

Book Review: Reflecting on Social Infrastructure in Left Behind Places, a book by John Tomaney, Maeve Blackman, Lucy Natarajan, Dimitrios Panayotopoulos-Tsiros, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Myfanwy Taylor



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Social Infrastructure in Left Behind Places is an instant classic which is already generating a level of buzz which points toward it making a profound impact. I commend the authors on producing a highly readable study which threads academic and policy relevance, and offers a well-articulated and replicable set of methodological practices which can be adapted widely. Through a “deep place” case study (p. 15) which traces the historical development of social infrastructure in Sacriston, County Durham, UK, the book draws attention to applied and actionable concerns regarding degraded social infrastructure (and, by extension, degraded capacity for building social capital) within ‘left behind’ places. In my read, the book also brought up larger questions regarding the role of the state in stewarding quality of life in marginal places, which is where I will focus my reflections in this review essay.

The historical perspective taken in the book is powerful not only as a reminder that social infrastructure provision is an ongoing process, but that it is unstable and contingent on local and national political context. During the post-war ‘making’ phase, social infrastructure development in Sacriston was partly facilitated by politics which supported a nationalised coal industry, empowered labour movements, and an expanding welfare state—as well as local politics favouring collectivism and collaboration. Coal companies, regional governments (County Durham), and local actors felt a responsibility to invest in Sacriston, which is to say that it was seen as a place worthy of investment. However, from the late 1960s onward, deindustrialization, strategic and planned disinvestments, and austerity measures generally threatened the community’s capacity to continue to provide and develop social infrastructures. Today, local citizens are re-making social infrastructures, in my read, largely against the odds: by forging “radical hope” (refencing Jonathan Lears, p. 15), and leveraging collective entrepreneurialism and deep affective attachments to place.

Inspiring as the recent history of re-making social infrastructure in Sacriston may be, such affective values are not appropriate policy outputs nor do they provide a scalable policy strategy—which is less a critique directed toward the authors, and more a cautionary note for the policy implications to be drawn from the book. The authors suggest that building policy to *directly* produce such affective and social bonds at the local scale is difficult or futile. Instead they advocate for the state to

play an “enabling” role in the long-range development of social infrastructure: the authors write, “...The role of government shifts to one of enabling the flourishing of social infrastructure by respecting, listening to, resourcing and supporting locally embedded actors and organisations” (p. 16). They recommend accomplishing this through appropriate scaling of governance responsibility, empowerment, and fiscal resources at the local scale.

The authors document several beyond-the-state themes which influence historical processes of making and remaking social infrastructure within a left behind place, including gender, cultural, and religious norms. Yet the book’s narrative of Sacriston’s social infrastructure history also depicts a shifting role of the state and how it relates to its citizens. In the postwar era, the UK and other central governments felt a universalist responsibility for public service provision. The central state was focused on maintaining and, at that time, rebuilding national quality of life. With a nationalised coal industry, stable employment, an empowered labour force, and an expanding welfare state, social infrastructure in Sacriston flourished (p. 54).

It does not seem that many ‘left behind’ places in Western advanced economies were yet in existence at that time. Pike et al. (2023) demonstrate the emergence of the ‘left behind’ term in the 1960s implied that such populations were ‘left behind’ by intensive state welfare and poverty reduction efforts—rather than ‘left behind’ by global capitalism and private capital, as the term often implies today (Sandbu, 2020). Stern and Hall (2015) show how investment in public services in the postwar Keynesian era was justified as a demand-side growth intervention, yes, and also as a moral economy: a responsibility the state held toward its citizens. Such government-citizen relationships during this period produced a politics and citizen-subjectivities where the citizens held the state to account (ibid.).

However as County Durham systematically disinvested in depopulating coal towns in the 1960s (pp. 54-55) and as the national coal industry deindustrialized in the 1970s and beyond, social infrastructures and public services in Sacriston and the surrounding region began to be ‘unmade’—hand-in-hand with the erosion of a Keynesian ethic of a state’s universal responsibility toward its citizens. At this time, perhaps, the seeds of a neoliberal ethic to maximise private sector profits and assume the mobility (versus place-attachment) of labour started to take root. In the authors’ account, the cracks in Sacriston’s social infrastructure

provisioning began to appear in the 1970s (Chapter 6). I cannot help but see this transition to the ‘unmaking’ phase as concomitant with fundamental ideological shifts in the way central and local states relate to their citizens, and the responsibilities governments feel toward society. In this sense, the book’s history traces how a contemporary ‘left behind’ place was actively produced through changing political economic relations in the latter 20th century (Chapter 4). Through and within the transition to neoliberal governance practice, the state actively ‘unmade’ and dismantled elements of the everyday economy and the social infrastructures necessary to maintain communal ties and quality of life. At the same time, the state failed to step in and correct for gaps left by deindustrialisation. Hence, contemporary ‘left behind’ places are not only residual byproducts of globalization as is often suggested, but products of austerity and disinvestment which exist in-their-own-right.

As inspired as I am by recent local, collective expressions of ‘radical hope’ to re-make social infrastructure within Sacriston (Chapter 7), I cannot help but see the ways in which these efforts are swimming against the current of structural conditions which dismantle(d) them. Today, fiscal austerity and rescaling of governance practice renders central state supports for social infrastructure neutral or ineffective at best, or actively un-makes social infrastructure resources at worst (see: Gray & Barford, 2018; Gansauer et al., 2024). So I ask: should ‘hope’ be a radical affective stance? Can citizens/taxpayers/voters not expect their state to allow them to feel hopeful about their futures, no matter where they live?

Addressing such questions at their core requires a fundamental re-fashioning of the relationship of the neoliberal state to its citizens, and requires normative judgements of how a government ought to relate to society. While the history of making, un-making, and re-making social infrastructure presented in the book raises such questions, the authors favor applied, practical, and incremental answers—which are readily transferrable to contexts outside the UK. Their foremost insight is for central and local governments to consider how the state institutions at various scales might “enable” conditions for social infrastructure to flourish (p. 7). Chiefly, this will require ‘un-making’ conditions wrought by austerity: namely, furnishing local efforts with adequate resources and autonomy.

The book also emphasizes the central role of third-sector, collective, and private sector involvement in the construction of social infrastructure (see also: Marks et

al., 2024). Surprisingly, it suggests that central and local states take a relatively diminutive role in social infrastructure's making—if anything the state takes a much more active role in its un-making. Therefore, the policy paradox set forward by the book is that for the state to support the building of social infrastructure, it must create conditions which enable its citizens to, fundamentally, act beyond and potentially against it.

Social Infrastructure in Left Behind Places is hence not only a history of the making, un-making, and re-making of social infrastructure in an English village as it is billed. It is also a history of how changing state and private institutions (re)produce the condition of 'left behind-ness'. In this sense, the book contributes to applied policy debates concerning left behind places while also providing a foundation for grappling with broader ideological and normative questions concerning "what should be done about them" (Fiorentino et al., 2024). Such questions hold implications far beyond Sacriston, and even the UK. *Social Infrastructure in Left Behind Places* highlights the importance of including social infrastructure investment in policy strategies for deprived places, and emphasizes how an interplay between local and central-state governing practices might make-and-remake the spaces where social capital is built. As governments across the G20 consider policy solutions for 'left behind' places, I imagine this book will provide a roadmap of practical solutions just as much as it will provoke open, normative debate concerning how states ought to relate to citizens in marginalized places.

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