

Geographical knowledges and neoliberal tensions: compulsory land purchase in the context of contemporary urban redevelopment

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Abstract. The author examines the materialization of geographical knowledges in relation to the ongoing neoliberalization of urban space where the latter is based on processes of compulsory land purchase. The specific context for the study is two recently planned commercial redevelopments for the south London borough of Croydon in the United Kingdom, and the arguments mustered in support of these proposals. The author identifies and discusses three principal sets of geographical knowledges, which he examines under the headings *symbolic*, *biopolitical*, and *scalar*. In each case, he shows that the knowledges have strong modernist overtones. The paper seeks both to understand and contextualize these historical connections, and to consider the contemporary political work performed by the knowledges in question.

1 Introduction

This paper takes up David Harvey's (2001, page 208) injunction to examine the "dialectical relationship between political-economic and socio-ecological change on the one hand and geographical knowledges on the other." Harvey has long claimed that geographical knowledges are important because they impact, though rarely in a linear, deterministic fashion, on more obviously material historical-geographical developments. He argued this thirty-five years ago (Harvey, 1974), in deconstructing a Malthusian overpopulation discourse that served, in his view, to naturalize capitalist policies and perspectives on unemployment and poverty; and he has argued it much more recently, in positing that globalization processes and policies depend "upon the accumulation of certain kinds of geographical knowledge" (2001, page 208). The objective of the present paper, in turn, is to investigate those geographical knowledges formulated to advance and buttress processes of urban redevelopment.

The importance of geographical knowledges in justifying and underpinning such processes is, of course, already well researched and widely recognized. In the context of what has come to be viewed as the contemporary 'neoliberal urbanism' (Hackworth, 2007) of the Global North, the knowledges that crystallize around mainstream redevelopment agendas have generally been shown to be market-flavored discourses that extol the strengths and opportunities promoting place competitiveness (eg Raco, 2003; Smith, 1996; Wilson, 1996). This is not surprising. But what is arguably surprising, and certainly worthy of consideration, is when substantively different types of knowledge are invoked in the service of what are ultimately similar, accumulation-directed ends. It is on one such instance—the mobilization of distinctly non-market-oriented geographical imaginaries in relation to recent commercial redevelopment plans for the London, UK borough of Croydon—that this paper focuses. It shows that three key forms of geographical knowledge emerged as pivotal, and that all three tally much more closely with the discourses of an earlier, more progressive, distinctly *modernist* urban era than with those ordinarily associated with today's neoliberal nexus.

To account for this apparent anomaly, the paper points to the particular legal processes whereby the Croydon redevelopment initiatives were to be facilitated. For, while the two redevelopment projects I focus on here were both to be owned and operated by private property developers, both, it was apparent from the outset, would require state intervention to get them off the ground. This was because, in each case, some of the land earmarked for redevelopment was owned by parties who opposed selling it in the open marketplace, which meant that the only way the projects could proceed would be for the state (in the shape of the local authority) to *compulsorily purchase* the land in question before selling it on—at cost—to the project developers. Focusing on this process of compulsory purchase can help us to rationalize the seemingly incongruous contemporary manifestation of modernist imaginaries. It can do so because the modernist period that, following Harvey's (1989) tentative chronology, extended through to the end of the 1960s, represented the historical heyday in the UK not only for compulsory purchase per se, but, more generally, for the interventionist state that it presupposes.

Alongside this attempt to place in meaningful historical-geographical context the geographical knowledges marshaled in support of the recent compulsory purchase initiatives in Croydon, I endeavour to discern something of their *effects*. My argument is that these quasi-modernist spatial imaginaries served, wittingly or unwittingly (on the part of their authors), as a twofold form of camouflage. They masked, firstly and most obviously, what the two redevelopment schemes would actually, in large part, be about: namely, *neoliberalization* (England and Ward, 2007), specifically in the shape of the creation of enhanced geographical and social spaces for a property-led and private-capital-dominated local economy. Second, they concealed—or, at the very least, softened—some of the tensions inherent in the use of compulsory purchase towards such ends. The paper locates the main such tension in the fact that the neoliberalization of this local space would necessitate, perversely, *overriding* the philosophical bulwark of neoliberalism that is the institution of private property.

The paper has three main sections. The first provides two elements of background: on compulsory purchase law and its contemporary usage in the UK; and on Croydon, its local politics of redevelopment, and the particulars of the two redevelopment proposals where compulsory purchase orders were invoked, and in relation to which the geographical knowledges analyzed here materialized. The second section looks explicitly at those knowledges, and discusses them under three headings: *symbolic* geographical knowledges; *biopolitical* knowledges; and *scalar* knowledges. The third section of the paper then explores the shared tendency of these knowledges—or imaginaries—to resuscitate much older and more 'modernist' discourses of urbanism, before finally considering the nature of the obfuscations entailed thereby. There follows a set of brief concluding thoughts.

The geographical knowledges identified and discussed in this paper were excavated largely, though not exclusively, from the various official documents generated in the course of the public enquiries held to consider Croydon Council's applications for compulsory purchase of land required for each of the two aforementioned redevelopment projects. These documents were used as the main source of empirical material for a very straightforward reason: because it was during these enquiries that the council offered its fullest public rationalization *for* compulsory purchase. That being said, other documentary sources, such as council planning documents, are also drawn upon as and where applicable. The choice of Croydon and its redevelopment projects as the locus for this specific investigation, meanwhile, was essentially predetermined: the research and analysis presented here form part of a larger study into contemporary commercial property development and financing in that part of London.

2 Background

2.1 Compulsory purchase in the UK

The power to purchase land against the will of the land's owner is one that is available to statutory authorities in many countries around the world, although not in all. In the US, this power is referred to (wonderfully euphemistically) as 'eminent domain'; in Canada, as 'expropriation'; and in the UK and certain other territories, as 'compulsory purchase'. The last is the term used here since the focus of the paper is the UK. Once acquired, the land is sometimes used by the statutory authority doing the acquiring, while in other cases—including those addressed below—the purpose of purchase is to allow the land to be sold on immediately to a private sector entity, with that entity often having instigated the compulsory purchase process through an approach to the pertinent statutory authority. The process of compulsory purchase takes away not only the landowner's decision as to whether or not to sell, but also any owner influence over the timing of sale, the identity of the acquiring party, and often (but not always) the level of remuneration.

Compulsory purchase is, in the UK at least, a veritable legal maze (see especially Denyer-Green, 2005; Roots 2008), with the provisions and procedures for purchase set out in at least six acts of parliament, and with different acts legislating purchase for different end purposes—the 1985 Housing Act, for instance, underwriting the clearance of unfit housing and the bringing of empty properties back into use; the 1980 Highways Act underwriting local road schemes; and the Town and Country Planning Act of 1990 underwriting acquisition for land redevelopment or regeneration. Other relevant acts include the Land Compensation Acts (1961 and 1973) and the 1981 Acquisition of Land Act. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act of 2004 was intended to simplify and clarify the system somewhat—particularly those provisions relating to redevelopment or improvement under the Town and Country Planning Act—but it is not, and was not intended to be, a wholesale recodification of compulsory purchase law.

Where, as is usually the case in the UK, compulsory purchase powers are invoked by local authorities (such powers are also available to the Regional Development Agencies and, more controversially, to the privatized utilities), the process that ensues is, in very simplistic terms, typically as follows. The so-called 'acquiring authority' submits a CPO (Compulsory Purchase Order) to central government, at which point it places advertisements in the local press and serves notice upon all parties with legal interests in the land in question. There then follows a 28-day objection period. If there are no objections, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will confirm the order. If, however, objections are received, the secretary of state will direct a CPO inquiry to be held, which will be conducted by an inspector under instruction from the secretary of state. At the end of the inquiry the inspector submits a report to the secretary of state, who decides whether to confirm, modify, or reject the order. If it is confirmed, the process of transfer of legal interest can begin. The various acts specified above set out rules for compensating all those who have had their interests compulsorily purchased, with monetary compensation and/or the provision of alternative accommodation intended to leave the previous owner in a similar position to that before they lost their interest. Sometimes compensation is voluntarily agreed between the acquiring authority and the vacating party; where the parties cannot agree, the Lands Tribunal steps in.

Perhaps surprisingly, a scholarly literature on compulsory purchase barely exists outside of formal legal (eg Stoebe, 1972) and neoclassical economic (eg Miceli and Segerson, 2007) analysis. There are, to be sure, a number of comparative studies that contrast compulsory purchase frameworks across different territories (eg Kotaka and Callies, 2002); a handful of assessments of the impact of compulsory purchase on

businesses that are bought out (eg Blair, 1980; Thomas and Imrie, 1989); and some strident free-market polemics against compulsory purchase on the grounds that it infringes on individual liberties based on private property rights (eg Paul, 1987). But genuinely *critical* work that analyses compulsory purchase in all its political, social, economic, and cultural contexts, is thin on the ground—particularly, as Tom Allen (2008) recently observed, from a UK perspective. The most notable exception here is the important work of Robert Imrie and Huw Thomas, based on research in Cardiff, Wales, which concluded (especially Imrie and Thomas, 1997) that compulsory purchase tends to perpetuate existing relations of social and economic power (cf Castano, 2008, in the US context). And while, as I note below, Thomas and Imrie (and selected others) have touched on the geographical knowledges mobilized in support of contemporary compulsory purchase agendas, such knowledges have nowhere been placed at the nub of critical scrutiny.

2.2 Regeneration in Croydon, south London

Croydon sits approximately 15 km south of central London. A historic market town, it had developed, by the early 1900s, into a dormitory suburb of London, albeit one possessing significant engineering industries—metal working and car manufacture among others—in its own right. The town's historic trajectory shifted markedly from the late 1950s, however, with a UK property boom and a first wave of office decentralization from central London seeing Croydon develop, over the course of ten to fifteen years, into a major suburban office and retail complex (Phelps, 1998; Saunders, 1983). Of the many large national and international corporations that moved to Croydon during this period, perhaps the highest profile was the food and drinks manufacturer Nestlé, which arrived in 1965 and whose UK headquarters is still located in the town. Today, Croydon is London's most populous borough, with an estimated 340 000 residents.

With relatively little in the way of urban redevelopment occurring *since* the 1960s, however, Croydon's physical fabric and public image have gradually deteriorated. The selfsame tower blocks that were once positively associated with "rapid modernization", and which, with the "glitzy new shopping centres", made Croydon "the envy of neighbouring boroughs", are now seen as millstones: "weathered, graffitied and often empty", and stark symbols of what is widely perceived as "a sprawling, somewhat soulless town" (Goff, 2009), described by one observer as a "tangle of concrete and tramlines [that] pioneered the vertical British brutalist architectural style" (Whittell, 2005).

It is against this backdrop of three decades of relative developmental inactivity, and a worsening public perception of the town, that we need to situate the formulation, especially since the turn of the millennium, of a substantial raft of proposals to regenerate and reenergize the borough's urban core. Typically led by private sector developers, these proposals have in many cases been actively promoted by the borough's council, whose overall plans for regeneration cohered most ambitiously in a 'Vision 20:20' planning framework that it adopted in 2002 and has since been vigorously pursuing. The current paper focuses on two projects that, at varying stages, have been seen by the council as pivotal to delivering on this overarching redevelopment vision. Both schemes, it was clear from the beginning, would require compulsory purchase, and thus both schemes saw the council become intimately involved, even though both would ultimately be owned, developed, and operated by private sector actors. One of the two schemes, where the CPO was confirmed, is theoretically ongoing at the time of writing (though arguably on life support); the other, where the CPO was rejected, is dead and buried. But, as I show in the next section, strikingly similar geographical knowledges crystallized in the service of each.

If the council is the key actor in the local politics of regeneration in Croydon, it goes without saying that other local actors cannot be ignored, and understanding something of the constellation of forces shaping such politics can therefore serve as helpful additional background for what follows. The work of Peter Saunders (1983) is a key—if now dated—touchstone here, for his influential sociological analysis of British urban politics in the 1970s was based almost exclusively on research in Croydon. His analysis conclusively demonstrated the sway, in the local politics of 1970s Croydon, of both business interests and middle-class owner-occupier residential coalitions, and it contrasted this influence with the relative impotence of the borough's significant working-class constituency. More recent work has suggested that the same array of forces largely persists. Nicholas Phelps et al (2006), for instance, point to the various substantive ways in which local business interests, and particularly those constituting the town's "central office-retail complex", continue to "influence local decision-making, especially that centring on Council expenditures and strategic priorities" (page 377). Some of the most important lobby groups in this regard during recent years have been the Local Enterprise Growth Initiative body Croydon Enterprise, the Business Improvement District body Croydon BID, and the business support organization Croydon Business. In May 2009 these three were brought together under a new umbrella organization, the Croydon Economic Development Company.

Among *non*-locally-based businesses, meanwhile, the most influential players have long been, and remain, property developers (who recently established their own local lobby group, the Croydon Developers' Forum), and three have played central roles in the two redevelopment projects that this paper is concerned with. We can now turn to these proposed schemes. First, then, is the scheme that is no longer live, which was for the redevelopment of a 4.41 ha site—generally referred to as the Gateway site—adjacent to East Croydon railway station, which had remained largely undeveloped since the 1970s. The council produced a planning brief for this site as far back as 1998, before adopting a more formal planning policy in 2000, which revealed a 10 000-seat arena to be the centrepiece of the council's vision. The council's partner was to be the property development company Arrowcroft Group, and in 2002 the latter submitted to the council a planning application. After undertaking the obligatory three-year statutory consultation, the council referred this application to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government in 2005. Having considered Arrowcroft's application, the secretary of state then 'called it in' in March 2006—meaning that it was not deemed worthy of immediate confirmation—and this led to a public inquiry being held from September 2007. But this inquiry *also* considered the *council's* parallel application for a CPO, for, critically, neither it nor Arrowcroft owned the Gateway site, the majority of which was held by a partnership between the rival property developer Stanhope and the financial institution Schrodgers. (A partnership, note, which had its *own* development plans that, unlike Arrowcroft's, had already received planning permission.) In mid-2008 the secretary of state announced that she (Hazel Blears) was rejecting both the planning application and the CPO, which signaled the summary termination of the project.

The second scheme, still (just about) alive, is for a 900 000 ft², retail-led, mixed-use development in the town centre, to be called Park Place. Here, until very recently, the council's partner was the property developer Minerva, which secured planning permission for the project in 2004. With the site of the proposed scheme under multiple (mainly small-business) ownership, and with Minerva having been able to acquire only some of these interests in the open market, the council was obliged to apply for a CPO, also in 2004. A public inquiry into this application was held in 2006, with the secretary of state confirming the application in March 2007. These early successes

notwithstanding, the development of the project has been highly problematic and controversial; and with no progress having been made during the two years following the confirmation of the CPO, Croydon Council ultimately decided in May 2009 to terminate its agreement with Minerva on the grounds that the latter—clearly suffering during the recession—was no longer in a position to offer a “viable scheme” (Thomas, 2009). This, then, leaves the council in the distinctly unenviable position of currently drawing up a “revised strategy” for the site.

3 Geographical knowledges and compulsory purchase

3.1 Symbolic knowledges: enacting city visions

In this and the following two subsections of the paper, I argue that three principal forms of geographical knowledge were mobilized by the CPO applicant (Croydon Council) and its development partners (Arrowcroft and Minerva, respectively) in justification of the proposed compulsory purchases of the relevant lands' incumbent owners. The first of these knowledges I describe as *symbolic*; and this symbolism turned, I show, on a set of fundamentally *spatial visions* for what Croydon was and, more pertinently, *could be*. The premise, in short, was that Croydon had the potential—indeed, in some versions, an obligation—to achieve a certain geographical stature, and that only through pursuit of the redevelopment schemes in question, and thus through the compulsory purchases that would enable those schemes, could such stature be achieved.

A somewhat similar mobilization of symbolic spatial visions has been hinted at by Imrie and Thomas (1997) in their work on CPO-based redevelopment of Cardiff in the 1970s and 1980s, where compulsory purchase was championed, *inter alia*, on the basis of a “vision of a new geography” with which certain *existing* “uses and kinds of buildings were incompatible” (page 1411). Indeed, the rationalization of redevelopment through appeal to symbolic geographical potential appears to have been a recurring theme in Cardiff's history, with such rationalization taking on proportions of “vanity, even absurdity”, the same authors (Thomas and Imrie, 1999, page 106) note, in the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation being charged in 1987 with establishing Cardiff “as a superlative maritime city, which will stand comparison with any similar city in the world.” In what follows here, the objective—in the context of the Croydon CPOs—is to provide further substance as to what specific forms such symbolic visions take, and to offer a fuller critical perspective on them.

If we turn first to Park Place, the CPO inquiry saw it repeatedly argued that Croydon had a very particular role or function to play in the wider spatial economy of Greater London; the great risk of *not* confirming the CPO, it was therefore claimed, would be that Croydon's ability to fulfill its predestined role would be placed in jeopardy. To give credence to this imagined spatial function, the council insisted that it accorded closely with that mapped out for Croydon by the London Mayor's office in its influential London Plan of 2004 (Mayor of London, 2004). Thus, with the London Plan having recognized Croydon as the largest of London's ten mainly suburban “Metropolitan Centres” (page 276), the council saw fit to argue to the Park Place CPO inquiry that “major investment in new shopping facilities and retail premises is required if the Town Centre is to perform its Metropolitan Centre function” (Park Place CPO Document 2, page 2). But Croydon, according to the council, was not only London's main Metropolitan Centre; it also had, or *should* have, a special significance in a wider *regional* retail economy, which in turn meant that “investment on the scale envisaged by the Park Place scheme [is] necessary, otherwise the Town Centre would fail in its function as a regional shopping centre” (Park Place CPO Document 2, pages 3–4). In both cases, the imagined geographical role *demand*ed the solution being proposed.

The arguments mustered in support of the council's plan for the Gateway site reproduced much the same spatial symbolism. The plan, it was claimed, had the "potential to provide a development of strategic importance in keeping with Croydon's position as a regional centre for London and the South East" (cited in Croydon Council, 2005, page 6). And yet at the same time, it was clear to Croydon Council that the Gateway CPO application required an even *stronger* geographical symbolism than Park Place. The reason was that the two applications were faced with very different scenarios on the ground: in the case of Park Place a disparate set of small landowners with no collective plans for the overall site; in the case of Gateway, one very substantial landowner (Stanhope/Schroders) with both plans *and* planning permission. As a spokesperson for the Stanhope/Schroders partnership eloquently noted at the Gateway CPO inquiry, this inevitably raised the bar in terms of proof of concept and demonstration of necessity: "A proposal of at best dubious financial and functional worth is being promoted, now not merely as an alternative to one of established and accepted validity in both of those respects, but as one so distinctly superior as to warrant the use of compulsion to enforce its substitution" (Gateway CPO Document 4, page 129). Effectively, the council needed to show that its regeneration objectives for the site could not be achieved by any means *other* than the mooted arena and hence the CPO.

Croydon Council believed that it had found the stronger geographical symbolism thus required in what has come to be known as its "Third City" initiative. Ever since it began putting together plans for large-scale redevelopment in the late 1990s, the council has argued that Croydon deserves 'city' status—alongside the only two existing 'cities' in the capital, namely the City of Westminster and the City of London. It had already had two bids for city status rejected in 2000 and 2002 (Cahalan and Truman, 2008), but, undaunted, it began promoting another bid under the "Third City" banner at the same time as it was championing the arena development for the Gateway site.⁽¹⁾

In yoking its quest for city status to its application for compulsory purchase of the proposed arena site, the council was invoking and drawing upon one of the most powerful and recognizable of all geographical imaginaries. For it was precisely the *obligation*—not, note, merely a desire—to make Croydon a city that necessitated the arena scheme and discounted all others: "Croydon's need to meet its Metropolitan ambitions and to re-brand itself would in Croydon council's clear and consistent position be *best* met by the provision of an arena-led scheme" (Gateway Planning Inquiry Document 1, page 7; original emphasis). All towns, it was implied, have the 'mere' offices and apartments that were on offer from Stanhope/Schroders, whereas *only cities have arenas*. Much like the Swedish Globe Arena described by Allan Pred (1995, page 16) as "a massive monument to consumption", and which has long served as "a device for marketing Stockholm", the arena envisaged by Croydon Council would, the CPO inquiry was told, "*re-brand and change perceptions of* Croydon in a unique way.... The arena would become the motif, the icon, the marketing symbol of Croydon" (Gateway Planning Inquiry Document 2, page 2; original emphasis).

⁽¹⁾ This campaign is ongoing: as Jon Rouse, chief executive of the council, writes on the campaign website (<http://www.thethirdcity.co.uk/>): "Our greatest ambition is to become the third city in London. We are Europe's largest town in a prime position in the South East and recognised as an enterprising Borough with great prospects for development. ... Croydon has set out a plan for the future that creates not just a landmark destination in the south of London but a city in its own right."

Ultimately, however, even this evocative premise proved insufficient to sway the inquiry, and the Gateway CPO application was rejected. Nevertheless, this aspirational use of city-as-geographical-knowledge is highly instructive, not least in terms of sharpening our understanding of the dialectic of geographical knowledge and political-economic or socio-ecological change that Harvey exhorts us to examine. For, typically, the ‘city’ ascription is seen as the dependent variable in this dialectic: acquired by a place, formally or informally, according to the various materialities that it already embodies (size, significance, and so on). Here, by contrast, the aspiration of cityhood—the geographical imaginary that posited Croydon ‘becoming’ a city—is being used to *justify* certain material processes: the removal or denial, that is, of land uses that are perceived *not* to deliver on such an aspiration. We have, in other words, a reversal: in one case the imaginary is a posteriori and passive, in the other, prior and deliberately active.

One other point, too, needs emphasizing before we move on to the second form of geographical knowledge that the CPO inquiries saw mobilized. This is that the knowledges we have discussed here—Croydon as Metropolitan Centre, Croydon as regional shopping centre, Croydon as city—were only spatial imaginaries, and only symbolic. Croydon Council repeatedly argued that the Park Place and arena schemes were needed in order to enable Croydon to fulfill its prescribed roles—for the town “to perform its Metropolitan Centre function”, for instance—and yet for all the council’s efforts to impart to those imaginaries a materiality that would add substance to the CPO claims, even the most superficial of analysis reveals such materiality to be threadbare. Scan the 420-page London Plan in which the capital’s Metropolitan Centres, including Croydon, are identified, and all one finds is a label. There *is* no function, no role, no definitive purpose, despite the council’s attempts to leverage one such. ‘Metropolitan Centre’, like ‘regional shopping centre’ and ‘city’, is purely a symbolic, descriptive classification. The London Plan does not accord to such centres any kind of operative function. The council, in essence, is reifying these terms: imbuing them with agency and materiality, in the service of a profoundly material political-economic agenda of its own.

3.2 Biopolitical knowledges: conferring well-being

The Park Place and Gateway CPO inquiries both saw Croydon Council speak about *regeneration* of the sites in question, more than about reconstruction or redevelopment. This is not immaterial, for in the context of urban policy, the metaphor of regeneration bears important connotations that alternative metaphors lack. The first, argues Robert Furbey (1999), is moral; and in this regard Furbey (page 421) cites Paul Morris on the Thatcherite ‘enterprise culture’ that accompanied the rise of urban regeneration programmes in 1980s Britain: “a moral crusade [going] beyond the economic regeneration of Britain to a revival of the spiritual and national values that she [Margaret Thatcher] associates with Christianity.” With this language in mind, consider the positioning of the arena-led Gateway development as a means to supplant “a vacuum that is often filled by gangs and those seeking to indulge in binge drinking” with a “quality, landscaped public space at the centre of a vibrant mixed use project and anchored by an important cultural offering, to create an appealing, safe, family oriented environment” (Croydon Gateway, 2007). The moral dimensions of such rhetoric are hard to miss, and were in play not just in the Gateway CPO inquiry, but equally in the council’s call for the Park Place CPO to “regenerate the southern end of the town centre” (Park Place CPO Document 2, page 6). Comparable moralizing discourse, interestingly, has been discussed in (once again) the Cardiff context, Richard Cowell and Huw Thomas (2002)

demonstrating that regeneration of Cardiff Bay was deemed a reclaiming of land from 'deviant' uses and users.

However, as Furbey explains, the discourse of urban regeneration has never been only about morality, and the other connotations he identifies—biological and socio-medical—were, in my reading, even *more* strongly apparent in the Croydon CPO applications. Furthermore, they were married with an additional environmental dimension. Thus, the council's argument was that overriding existing property rights to facilitate the two large-scale new developments would not only be morally appropriate—it would be life giving; it would be therapeutic; and it would be sustainable. Such inferences cropped up again and again in the arguments put forward to both inquiries, but were perhaps more notable and prominent in the case of Park Place. This scheme, it was submitted, would infuse Croydon with renewed 'vitality'; it would give the town, in the shape of a regenerated Queens Gardens at the heart of the new Park Place, a resuscitated "green lung"; and it was, as a result, "a vital component of the Council's [overall] strategy for revitalizing and enhancing Croydon town centre" (Park Place CPO Document 1, pages 15, 8, 6).

Yet whether one points to the biological, medical, moral, or environmental aspects of these arguments, one is, in my view, ultimately talking about the same essential thing, which is the placing of *life* and *living* at the heart of political and economic policy discourse. The label typically given to this type of 'vitalized' discourse is, after Michel Foucault, *biopolitics*—by which Foucault meant the insertion of the phenomena of life and living "into the order of knowledge and power, into the sphere of political techniques" (1990, page 142). Once political economy became biopoliticized, Foucault says, "methods of power and knowledge assumed responsibility for the life processes... and collective welfare"; and that is *exactly* the arrogation that we see in Croydon Council's pursuit of its CPOs. 'We' need to be given permission to implement these plans, the council was saying, because the life of the town, and the welfare of those living in it, is *our* responsibility—meaning that all of our political and economic decisions must be made, and can be justified, accordingly.

The biopoliticization of the council's defence of its compulsory purchase agenda was encapsulated in the powerful concept of *well-being*. Indeed, of all the arguments mustered in support of the two compulsory purchase applications that concern us here, the premise that allowing such dispossession and the subsequent redevelopment would foster well-being was, perhaps, the most forceful, the most prominent, and the most frequently repeated. And the notion of well-being was applied not just to Croydon's inhabitants: society, environment, and even economy would, it was claimed, be made 'well' by the schemes in question. Thus, in respect of Park Place: "The Council considers that the Scheme will promote the social, economic and environmental well being of the Borough" (Park Place CPO Document 2, page 5). And in the case of the Gateway proposal: "this development, re-development and improvement is likely to contribute to the promotion and improvement of... economic and social well-being" (Gateway CPO Document 3, page 1).

It is important to note that this local appeal to the concept of well-being did not crystallize in a policy vacuum. Far from it: at least two relevant national acts of parliament had recently placed well-being firmly within the ambit of local regimes of power and knowledge. First, giving local authorities the "power to do anything which they consider is likely" to promote well-being was arguably the principal purpose of the Local Government Act of 2000 (which *required* councils to "prepare a strategy... for promoting or improving the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area") (pages 7, 9). But despite this seemingly unlimited endowment of scope for intervention, the 'anything' referred to in the Local Government Act

remained extremely vague, and it took the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act of 2004 to finally impart *substance* to the powers ostensibly gained by local authorities four years earlier. And that substance was, of course, compulsory purchase, although curiously it was articulated and enshrined in law by way of a bizarre double-negative: a local authority, it was now decreed, “must *not* exercise” its power to dispossess and then regenerate “*unless* they think that the development, redevelopment or improvement is likely to contribute to the achievement of [well-being]” (page 79; my emphasis).

Interestingly, little has been written about this inscription of the governance of well-being into local politics and economics. This absence is particularly surprising when one considers firstly that other countries, such as New Zealand (with its own Local Government Act of 2002), have pursued a very similar course of legislative action to the UK, and secondly that the discourse of well-being increasingly permeates *national* as well as local political economy—UK Conservative Party leader David Cameron asserting in 2006 that “it’s time we focused not on GDP (gross domestic product) but on GWB—general well-being” (quoted in Ferguson, 2007, page 127), and the UK Labour government commissioning research into the factors affecting personal well-being and their potential application to policy making (see especially Dolan et al, 2006). Perhaps the most useful thoughts on such developments have been offered by David Craig (2006, page 193), who notes that “addressing well-being is presented politically as a turn away from previous conservative neoliberal reforms, and towards a more inclusive or social democratic social policy”; and from “a ‘welfare’ orientation (focused on income security and equity) to a ‘well-being’ orientation, focused on individual opportunity and enablement.”

Such thoughts are certainly relevant to the case studies that concern us in this paper—as I suggest below, dressing up property-led and consumption-led redevelopment as a mission of improving local well-being clearly *does* work to muddy, following Craig, the neoliberalizing essence of the projects in question. But it also does much more. At a deeper level, mobilizing the concept of well-being and related biopolitical knowledges serves to unsettle our conventional framings of both ‘nature’ and ‘economy’. In the first place, we see a privatization of the natural, whereby representations of nature are brought firmly into the realm of capital accumulation. And, secondly, we have a naturalization of the urban economy, with the latter being rendered in the terms of biology, medicine, and environmentalism—“gentrification of the city” pictured, in Neil Smith’s (2002, page 445) words, as “a natural process”—rather than of money, markets, and the social relations of production. The line being put to Croydon’s CPO inquiries was not, in this respect, ‘give us the land because we will make more economic use of it’; it was ‘give us the land because *our* spatial economy is more healthy, more natural, and more alive.’

3.3 Scalar knowledges: privatizing public interest

If the spatial economy articulated to the CPO inquiries was envisioned as healthier and more ‘vital’ than the extant alternatives, it was also, the council claimed, more in the public interest. In the case of the Park Place project proposal, the inquiry was repeatedly informed that the council was “fully satisfied that the CPO is in the public interest” (eg Park Place CPO Document 2, page 6); similarly, the Gateway CPO inquiry heard that there was a “compelling case in the public interest” (Gateway CPO Document 3, page 1). So pivotal was the public interest argument to each inquiry, in fact, that when the secretary of state decided *not* to approve the Gateway CPO, she emphasized her disagreement on this specific issue, saying that ultimately she “agree[d] with the Inspector that there is no compelling need in the public interest for the Order” (Gateway CPO Document 2, page 3).

My argument is that the ‘public interest’ case constituted a third critical geographical knowledge in the two-pronged quest for compulsory land purchase in Croydon. But in what *sense* ‘geographical’? An answer to this question can be framed at two levels. Firstly, and in the most transparent of senses, the public interest argument did assume *physically* spatial—public *space*—manifestations. Hence it was claimed that the Arrowcroft scheme for the Gateway site would serve the public interest in part by “allowing the local community to ‘reclaim’ its public spaces” (Croydon Gateway, 2007). With Park Place, meanwhile, the proposed enlargement and revitalization of public space was similarly vaunted, and would take the form of “a new public square in the High street capable of being used for public events and improvement of the public realm” (Park Place CPO Document 1, page 8).

Notwithstanding these demonstrably spatial crystallizations of the public interest argument, the second level at which this argument constitutes a ‘geographical knowledge’ is the one emphasized here. Citing public interest was, I suggest, fundamentally a *scalar* narrative: it was an argument about the scales at which the benefits of the proposed schemes would accrue. These benefits, it was posited, would be realized not only by the council or the schemes’ private developers, or even ‘merely’ by those people living or working at the redeveloped sites. Indeed, this latter hypothetical outcome—the confinement of any public benefits strictly to the space of redevelopment itself—was an allegation leveled at the competing Stanhope/Schroders proposal by the council’s chief executive in giving evidence to the Gateway CPO inquiry and dismissing said proposal partly on the grounds that he was unconvinced that *its* “proposed public spaces would be used by many people *other* than those working and living in the Gateway scheme” (Gateway CPO Document 1, page 3; my emphasis). The benefits of the Arrowcroft scheme, by contrast, were anticipated to accrue to *all* the people of Croydon, and, moreover, to those from farther afield who would travel to Croydon to attend events at its new landmark arena. Realistically or otherwise, then, the council’s case counterposed geographical and social *scales of beneficiary*: it pitched public versus private, social versus individual, and collective versus unitary.

As with the well-being argument discussed above, there was here, we should note, a framing national policy context: in this case not a statutory act as such, but rather a circular from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister that was intended to serve as “guidance” for the submission of Compulsory Purchase Orders (ODPM, 2004). This circular stated unequivocally that a CPO “should only be made where there is a compelling case in the public interest” (page 7)—wording which was explicitly invoked by Croydon Council in seeking to justify both of the CPOs discussed in this paper.

How, then, can we most productively understand this scalar narrative? The argument being used to justify the transfer of land is that it generates a set of public benefits that outweigh the infringement of existing property rights. And the fact that the transfer in question represents, in the first instance, a *public* appropriation of private property (the council being the CPO applicant) lends the public interest argument a seeming credibility. But the key point, surely, is that the transfer into council hands would represent only a temporary means to a very different end, for once acquired the land would immediately be passed on to a private entity. The intended transfer is actually therefore a ‘private–public–private’ one—increasingly referred to in the legal literature (eg Cohen, 2006; Scott, 2003) as a “public–private taking”—and its cardinal feature is that for the end-to-end private–private transfer to happen without the voluntary consent of the first of the two private actors, state intervention is required. ‘Public interest’ or ‘the social’, in other words, is *ultimately* being invoked in the service specifically of *private* capital; it is, in this sense, being privatized.

4 Reviving modernism?

The geographical knowledges discussed in the previous section share one key attribute—they all, to one degree or another, resuscitate and reenergize discourses of urbanism that are more commonly associated with the modernist era. We can show this by examining each in turn, starting with the spatial symbolism that envisioned a particular geographical role or function for the Croydon of the future, and which legitimated or discounted different land uses accordingly. Studies of urban modernism point to the consistent privileging of functionalism among modernist planners and architects (see especially Bradbury and McFarlane, 1978, pages 95–190). Cities, in other words, and the buildings and transport networks that constituted them, were to be designed and built strictly according to the purposes they were expected to fulfill, with other considerations (not least aesthetics) playing a backseat role—‘form ever follows function’, as the famous phrase has it. Thus Harvey (1989, pages 25–26), in his discussion of modernism in the city, is able to group together disparate urbanisms from the late-19th through mid-20th centuries through the comparison of functionalist luminaries including Haussmann, Ebenezer Howard, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Croydon Council’s plans, of course, exist on a much smaller scale than the megaprojects associated with these names, but that is not the point: the underlying arguments—in Croydon’s case, that the town’s redevelopment should be geared precisely to *enabling* its assigned spatial functions—bear direct comparison.

What, second, of the biopolitics of urban ‘well-being’ that the compulsory purchase applications also saw invoked? This was the premise that only certain land uses would deliver the health, goodness, and vitality that Croydon Council took upon itself to confer on local society and economy. My earlier argument, following Smith, was that such a discourse serves to *naturalize* what are inherently political-economic processes. But the point to emphasize here is that where urban political economy is concerned, such a naturalization has deep and powerful historical precedents. This is most notably the case with the approach of the famed Chicago School of sociology in the 1920s and 1930s, which both coincided with and contributed to the hegemony of high modernism.⁽²⁾ Perhaps most often associated with the work of Ernest Burgess and Robert Park, the Chicago School applied the vocabulary and models of biological ecology to the urban context, and specifically to urban sociospatial relations (Bulmer, 1984). In doing so, it implied that there somehow existed ‘natural’ laws of urban morphology and growth. Croydon Council, of course, was not invoking such laws when it offered its own naturalization of urban political economy, but it *was* co-opting—unwittingly or not—a language with roots in the modernist history of urbanism.

Third, and last, is the ‘public interest’ argument put forward to sanction compulsory purchase. The concept of public interest has a long and distinguished heritage in the political philosophies of, among others, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Locke, but once more it has been shown that modernism in general—and modern *urbanism* in particular—became an especially fruitful locus for the concept’s application. Thus Paul-Alan Johnson’s (1994, page 134) recognition that “It was the ‘public interest’ that modernist architects sought to address.” And it was not only architects that invoked the idea: Lewis Silkin, the UK’s Minister for Town and Country Planning in the immediate postwar years, was another influential advocate of the “common interest”, insisting that “The objectives of town and country planning...are to secure a proper

⁽²⁾Carla Cappetti (1993), for instance, discusses the explicit connections between the Chicago sociology school and influential Chicago-based modernist fiction writers in the 1930s.

balance between competing demands for land, so that all the land of the country is used in the best interests of the whole people" (cited in Rees and Lambert, 1985, page 64). Precisely such appeals to the 'whole people' explain Robert Freestone's (1996) labeling of public interest as a "hoary modernist cliché". It was only with the post-1970s rise of neoliberalism, with its emphasis on markets and economic individualism in place of collective social identities, that the concept of public interest largely receded from view in the West (Bozeman, 2007, chapter 1; Clarke, 2004). Where it is revived and mobilized in contemporary social or economic policy, as it has been in the machinations around compulsory land transfer in Croydon, what is being recuperated is, again, a quintessentially modernist discourse.

In effecting this reenergization of discourses strongly associated with the urban world of modernism, the geographical knowledges discussed in this paper effectively camouflage, it seems to me, much of what is really going on with contemporary compulsory purchase. They do so by virtue of the fact that they are populated with a very selective set of social, political, and economic concepts, while excluding others. This is *not* to suggest that Croydon Council and its private sector partners were merely paying lip service to notions such as well-being and public interest (and the council, at any rate, clearly *was* a staunch believer in the idea of Croydon aspiring towards a lofty regional 'role'). But it *is* to suggest the following: that if a commitment to public interest and well-being was indeed present, so, too, was a commitment to an altogether different set of outcomes, centred on property-led, accumulation-oriented, and private-capital-controlled exploitation of town centre space; that these latter, indubitably neoliberalizing outcomes were at least as important to the schemes' architects as the former outcomes, and existed in tension with—if not outright opposition to—them; and that the neoliberal concepts underpinning the latter outcomes palpably did *not* figure in the geographical imaginaries that came to encapsulate the case in favour of compulsory purchase.

Given, moreover, that Croydon Council's appeal to well-being and public interest was driven at least in part by the inscription of well-being and public interest clauses in *national* compulsory purchase law and policy guidance, we should arguably be situating this camouflaging effect at the national as well as the local scale. Other authors, interestingly, have hinted at strongly comparable effects—in both national and transnational contexts, and in terms both of well-being and public interest discourses. Craig, for instance, whose work I touched upon earlier, claims that the burgeoning emphasis on well-being in New Zealand is "presented politically as a turn away from previous conservative neoliberal reforms"—the implication being that the turn from neoliberalism *is* only political spin. Vis-à-vis the nascent revival of public interest political discourse, meanwhile, such claims have been made even more explicitly: for both Sangeeta Kamat (2004), transnationally, and John McDonald (2007), in Australia, the invoking of public interest has indeed merely smoothed over what remain essentially neoliberal policies.

If the geographical imaginaries sketched out above recall an earlier, modernist era of urban development in general, they also hark back to an earlier phase of compulsory purchase more specifically; and recognizing this arguably lends their contemporary manifestation a degree of logic (if not justification). For compulsory purchase in the UK is not a new phenomenon; and while, as Guy Roots (2008, page 10) notes, the Land Clauses Consolidation Act of 1845 represented the effective "birth of our present system of compulsory purchase", it was not until "the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the functions of local authorities were greatly extended into such fields as housing, highways, public health, water supply and sewage disposal", that the number and scale of compulsory acquisitions became material. But these

acquisitions were typically *not* a question of the state simply easing the path of private capital accumulation. Compulsory purchase formed, rather, a linchpin of a progressive, Keynesian urban planning orthodoxy that *did* seek to advance the 'common interest', and which, as the 20th century wore on, increasingly saw the modernization of British cities as part-and-parcel of an emergent welfare state. This orthodoxy crystallized most significantly in the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947. Through the provision of compulsory purchase powers to local authorities, this act paved the way for a massive programme of 'slum clearance' and new public housing estate construction from the 1950s through the early 1970s, resulting in nearly four million people being compulsorily moved (Pacione, 2005, pages 233–234).

And so the argument of this paper is that, perhaps influenced by the centrality of compulsory purchase to the UK's modernist urban agenda, the compulsory purchase initiatives in contemporary Croydon revived the language of urban modernism—but *not its principles*. Dispossessing existing landowners in order to enable an enhanced regime of private sector capital accumulation is a policy far removed from that of moving residents, misguidedly or otherwise, in the hope of improving their collective welfare.

Equally, we must recognize that such distinctions—between modernist and neo-liberal, progressive and conservative—cannot be drawn too sharply; and a more nuanced historical geography of UK compulsory purchase would readily demonstrate as much. For one thing, while much of the compulsory purchase-based redevelopment that occurred in the postwar era *was* of a progressive, welfare-oriented variety, there are plenty of examples of cases where different motives prevailed. As Oliver Marriott (1989) discusses in his treatment of the 1960s property boom, local authorities were encouraged by national government from the 1950s onwards not only to clear slums, but also to help assemble city-centre sites for commercial redevelopment that was a *de facto*, if not *de jure*, private sector affair.⁽³⁾ It is of no small interest to this paper that Croydon has come, over time, to represent perhaps the signature example of this alternative type of compulsory purchase-based redevelopment in the urban world of 1950s–1970s Britain.⁽⁴⁾ At that time, as today, compulsory purchase generally required the lodgement of a provisional order and, in the event of objections, a public hearing; but in Croydon such niceties were circumvented with the passing, in 1956, of the Croydon Corporation Act, which empowered the council for a period of five years to compulsorily purchase town centre land *without having to face public inquiries*, and to release this land for private development (Saunders, 1983, page 300). This it did on a massive scale, the outcome, within a decade, being 5 million ft² of new town-centre office space.

It would be very difficult, therefore, to make a case for anything like a 'modernist regime' of compulsory purchase; to the extent that such a regime existed, it was clearly characterized by considerable internal variation and tension. And to appreciate this is to appreciate that the same is of course true of compulsory purchase in what I have described here as a 'neoliberalizing' guise. The word 'neoliberal' is a helpful label to the extent that it signals a commitment to economic growth anchored firmly in the private sector, and free as far as possible from government interference in markets, but one of the most important and interesting aspects of the contemporary Croydon case study—and, more broadly, of any contemporary compulsory purchase on behalf of private interests—is that it highlights the problematic nature of all such descriptors (including,

⁽³⁾ *De facto* rather than *de jure* in the sense that land was generally leased to private developers rather than sold, as is customarily the case today.

⁽⁴⁾ See, for example, the discussion in Susan Fainstein (1994, page 7).

as noted, 'modernism'). For while the Gateway and Park Place projects *were* intended to advance private sector commerce in the service of the local market economy, the central mechanism for effecting such change was, ironically, state abrogation of (existing) private property rights—the sanctity of which *also* sits at the heart of 'neoliberalism' as conventionally framed.

Two closing observations about the case study presented here arise from this recognition. The first is that it throws into especially sharp relief the wider tensions that various authors (eg Peck and Tickell, 2002) have identified in the 'neoliberal project', particularly around the ambiguous role of the state and of state involvement in markets—such tensions seldom appearing starker than where, as here, public institutions override private property *for* private property. The second observation pertains specifically to the geographical imaginaries to which the interventionist local state appealed. I argued above that these imaginaries, evoking as they did a substantially different era of urban redevelopment, obfuscated much of the reality of what the council and its developer partners were actually working towards. But the imaginaries in question also, I suggest, obfuscated those tensions implicit *in* compulsory purchase. By focusing attention on a set of ill-defined town functions (not least 'becoming' a city) and council functions (to enhance well-being and further the public interest), the advocates of compulsory purchase elided the contradictions that a private–public–private chain of forced ownership change must always entail.

5 Concluding thoughts: on the nature of materiality of geographical knowledges

Why study geographical knowledges? The answer, it seems to me, is because they are clearly material. This materiality of geographical knowledges should be self-evident from the present paper, which has, following Harvey, sought to demonstrate that such knowledges contribute substantially to shaping the *bounds of possibility* of political-economic change—often through the accentuating of certain characteristics, motivations, or outcomes, and/or through the marginalizing of others. Nevertheless, if we return to the specific relationship invoked in opening the paper—the avowedly 'dialectical relationship' between political-economic change on the one hand and geographical knowledges on the other—the question remains: what is the exact *nature* of this relationship? In conclusion, I want to suggest that answering this question first requires answering a related question: namely, what is the exact nature of the materiality of geographical knowledges *themselves*? If the present paper, alongside a large existing literature, has shown that these knowledges *are* material, the nature of their materiality remains a distinctly thornier issue.

We can productively broach this issue by considering the way in which Harvey frames his inquiry into geographical knowledges and political-economic change. He speaks, as we have seen, of a 'relationship' between the two. But arguably we should actually not be talking about a 'relationship' at all. For doing so implies *separability*—it implies that geographical knowledges and political-economic change are two discrete (albeit connected) entities, belonging to two different orders of things. It also implies varying degrees of substance: political-economic change residing in the sphere of physical reality, and geographical knowledges in the realm of (mere) representation. Timothy Mitchell (2002), among others, has persuasively argued against such a distinction. More fruitful, perhaps, would be to think of geographical knowledges as part *of* political-economic change, as integral to it, and as no more or less material than the events, institutions, and 'things' that we typically associate with the latter domain.

Take, for example, the notion of private property that figures centrally in this paper. Our typical framing is a binary one: the physical sphere containing the property itself, and the conceptual sphere containing the philosophical-legal *principle* of private

property rights. The latter is yet another geographical knowledge, of course; but is it truly 'just' a representation, meaningfully separate from the political-economic changes that create it and are reproduced by it? Mitchell's argument is that our historical geographies should never begin with such "metaphysical abstractions" (page 59) but should end with them, showing, in the process, how the seeming difference between reality and representation, land and law, is *made*. Such an approach squares, to my mind, with the impulse to study neoliberalism not as "a regularized form" but rather in terms of "the processes of its enactment" (England and Ward, 2007, page 14). These latter processes can be given the term 'neoliberalization' that I have used in this paper, and would *include* contemporary processes of compulsory purchase—which, by this reading, do not breach a universal, ahistorical, neoliberal essence called 'private property', so much as reproduce *private properties* in localized forms that are assuredly contradictory, and as much conceptual as material. And while this paper has done no more than gesture in the direction of such an approach, I hope it has at least intimated that geographical knowledges such as 'private property' (or, for that matter, 'well-being' or 'public interest') are always material, and always in the process of being remade—and merit study accordingly.

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