiring experimentation with new, activist roles amongst a generation of young professionals. Alliances between middle-class professionals and working-class residents were central to community action (Ellis 2015), however, the roles of those Robert Goodman (1972) labelled *counter-professionals* have not been subject to subsequent research. Filling this gap, we argue that a re-examination of the ways counter-professionals navigated the complex and shifting 'spaces of power' (Newman 2012) between the state and civil society provides important insight into the history of community action. In addition, the article illustrates enduring tensions activist-professionals face when working in support of urban social movements for a more progressive urban politics, with implications for international debate and practice in this space.

In the next section, we introduce debates on social movements as key agents of urban political change. In doing so we pay particular attention to what we characterise as pervasive angst—both then and now—about the roles of 'counter-professionals' within urban movements, particularly through the experiences of advocacy planners in the US. After introducing the research our argument develops from, we historically position the emergence of counter professionals in the UK, going on to consider our participants' experiences in the community action movement through their relations with the state and community-based organisations and the ways these shaped the political horizons of community action. Our empirical work concludes by accounting for the relative decline of community action through the 1980s. Without denying the validity of enduring concerns about counter-professional roles, we argue that it is important to acknowledge their frequently constitutive centrality to community action and that doing so opens up important questions about the politics and potential of radical planning.

## Urban social movements, radical planning and counter-professionals

Urban research has long focused on the structural conditions that give rise to conflict over the reproduction of urban life and the changing forms of social mobilisation and movements they have generated over time (Castells 1983;

Mayer 2006). From the political left, scholarship has focused attention on the potential of social movements as autonomous agents of urban transformation, promoting radical democratisation and social justice 'outside' and against the coercive logics of the capitalist state (Cooper 2018; Purcell 2013).

The social forces constituting urban movements have also been subject to debate, reflecting some unease about their identity. Castells' (1978; 1983) move from a more orthodox Marxist analysis to stress the complex social coalitions that constitute many urban social movements, for example, generated lasting controversy over their class character and resultant relationship to radical politics. Piven and Cloward, similarly, identified unease around their seminal work on poor people's movements, emanating from a sense that: 'The wrong people have mobilised, for they are not truly the industrial proletariat. Or they have organised around the wrong organisational and political strategies' (1978, x).

Work in social movement studies recognises the often prominent roles of new middle-class and professional groups in many movements from the 1960s (Della Porta 2015), perhaps reflecting the rise of new classes of intellectual worker whose knowledge and skills were crucial for developing and transforming capitalist societies (Gouldner 1979). Their involvement has raised important questions about the political interests animating social movements (Cleveland 2003) and the impacts of professionalisation on the radicalism of activist organisations (Mayer 2006; Roth 2016). However, it has also generated an interest in understanding how activist commitments can be sustained in various occupational roles over the life course (Newman 2012; Roth 2016).

The roles of *urban* professionals within social mobilisations and movements has been extensively debated within the planning literature. The emergence of concerted political opposition to modernist urban planning from the 1960s onwards stimulated interest in exploring the potential for socially transformative planning as a: 'counter-tradition to state-centric planning that ... emerged within civil society ... geared not towards societal guidance from a central command post but social transformation from myriad points of resistance ...' (Friedmann 2011, 60).

Contributions to this *counter-tradition* have developed understanding of the role of social movements as insurgent planning actors (Lopes de Souza 2006; Miraftab 2009; Sandercock 1998), expanding the boundaries of planning studies beyond pre-occupation with professional planners working in state institutions to include the radical and insurgent practices of 'community organizers, activists, and everyday citizens as 'planners' working either in collaboration with, opposition to, or completely beyond the purview of state-sanctioned, formal planning processes' (Beard 2003, 15).

In questioning the primacy of professional expertise, however, these developments generated significant 'angst about the relationship between professional identity and radical practice' (Sandercock 1998, 91), leading to both practical and theoretical exploration of the roles that politically motivated, professionally-trained planners might play in support of community-based organisations and urban social movements. In Gramscian terms, we might understand radical planners' disenchantment with a role as 'traditional intellectuals', apolitically guiding societal development within the capitalist state, as leading them to explore possibilities for becoming politically-committed

'organic intellectuals' within movements for societal transformation (Gramsci 2005, 5–14; see Batuman 2008).

US-based ideas of advocacy planning were one of the first attempts to reimagine the role of the planner in an explicitly political frame in relation to social movements. The term was coined by Paul Davidoff (1965) who argued that professional planners should become advocates for client groups in society, developing counter-proposals to represent their interests in pluralist struggles for attention and resources.

Davidoff's idea described what students and community organisers, radicalised through the civil rights movement in the late 1960s (Ross 1976), were already doing on the ground and inspired others to join them. In Robert Goodman's (1972) since neglected formulation they sought to become '*counter-professionals*', operating against or outside the traditional base of professional planners' power in the state, taking the side of low-income 'clients' in struggles over urban renewal.

Despite some initial success in blocking harmful developments, a significant strand of literature reflects the subsequent disillusion and burning out of the energies advocacy planning ignited (Goodman 1972; Heskin 1980; Peattie 1968). Reflecting on his own involvement, Goodman (1972) concluded that counter-professionals were no match for the state-industrial complex driving urban renewal and that advocacy planners had distracted communities' attention from the real causes of their oppression. Where poverty and powerlessness were structural features of racial capitalism, pluralist struggles over state resources would always favour the already powerful (Friedmann 1987).

The experiences of advocacy planners revealed the paternalistic residues underpinning assumptions that external 'experts'—typically white, middle-class males—could represent the interests of low-income groups and communities of colour (Peattie 1968). Not only were communities internally diverse, they also knew more than planners about how to organise themselves politically. Ultimately, it was power rather than professional planning knowledge that they lacked (Sandercock 1998, 89). As Heskin (1980, 60) argued in retrospect:

Advocacy planning had set out to bring the poor out of their anomie through the competence of professionals. For many advocates it had accomplished the reverse process. For many, who had taken up the challenge of bringing about a just society, advocacy planning had meant the learning of the limits of their professional competence. It had meant a heavy blow to their professional egos.

On the ground, variations on advocacy planning emerged as counter-professionals and their 'client' groups responded to these challenges (Corey 1972). These included Paul and Linda Davidoff's 'ideological advocacy planning' that eschewed the need to serve any 'client' directly, instead looking to build a constituency of political support for radical counter-plans (Davidoff and Davidoff 1970; Peattie 1979). 'Indigenous-liberation advocacy planning' meanwhile emerged from the work of Bill Bunge and the Detroit Geographical Expedition, emphasising empowering communities to plan for themselves (Corey 1972).

Despite this plurality of approaches, subsequent theoretical developments sought to deliberately distance radical planning from the idea of advocacy which

for Friedmann (1987, 300), 'in retrospect, was not radical at all' since it involved planners 'mediat[ing] between the state and the people of a given community, shuttling information back and forth ...', rather than empowering people to take action for themselves (Friedmann 2011, 78).

Reflecting the search 'for a radically different role for the urban expert in a radically different context' (Goodman 1972, 51) the debates advocacy planning instigated provide a valuable, though predominantly North American, map of the terrain on which radical planners work when relating to social movements. Beyond burn-out, angst or outright rejection of counter-professionalism, Sandercock (1998, 90–91) identified three trajectories that emerged from these experiences:

Firstly, advocacy planners reverted to more traditional professional roles, looking to improved public participation as a means of better involving the poor and unrepresented. Others sought to work through the state, redirecting resources towards those who had least by allying themselves with progressive political administrations to pursue 'equity planning' (Krumholz 1994).

By contrast, the second trajectory involved 'crossing over' to identify fully as organic intellectuals *within* movements rather than as 'professionals' working *for* them (Sandercock 1998, 100). More recently, this positionality has been central to insurgent planning theory, developing particularly from the practices of urban social movements in the global south where 'professional planners are but one of the actors that shape the contested field of action known as planning... the theoretical object shifts from planner to planning' (Miraftab 2009, 279). As Sandercock (1998) notes, such moves resolve some of the problems identified by advocacy planners but still raise questions about the roles professionals play within insurgent movements.

Finally, Friedmann's (1987) definition of 'radical planning' suggested a third path where planners retain a critical distance whilst working to 'elicit from a potential actor, such as a community-based action group, a commitment to engage in a transformative practice of its own' (2011, 78). By working *for* but not necessarily being *of* the community, the radical planner encourages, 'a view beyond their local sphere of action to the larger structural changes that must be accomplished on a wider scale' (61). In this formulation, planners walk a 'tightrope' (Sandercock 1998, 100), suspicious of the state but stopping short of full organic identification with movement organisations, retaining a degree of professional independence rooted in a wider orientation towards social transformation.

The conditions of possibility for counter-traditional planning roles are always shaped by wider conjunctural dynamics that determine prevailing cycles of urban development, the role of the state and the strength, intensity and political orientation of oppositional movements (Peattie 1979). This means counter-traditional practices are likely to be highly variable across time and space, requiring ongoing negotiation of more or less 'organic' relations of service, support or solidarity with urban movements and their demands. We can therefore understand counter-professional practices as operating within a 'dilemmatic space', requiring ongoing ethical, political and tactical negotiations of positionality and possibility (Honig 1994), in contexts frequently marked by precarious struggle for resources to sustain urban activism (Friedmann 1987).

In the rest of the paper we therefore seek to explore how these debates resonate with the experiences of radical counter-professionals in the UK who worked to support community action.

## Methods

Although a handful of key episodes of community action have been incorporated into mainstream planning histories in the UK, the overall record of this movement and its impacts remains patchy. By exploring the roles of counter-professionals within the UK's community action movement in the 1970s and 1980s we therefore aim to contribute to the wider project of building histories of counter-traditional planning (Sandercock 1998). As such, our research adds a significant new dimension to recent re-assessments of the historical legacies of advocacy planning (Sager 2022), the new urban left of the 1980s (Beveridge and Cochrane 2023; Cooper 2018; Thompson 2021), community action (Ellis 2015) and the search for collective alternatives in British cities (Thompson 2020); sharing with this work a belief that it is timely to recover lessons from the past as a means of informing contemporary urban political movements.

The paper draws on 26 oral history interviews conducted with 'counter-professionals' identified as having been heavily involved in community-led planning and community action across the UK's four nations since the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> The interviews focused on personal stories of involvement, and understandings of the politics, impacts and legacies of their work. We also gathered personal papers and artefacts held by these individuals, including but not limited to letters, memos, leaflets and press cuttings. Although not all were professionally trained planners, they had all built careers through community action and been active in struggles over urban change. Their counter-professional work therefore fitted within a broad definition of radical planning. The material we collected from them was supplemented by reading of contemporary literature, research in the uncatalogued archives of the Town and Country Planning Association, an organisation heavily involved in community-orientated planning from the 1970s onwards, and content analysis of both their house journal *Town and Country Planning* and *Community Action* magazine. Our collective analytical process involved the identification of shared themes across the various sources we gathered and collaborative refinement of these. The examples presented below are used to illustrate these themes as a means of assessing the contributions of counter-professionals and some of the challenges they encountered.

Recognising that our reliance on counter-professionals' own accounts of their work may bias our understanding of their role and influence, we have tried wherever possible to triangulate their perspectives with other sources, providing a sense-check on their interpretations. However, following Newman (2012), we also believe that this biographical/oral historical approach generates a rich record of the ways these actors understood and navigated the shifting spaces of power between community-based movements and state institutions.<sup>3</sup> In particular an oral historical lens moves urban research beyond a focus on individual cases/episodes, enabling a longer view that, in conjunction with the analysis of *Community Action* magazine and other contemporary documentary



sources, moves beyond the initial disillusion with advocacy planning that marked the North American literature. As such, our interviewees' experiences have wider resonance for understanding both the community action movement in the UK and key issues raised by counter-professional practice in service of urban social movements.

## The politics of planning and the emergence of community action into the 1970s

By the time the first issue of Community Action magazine (CA) was published in 1972, struggles against slum clearance, comprehensive redevelopment and new road construction had become increasingly widespread throughout urban Britain (Ortolano 2019; Saumarez Smith 2019). Early issues of CA illustrate this, dedicating significant space to reports from action groups spread right across the country. The often high-handed and secretive ways that change to the built environment was handled by local authorities crystallised wider frustrations with the post-war state machinery and its approach to providing welfare, giving planning struggles a particularly high profile. Community action therefore emerged as a radical counterpart to more politically moderate but equally vociferous demands for change coming from established civic amenity societies and conservation groups (Barker 1979).

Students were prominently involved in many community action initiatives. Sheffield, an industrial city in northern England, provides an illustrative example. In 1968 Geoff Green, a young doctoral researcher, who had been following the development of calls for public participation in planning, began to organise with a working-class community whose terraced homes were facing demolition in the Walkley neighbourhood (Musselwhite 2015).

Looking back, Green recognised a wider, collective mood animating his involvement:

... there was a kind of atmosphere of popular unrest against the way in which the planning system was marginalising the views of local residents... It was challenging post-war comprehensive redevelopment and I was assisting in saving this really nice, old stone neighbourhood from demolition. So it was a challenge to modernism if you like, very much grassroots, outside the state and challenging the state.

Local residents formed an action group, working with Green and students from the University who conducted surveys about neighbourhood housing conditions. Having determined that many wanted to keep their homes, they pressed the local authority to change their plans. Green stood for election to the council as an independent candidate in 1969, splitting the progressive vote at a time when the Labour Party's habitual hold on the city was threatened by poor electoral performance nationally. Despite initial opposition from within 'the Corporation' the campaign eventually succeeded; part of a wave of mobilisations that blocked planned demolitions and road building schemes across the country. Ultimately, amidst soaring costs, the slum clearance machine itself was gradually replaced by a new policy emphasis on renovation.

At the time, Green's involvement was judged crucial in organising Walkley residents:

'Once the first steps were taken a local leadership emerged, but the original stimulus of someone versed in the techniques of social action was necessary' (Hampton 1972, 293; also, Davies 1975). With other students, Green went on to edit two issues of *Grassroots*, a publication seeking to connect action groups forming across Sheffield (including Walkley, Pitsmoor, Sharrow, Darnall, Eckington, Heeley and Parkwood Springs) and make sense of their political significance (Grassroots 1970; Green and Fudge 1971). *Grassroots* contained reports on high-profile cases of community action elsewhere (Covent Garden in London, the Shelter Neighbourhood Action Project (SNAP) in Liverpool and St Ann's in Nottingham) and a positive report on American experiences of advocacy planning, illustrating how various exemplars were circulating, shaping understandings of community action and the radical roles available to students as proto counter-professionals. Versions of *Grassroots* were published elsewhere, including the West Midlands and Nottingham, and local newsletters and community newspapers proliferated. Green became a founding member of Community Action magazine's Advisory Group.

Radical, young professionals were also deeply involved in the development of community action and actively experimenting with counter-professional roles. Dexter Whitfield, one of the founding editors of Community Action, had returned to London from Detroit where he had directly experienced the racial politics of urban renewal, radical community organising and advocacy planning. Frustrated in his day job in Islington Borough Council's planning department, he spent his spare time working with community organiser George Clark's Notting Hill Community Workshop, another high-profile project that played a significant role in shaping debates on community action (see O'Malley 1977).

Reflecting Whitfield's counter-professional positionality, the first issue of Community Action noted the contemporary influence of another idea emerging from the US, where radical planners had become 'guerillas in the bureaucracy' (Needleman and Needleman 1974), working against the interests of their employers:

Increasingly frustration is forcing the radicals to attack the more appalling schemes their departments produce or endorse by direct leaks to community groups or the press. These radicals are often the only source by which community groups can obtain public information which is classified as 'secret' by the bureaucracy. (CA1 1972, 29)

The magazine's launch generated sensationalist media coverage about the presence of 'a people's spy' working in the town hall (Evening News 1972). Brian Anson (1981), a Greater London Council architect-planner who 'crossed over' to organise community opposition to the redevelopment plan he had drafted for Covent Garden, was probably the highest-profile example of this phenomenon at the time.

The spread of community action from the late 1960s reflected a widely-felt structure of feeling that coalesced with particular intensity around the insensitivity of planned redevelopment. Although the configuration of action groups took different forms in different places, the examples of Green, as a

student in Sheffield, and Whitfield, founding *Community Action* whilst working as a ‘guerrilla in the bureaucracy’, are evidence of the roles counter-professionals played in variously initiating, organising and networking action groups opposing planned redevelopment. In the following sections, we consider two key factors that shaped the subsequent development of counter-professional practices: first, the relations between community action and the new professional opportunities that local state responses to it generated; second, the relations between counter-professionals and ‘communities’ as emergent political agents. We go on to consider how these factors shaped the politics of community action.

## Community action, counter-professionals and the local state

The scale and intensity of community action was seen as a direct challenge to the local state. As one contemporary newspaper article suggested:

The rapid growth of community action — of self-help groups over the last few years carries a serious warning for local government. It suggests that the established democratic processes are failing to involve large sections of the urban community. (Watts 1972)

However, as Cynthia Cockburn (1977, 102) argued ‘movement and change in social formations stems from both sides in a class struggle; one move leads to a counter-move’. The state response to this challenge focused on a series of experiments in governing through (or ostensibly with) ‘community’ (Cockburn 1977). Like the radical ideas animating students and counter-professionals, this approach drew inspiration from the US, the Johnson era ‘war on poverty’ and especially the Model Cities programme. In the UK this saw twelve ‘community development projects’ established by the Home Office in 1969 (Marris 1982). The Skeffington Report (1969) into public participation in plan-making also attracted attention well beyond the statutory planning system, occasioning significant debate about the power communities could and should exercise over the ways their lives were being planned. A period of (more and less enthusiastic) local state experimentation with new forms of participation and community development followed.

Whilst some radical groups rejected these initiatives outright, many treated the new spaces they created as potential openings through which to leverage change and build pressure for democratisation. The immediate demands of action groups were frequently directed towards the local state as a key provider of collective services, most notably housing. Seeking to influence local government without allowing their energies to be co-opted produced varied repertoires of contention amongst action groups that often involved ‘shuttling’ between more formal modes of engagement (such as evidence gathering through surveys or formally petitioning local authorities), direct action (including squatting, occupations or protests) and autonomous capacity building (e.g. Cockburn 1977; O’Malley 1977). In this vein, action groups developed relations with the state that oscillated uneasily between confrontation and collaboration, frequently filtered through a lens of mutual suspicion.

The state response to community action also led to the symbiotic emergence of new professional projects organised around the emerging field of 'community work' (Gulbenkian 1973). Various welfare professional groups laid claim to the expertise required to manage these spaces, and the employment opportunities that accompanied them. Community action was sometimes understood as a radical tendency *within* community work (Baldcock 1977) and was associated with the efforts of younger radicals to develop 'community'-orientated alternatives to mainstream practices in professional fields as diverse as social work, education, planning and architecture amongst others.

In some places the professionalisation of these spaces would lead to conscious attempts to distance practices from radical or student political versions of community action. In Liverpool, for example, Des McConaghy had persuaded the nascent housing campaign group Shelter to fund a Neighbourhood Action Project. Working closely with the local state, McConaghy was sceptical of the idea of advocacy planning, arguing it 'tends to ennoble planning schools and enliven planning journals rather than effect any real shift of resources to those in real need' (CA 1972, 27). Keen to distance the project from 'radical activists' (SNAP 1972, 6) McConaghey noted in their final report that:

SNAP has been criticised by some pundits of community action for not depending entirely on the efforts of underprivileged groups to better their situation... One of the easiest tasks in the world is to go into an area teeming with social injustice and stir up people... But it is quite a different matter delivering the goods. (SNAP 1972, 6)

Reflecting different orientations towards community action, radical counter-professionals often maintained distinctions between what they did and less activist forms of community work they associated with more conservative models of community development. What Cockburn (1977) called 'the community package' nonetheless opened up a range of opportunities for them. Geoff Green, for example, left Sheffield to work on the Home Office Community Development Projects, whilst Dexter Whitfield also persuaded Shelter to fund community action projects that focussed on empowerment rather than advocacy.

Various other streams of public funding for community-based projects were also becoming available as state experimentation with governing through community developed. Bob Colenutt, for example, arrived back in the UK in 1972 after working with Bill Bunge in Detroit. Looking to develop a London 'geographical expedition', he quickly connected with others with similar goals. Together they secured funding, first from a university student fund and then from Southwark Borough Council and the Greater London Council, perhaps reflecting the wider fixation of some (particularly Labour) politicians at this time on participation as a 'fix' for protest and dissent (Fielding 2007). Despite organising community groups to oppose official plans for office development, this funding continued until 1979 when political tensions with the Labour-run Southwark Council finally became untenable. Whilst 'guerillas in the bureaucracy' found themselves subject to discipline in the workplace, the availability of such funding reflects the range of opportunities that local state experimentation created beyond formal organisational structures. Although

often short term and precarious, what now seem remarkably free spaces were created where radical counter-professionals could pursue forms of occupational activism by working directly with community campaigns.

Governmental and professional responses to community action created an often-ambiguous terrain, complicating any dualistic separation between the 'invited spaces' of state-defined participation and community development and more radical 'invented' or 'claimed' spaces of insurgent action within civil society (Cornwall 2009; MirafTAB 2009). Rather than focussing on the empowerment of autonomous groups in civil society as contemporary planning theory has often advocated, the politics of community action in the UK played out across the messy and deeply contradictory 'spaces of power' (Newman 2012) these local state responses created.

## Counter-professionals and community empowerment

The language of 'community' deepened the ambiguities associated with these emerging fields of practice. Its fuzziness drew together diverse and locally distinct coalitions of actors across a spectrum that spanned established institutions (faith groups, charities, civic societies), organised political parties, trades unions, and activists. For some of the latter, 'community' became a politically expedient proxy for class struggle and the radical redistribution of power. The demand for 'community' power was a call for change, rooted in emergent forms of collective agency and challenging a felt experience of disempowerment.

Whilst strong local leaders emerged organically in some places to insist on the rights of communities to speak for themselves (e.g. Crummy 1992), the range of actors involved meant it was not always clear whether community action was something being done *to* or *with* the working-class residents whose lives it sought to improve:

It was as if the very novelty of thinking and talking about community action and community projects in England defined the groups the [Notting Hill] workshop related to in terms of those charitable, liberal institutions which also talked *about* community, but were not *of* the community. (O'Malley 1977, 47)

UK-based counter-professionals therefore quickly found themselves facing some of the same dilemmas of representation that troubled their contemporaries in the US. At a time when less than 10% of young people went into Higher Education, university-trained counter-professionals, whatever their politics, were typically middle-class, white, male 'outsiders' in working class and increasingly ethnically diverse inner-city neighbourhoods.

A letter written to Green by Dave Wilkinson (1943–2020) who had been involved as a student activist in St Ann's, Nottingham, but was by then working with the SNAP project, speaks to the challenges counter-professionals experienced in building and sustaining relations with communities:

As a group of outsiders I think we [SNAP] are at a disadvantage. My experiences in St. Ann's which I would imagine are very similar to your group in Walkley, was that as a

group of long haired students who talked a semblance of sense and were able to gather and distribute otherwise unobtainable information, we became closely associated with them [residents], we became trusted friends, most definitely on their side, and perhaps most important of all we had little or no organisation, no hierarchy — we were all at the bottom. SNAP however is a group of hard professionals, we stand above them all, we cannot avoid it, that's how it is, with a posh office, carpet on the floor and a very articulate and volatile director — all I think associated with the nasty inefficiency of the town hall mob.

Many of our respondents recognised the potential for tensions to emerge between those for whom community action was an occupational or activist commitment, and residents whose chief concerns were often more immediate:

It's a dilemma I mean you know, I'm trying to choose my words and not be paternalistic and patronizing but um yeah... I mean what you're trying to do is to take that a few steps further into you know what really was happening, you know what are the principles behind all this... most people... are not interested in that, they're trying to get a better house or you know a better shopping centre or whatever. (Interview with counter-professional)

If Gouldner (1979) saw sections of the new class as a potential vanguard driving political change, the editors of *Community Action* magazine were aware of the need to tread a line between counter-professional leadership and the needs of action groups, as a letter from Whitfield to Green in April 1972 suggests:

The magazine is sold out (3000 copies) but I am not very happy regarding the distribution to action groups themselves. There is a very great danger that it simply becomes a professional thing thus missing the much-needed linkage of communication and aid between professionals and action groups... the first issue was too heavy for some of the action groups.

There is a sense that radical planners sometimes felt they were walking Sandercock's 'tightrope' in working the spaces of community action. This frequently surfaced in discussions of the leadership of local movements. The need for counter-professionals to empower communities to act for themselves became established relatively quickly, leading to a rejection of the paternalistic residues associated with advocacy planning. Several interviewees used the example of refusing to speak on behalf of communities at public inquiries as an example of this commitment. A piece on the Shelter Community Action Team in *Community Action*, for example, was at pains to state:

It must be stressed that the Project is not what is called advocacy planning, which is based upon the professional advocating on behalf of a group or 'client'. Team members will not take leadership roles. (CA7 1972, 11)

However, this knowledge was often learned through hard experience and was recognised as an ongoing tension. John Palmer, another radical planner who worked with the sometimes divisive George Clark in Notting Hill and

wrote the introduction to the UK-edition of Robert Goodman's (1972) *After the Planners* recalled:

Their idea was basically, we're trying to empower local communities to speak for themselves. And that's such a difficult and dangerous path to tread because as I've kind of realised, it's very easy for the activists to become surrogate leaders. And if you're trying to empower communities, that's not what you need to do... The question is, what is the role of the professionals? Who is the community? Who leads? Where does leadership lie?... those are really critically important issues for this kind of work. (Palmer)

Finding a way through these complexities often led to a pragmatic orientation towards the work required to shuttle effectively between the state and communities. Bob Colenutt, for example, recounted how he learned to combine his 'professional' skills with the political experience and local knowledge that existed within community organisations in the search for political influence:

I guess through these activities you develop these kinds of skills... but you've also got to learn the skills of the people as well. But that, that's a kind of an incredible combination. Quote 'technical' skills, which can include things like simply being able to write something quickly, fluently. To being able to interrogate a technical document, which is not the kind of thing that most working-class people would immediately want to do because that's not their background. So you could use those skills plus all their skills in trade union activity, knowing the local area backwards, street by street. Knowing local businesses, understanding how community work and what their needs were and so on, so forth. And that combination could be really, kind of a powerful combination.

For some counter-professionals these experiences generated a strong commitment to the principle of empowerment, leading to experimentation with new participatory planning techniques and modes of organising through deliberative democratic decision-making. Pro-bono 'technical aid' services and centres were established in many cities that sought to ensure professional advice was available to communities on their terms ('on tap not on top' in a phrase coined by Tony Gibson, the founder of the much-used *Planning for Real* approach to participatory planning). Many of these approaches have since been incorporated into the ideology of mainstream professional practices but their roots in the community action movement, and the lived experience of attempts to fundamentally reshape power relations between professionals, the state and low-income groups is no longer widely acknowledged.

## The politics of community action

The community action movement grew from genuine hopes that the post-war settlement could be extended in a socially just and democratic direction. Although counter-professionals' orientations towards politics varied significantly, many working these spaces were motivated by heterodox, left-wing political commitments. These ranged from the anarchism of a figure like Colin Ward at

the venerable *Town and Country Planning Association* through various forms of socialism. In Notting Hill there were strong links between community action and the British New Left. Community organisers George Clark and Jan and John O'Malley had been involved in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the women's and civil rights movements before moving into the area, and other prominent intellectual figures like Stuart Hall and Michael Rustin were actively involved at times (Nishikawa 2014).

If the influence of these energies was various, the coalitions that came together around community action were possibly even more complex, issue-based and locally varied. As a result, its politics were often shrouded in ambiguity. Aware that taking too strong a position could alienate some action groups, the editors of *Community Action* magazine, for example, consciously sought to remain politically unaligned. For activist counter-professionals motivated by radical political ideas this generated dilemmas. As one contemporary analysis argued:

While outsiders may have all sorts of objectives, the objectives of community groups are usually extremely limited. They are limited by what they see as possible within the system. An important question to ask about intervention is does it extend the possibilities and alternatives in peoples' minds or does it limit and contain them? (Woolley 1972)

This question prefigures Friedmann's (2011, 61) injunction for radical planners to raise the consciousness of communities beyond the local, towards wider, structural change. It also resonates with calls from various theorists of radical democracy to build movements through the articulation of universal demands, capable of linking the local and particular into wider counter-hegemonic movements (Purcell 2013). Irene Binns argued along these lines in the pages of *Community Action* in 1973, suggesting that the fundamental aim of issues-based community action should be consciousness raising amongst sections of the working class, who alone are capable of realising fundamental societal change (CA 1972, 13). Woolley, however, also hints at reasons why this often proved challenging in the context of community action that brought diverse coalitions of actors together around particular issues.

John Palmer concluded that the immediacy of community demands tended to define the political horizons of community action, '... what we were trying to do... was essentially reform... inevitably because we were trying to improve conditions'. In this regard, the movement arguably tended to operate as, 'an instrument of participation within general, dominantly institutional objectives' (Castells 1983, 387) rather than transcending the militant particularisms of local struggles (Harvey 1996).

Does this mean, following Friedmann's critique of advocacy planning, that the community action movement and the counter-professionals who supported it were never really radical at all? Ultimately, it is hard to generalise about such a diffuse and locally variable set of practices and the very diverse trajectories they generated (Ellis 2015). A definitive answer would depend on the extent to which credence can be placed on the potential of reformist demands to fit into broader political strategies for urban justice, including the possibility for 'non-reformist reforms' to build capacity and support for more radical demands (Gorz 1967; Hahnel and Olin Wright 2016).



The political compromises evident in community action certainly led some to reject its potential as a site for transformative planning. An anonymous article in a newsletter produced by the short-lived *Conference of Socialist Planners (CSP)*<sup>4</sup> in 1977 captures a sense of disillusion felt by some as the decade wore on:

Have you ever wondered what happened to those chanting students at Grosvenor Square in 1968? ... My belief is that a lot of those idealists are today's disillusioned planners, lecturers and academics. Forced to compromise with a society whose values they hold in contempt, they went into teaching and planning, amongst other jobs, hoping to bring about some sort of change. It was they who promoted the Community Action movement of the early 1970s, thinking there might at least be a means by which the oppressed could unite against and even overthrow their oppressors. Later they saw the whole movement become increasingly fragmented and parochial. (CSP 1977)

Growing interest in Marxist scholarship in the 1970s, including the influential structural analyses developed by radical critics within the Community Development Project, suggested community-based approaches were often little more than coalitions of the weak (Marris 1982, 39); 'gilding the ghetto' when the real causes of urban poverty lay in the organisation of capitalist society (CDP 1977; Harvey 1979).

However, if revolutionaries were left disillusioned with the results of community action (e.g. Anson 1981), many counter-professionals continued to work the spaces of power between the state and community-based groups. Negotiating ideological and political differences they continued to hold onto the prospect that local action could contribute to the building of wider progressive movements. Some, like Jan O'Malley (1977) and Dexter Whitfield, sought to build links between community action and the trade union movement through joint campaigns in areas facing economic change. Both counter-professionals and local activists moved on to a variety of further roles. Some became elected officials in order to shape new approaches from within the Labour Party and local state, whilst others worked through organisations supporting a broad range of community initiatives and campaigns. Taking too narrow a view of community action as local and bounded by particular episodes may therefore limit the scope for seeing how key individuals, ideas, and strategies went on to influence later developments, playing a part in articulating broader solidarities (see Featherstone 2005). Amidst ever-present dangers of appropriating community struggles, counter-professionals frequently acted as conduits for the social learning built up within local campaigns, carrying experience, knowledge and expertise *across* various local struggles over time. They were often therefore well placed to articulate how the particular concerns of local communities connected to a general interest in reform of the post-war settlements.

## Community action into the 1980s

Physical planning issues had a particularly high profile in the wave of community struggles of the early 1970s, drawing a generation of counter-professional

planners into the heart of debates on community action. Although planning and development issues continued to serve as a flashpoint for community mobilisation, this proved cyclical, dependent on the uneven and changing ways that state programmes and market dynamics affected different localities over time. Following property market cycles, for example, office-development led displacement of low-income communities in central urban areas remained a significant issue throughout much of the 1970s. This was most notable in London where it stimulated the production of a series of 'alternative community plans' or 'people's plans' influenced by the contemporary embrace of popular economic planning on the left (CSP 1978).

The pages of *Community Action* magazine track shifts in the focus and intensity of community struggles over time, notably into tenant and resident organising around housing conditions in newly built council housing estates, but also taking in campaigns to defend public services against cuts and later anti-privatisation, anti-racism and gender equality battles amongst a host of other issues. Many counter-professionals took a flexible approach to established professional boundaries when working in support of these community struggles. Palmer, for example, moved briefly into academia before going on to a career in housing, whilst Whitfield became a prominent defender of public services through the Shelter Community Action Teams and later the Centre for Public Services.

From the late 1970s the conditions of possibility for community-based initiatives began to shift, including, as our participants noted, cuts in state funding. Subsequently, many counter-professionals moved back into the public sector, influenced by the idea of working 'in and against' dominant state forms in roles Tim Joubert (2023) has recently described as 'activist state-work' (see London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1979; Newman 2012). The emergence of Thatcherism in the 1980s produced a new wave of urban unrest and grassroots opposition to privatisation and market-led urban development. The new urban left administrations that sought to resist central government in several major cities were influenced by community action in their efforts to break with the paternalism of traditional Labour politics and develop alternative strategies for bottom-up economic development. The Greater London Council (GLC), arguably the foremost reference point for those in opposition to the Thatcherite dispensation, set up the Popular Planning Unit, for example, which was responsible for the People's Plan for the Royal Docks, involving a range of prominent activists and counter-professionals including Bob Colenutt, Hilary Wainwright and Ines Newman. In Sheffield, meanwhile, initiatives to 'build from the bottom' in response to deindustrialisation were developed by David Blunkett, working closely with John Bennington who had worked on the CDP programme and Geoff Green who returned to the city as a policy planner (see Beveridge and Cochrane 2023; Blunkett and Green 1983; Payling 2014). In this way, we can see how counter-professionals with experience in the community action movement went on to play significant roles in the municipal socialism of the new urban left in the 1980s.

Since establishing the first Planning Aid service in the country in the 1970s, under the influence of Colin Ward the TCPA had become an important organisational base for counter-professional planning. For a time in the early

1980s they employed several other prominent figures including Tony Gibson and Brian Anson. As well as coordinating a national network of technical aid centres, Gibson worked on the 'new communities' project in Birkenhead and Lightmoor while Anson and colleagues used government grants to develop Planning Aid in support of community struggles. After taking their 'mobile planning unit' — a campervan — around the country they became involved in the campaign to demolish the Divis flats in Belfast, activity deemed so politically controversial that Planning Aid's funding was subsequently cut.

Much of this work remained reliant on short-term funding. As central control over local government tightened, resources were drying up and with them some of the political hopes that had been reanimated in opposition to Thatcher. The GLC's decision to sell land on the South Bank at a nominal price to the Coin Street Community Builders soon before it was dissolved arguably represented one of the final acts of this political conjuncture. Although community-based struggles continued and many of the counter-professionals we interviewed went on 'working the spaces of power' thereafter (Newman 2012), including through successive waves of state-financed urban regeneration and growing awareness of environmental campaigning, there was a general sense that the political horizons animating the community action moment that began in the late 1960s had passed. *Community Action* magazine stopped publishing in 1990, members of the editorial collective noting a sharp decline in the number of community groups contacting them to share news of their campaigns.

## Discussion: reassessing counter-professionalism through community action?

It is open to question whether community action in the UK should be considered a fully-fledged urban social movement. Ellis (2015) argues it never consolidated into a coherent movement and, as one of our interviewees noted, its highly localised and episodic character make its role and wider significance hard to decipher:

The sort of community action thing, I think it's difficult to know, to say definitively what it's been, because by the very nature of it doesn't tend to get written up... The battles tend to be sporadic, the people tend to get burnt out, they've got other things to do beyond writing academic papers. Not that I belittle that obviously but I find it quite difficult to think, you know, just what this, what's probably been a myriad of local actions, actually amounts to in terms of a body of knowledge and practice and ideas.

Despite that complexity, we have argued it should be seen as a UK counterpart to the urban social movements that emerged to challenge the administration of society in the late 1960s (Castells 1983). Challenging a paternalistic state, community action demanded greater participation in the ways the lives of low-income groups were being planned. If accounting for the impacts of community action is hard, myriad local actions did often lead to local successes, not just

in blocking unwanted developments but also in generating distinctive local cultures that sought to build and sustain community-led alternatives (e.g. as Thompson (2020) shows, SNAP played an important role in institutionalising Liverpool's distinctive tradition of cooperative housing).

Our argument highlights that community action in the UK was never straightforwardly the preserve of amateurs or place-based community groups but was instead a terrain that brought together messy coalitions of actors, often with considerable initiative and input from counter-professionals. Like their North American contemporaries whose experiences have done so much to shape debates about radical planning, an influential group of UK planning's '68-ers' were instrumental in developing more political conceptions of planning that sought to prioritise social needs. Intent on transforming the traditional basis of professional authority, they developed new language and practices as they explored how principles of empowerment could be developed to enable under-served communities to demand improved living conditions and democratic control. If the ideas they helped develop were always subject to cooptation by mainstream professional practices to legitimise exclusionary planning and extractive urban development, its more radical potential should not be forgotten.

Alongside the political and ideological we can discern a structural driver for the role of planners in community action, in the very large amount of state-led redevelopment launched in the 1950s and 1960s. Popular resistance led to a period of active state experimentation that opened opportunities for a generation of politically-motivated counter-professionals to take on new roles, navigating the dilemmas that arose as they learned (sometimes from hard experience) how to serve or work in solidarity with local action groups by variously instigating, organising and connecting local struggles.

The turn to government through community in the 1970s was inspired by US-precedents following what Davies (1975, 85) drily called the 'standard British practice to copy failed American schemes'. It created relatively experimental spaces within which occupational activism was for a time tolerated. Several participants also reflected on the ways their freedom to engage in activist practices was sustained by wider economic and social conditions, including free higher education, a social safety net and the availability of affordable housing in inner-urban areas, sometimes through squatting.

The oral historical approach adopted in this paper has enabled us to explore how counter-professional roles shifted in response to these shifting conditions of possibility and the opportunity structures they created over time. This has enabled us to explore how their commitment to a values-driven or 'missionary' (Hillier 2002) rethinking of professional practice led to a series of innovations in the roles outside experts played in support of community action, whether within the state (guerillas in the bureaucracy, activist state workers), beyond it (activists, students) or in the in-between spaces created by public funding for the 'community package' (technical aid, community work).

Our focus on professional perspectives here is not intended to erase the important contributions of local leadership to community action, or to deny the tensions inherent to professional involvement in community action. We have, however, explored the variety of important roles counter-professionals played

in the development of the movement. Their experiences represent an important counter-tradition of radical planning in the UK, whose role and significance has, until now, remained under-researched. The ways they not only 'worked' but also shaped the dilemmatic spaces of power between the state and social movements is therefore important to record and open up to critical debate. In doing so, we have argued for the active rehabilitation of 'counter-professionalism' as a label to describe the range of roles they played and the variety of forms of occupational activism they engaged in.

The term community action and some of the ideas its protagonists drew upon, from advocacy planning to public participation, were significantly influenced by North American battles over urban renewal and anti-poverty programmes (Marris 1982). By considering counter-professionals' relations with the state and 'communities' we have explored the political horizons of community action, showing that the UK experience resonates with much of the US-derived literature on advocacy and radical planning that has defined debates about the ways planners can work in support of social movements.

In some respects, UK-based counter-professional careers followed similar trajectories to those identified by Sandercock (1998) as the focus of their struggles shifted over time, ranging from disillusion to retreat into more traditional professional roles, through to more activist identification with movements. For many this has involved careers spent walking the 'tightrope' of radical planning practice across activist, professional, political and academic settings. If activism is often associated with the freedoms and conviction of youth, in retrospect it is striking how many of this generation in the UK resisted burn-out and went on to play a variety of different counter-professional roles over the course of their careers (Newman 2012; Roth 2016).

The conditions of possibility for counter-professional practice were different in the UK than those that prevailed in the US, however. Notably, the state played a more central role in both collective consumption and the resourcing of community action. As a result, enduring dilemmas of radical planning practice were configured in different ways, arguably placing more emphasis on counter-professionals' ability to 'shuttle' effectively between the state and action groups. The centrality of the state perhaps made it harder to imagine or realise the radically autonomous forms of planning stressed in US-focused planning theory's increasingly assertive turn towards civil society as a locus of progressive political energy (Rankin and Goonewardena 2004; though see Thompson 2020; Ward 1990). This state-centrality contributed to a stronger focus in the UK on the possibilities of working *in and against* public institutions, navigating complex and ambiguous spaces between the pursuit of immediate reforms and broader political transformations. If aspects of this experience are peculiar to a particular period in British history, they speak to the value of extending scholarship on radical planning beyond definitions largely developed in North America. Further work might profitably consider how experience in other parts of the world might take these debates further.

UK-style community action was never straightforwardly radical in its politics; however, it is important to recognise the broader hopes that animated many of those involved. Not just another planning but another world did, for a time, seem possible. As one counter-professional reflected:

the wider sort of ideological imagination has also changed, I think there was that period in the 1970s when you really thought you could win, you know, or you could at least see a route forward to more than a series of sort of temporary victories.

Ultimately, the same forces that created the conditions of possibility for radical planning practices in service of community action, arguably also created vulnerabilities that contributed to the exhaustion of its energies by the late 1980s. The community action movement sought to channel emerging dissatisfaction with the post-war welfare settlements into demands for community control alongside greater investment in collective services for those in most need. Ultimately, however, those same dissatisfactions were articulated to very different ends by the hegemonic project of the New Right. Public sector cuts, privatisation, and the imposition of managerial discipline over local government spending and professional autonomy led to the withdrawal of much of the funding that had sustained the community action movement and the spaces of counter-professional practice between the state and community groups. The lack of any independent institutional resources, locally or nationally, played a key role in the movement's decline and remains a key struggle for community-based movements today.

Following Sandercock (1998), critical counter-histories have the potential to expand horizons of political possibility by challenging mainstream narratives about city-building. The argument in this paper speaks to growing scholar-activist interest in recovering lessons from urban political movements of the 1970s and 1980s to inform contemporary struggles over the ways the lives of low-income groups are being planned (Beveridge and Cochrane 2023; Cooper 2018; Thompson 2020; 2021). Our analysis has shown that the state was central to community action in the UK, however, we have also shown how community action shaped some of the key experimental state initiatives of the new urban left in the 1980s. Foregrounding the under-examined roles counter-professionals played in developing 'new political subjectivities, strategies and organisational forms' (Thompson 2021, 325) in the spaces between the local state and community action groups opens up important questions about the terrain on which contemporary struggles to rebuild municipal socialist alternatives might be fought (Beveridge and Cochrane 2023; Joubert 2023). The conditions of possibility for counter-professional activism today are constrained by the retrenchment of the local state amidst the wider transformations wrought by decades of neoliberal urbanisation. However, the hope remains that recovering the concept and contributions of counter-professionalism and building a fuller understanding of the UK's rich counter-tradition of radical planning, might yet inspire future generations and ongoing movements for urban justice.

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## Notes

1 For clarity, 'Community Action' (capitalised) refers to the magazine, 'community action' to the wider movement/set of practices.

2 Reflecting unequal access to 'professional' status and spaces at the time, 24 interviewees were white and 20 were male.

3 Our work resonates with *The GLC Story* (<http://glcstory.co.uk/>) and the British Library's work on architects and designers

(<https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/oral-histories-of-architecture-and-landscape-design>), projects testifying to biographical research's richness.

- 4 An off-shoot of the influential and still extant *Conference of Socialist Economists*.

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