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Ideology in practice: the career of sustainability as an ideological concept in strategic urban planning

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an approach for analysing ideology dynamics in strategic urban planning based on post-foundational political theory. Drawing on empirical material of strategic planners discussing their usage of the concept of sustainability it is suggested that although planners generally consider themselves to be pragmatic problem-solvers, it is exactly in their efforts to 'get things done' that they become deeply embroiled in the social dynamics of ideology. The reason for this is that planners are forced to employ ideologically charged concepts to bring together the disparate coalitions of actors that are needed for generating any form of policy traction in fractured governance landscapes. However, the ideological utilization of a concept contributes not only to the reproduction of hegemonic relations but also to a consequent hollowing out of the concept whereby its meaning becomes increasingly diluted, leading to its eventual demise and replacement.

KEYWORDS

Strategic planning; post-foundational theory; ideology; concepts; practice; sustainability

Introduction

Recent times have witnessed a rekindled analytical interest with regards to ideology dynamics in planning (see e.g. Zanotto 2020; Inch and Shepherd 2019; Davoudi, Galland, and Stead 2019). Nonetheless, an overwhelming majority of planners do not appear to consider themselves ideologically driven, let alone ideologues (Lauria and Long 2017). As convincingly argued by Salet (2018, 2019), most planners rather tend to focus their professional engagement on what he calls 'purposive strategies of action': work towards developing 'practical solutions for problems in concrete situations' (Salet 2019, 4). As such, contemporary planning work tends to be 'outcome directed, flexible and opportunistic, and typically characterized by negotiation of interest in a plural context of governance' (Salet 2019, 4).

However, we may be wise to treat with a degree of suspicion any actor that purports to solely be prudently dealing with 'real problems' in contrast to the pursuit of ideological whims. In fact, there are even those that suggest that any such claim is actually 'the very founding gesture of ideology' (Rancière quoted in Žižek 1997, 211), and that therefore '[i]n everyday life, ideology is at work especially in the apparently innocent reference to pure utility' (Žižek 1997, 2). In other words: it may be that it is precisely when we believe that we are being least ideological that we come to reproduce ideology most efficiently. Founded upon this intuition, we show, in contrast, that planners, in going about their purposive strategies of action, constantly work with ideology to achieve their

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practical aims – and through this become entangled with and partake in the reproduction of broader social dynamics of ideology. We will thus argue that, even when unnamed and unrecognized, ideology is nonetheless one of the indispensable tools of planning practice, and that the work of planners can therefore also be assumed to always have a degree of ideological implication.

To provide some empirical concreteness to the theoretical arguments presented in the paper we will draw on material consisting of interviews with strategic planning practitioners in Cambridge (UK) and Sydney (Aus) relating to their own experiences of working with the concept of sustainability within their professional practice. Previous important work on sustainability as an ideological concept in relation to urban planning has been presented by, e.g. Gunder (2006), Gunder and Hillier (2009) and Davidson (2010, 2012).[1] Gunder (2006) and Gunder and Hillier (2009) draw upon a similar theoretical foundation as we do here. However, their argument moves on a more abstract, conceptual plane, and the present paper contributes to these debates by developing a more practice-focused approach that concretely connects theoretical discussions on ideology to the nitty gritty doings of everyday planning work. Davidson (2010) shares both a similar theoretical orientation and methodological approach with the present paper, focusing on Žižek's (1989) notion of the cynical reproduction of ideology, and drawing upon this helpfully highlights complex interplay between cynical distancing and engaged commitment in urban professionals' relationship to the concept of sustainability (see also Gressgård 2015). This particular aspect of ideology dynamics, although present in the empirical material discussed in the paper, is less in focus here. Instead, what this paper offers in relation to Davidson's previous contribution is a stronger focus on developing a diachronic, dynamic perspective on ideology which is less concerned with a synchronic analysis of the characteristics of empty ideological signifiers, and instead contributes with a more explicit attentiveness to and conceptualization of diachronic processes of 'floating' and 'emptying'.

A further contribution of the paper is that it situates debates on ideology and planning within a wider post-foundational approach to the study of urban policy and politics. Post-foundational political theory has been previously introduced into planning studies primarily through discussion centreing on the phenomenon of postpolitics (see e.g. Allmendinger and Haughton 2012; Metzger, Allmendinger, and Oosterlynck 2014; Metzger 2018). Swyngedouw (2007) has argued that sustainability discourse constitutes a prime example of postpolitics, arguing that it is

> of course not a politics, let only a political programme or socio-environmental project; it is pure negation of all that is political; a type of negation we can all concur with, around which a consensus can be built, but which eludes conflict and evacuates the political field. (Swyngedouw 2007, 27)

Without questioning the facticty that the deployment of the sustainability concept may well have generated such effects in many situations and contexts we nonetheless suggest that these effects which Swyngedouw ascribes to postpolitics can often rather be traced back to the more generic functionality of ideology, as understood within a broader framework of post-foundational political theory. By more clearly differentiating between the specific practices of postpolitics and broader, more generic effects of ideology the paper thus contributes through a discussion of how the concept of ideology fits within a broader post-foundational understanding of planning, and argues that the introduction of this additional conceptual component will help increase understandings of some of the more elusive yet crucial power dynamics of planning practice.

It is important to clarify that the paper does not have an ambition to present either a comprehensive catalogue of all the ways in which ideology relates to planning, or a complete mapping of the effects of these interactions. Rather, it merely aims at opening up a new perspective for the understanding of ideology and planning through touching on but a few aspects of these dynamics. Further, even though the approach presented in the paper is particularly suited to concrete empirical investigations of ideological dynamics in planning, it is nonetheless important to clarify that the empirical material included in the paper should not be read as attempts at proper case study analyses. Rather, due to restrictions in space, they are limited to brief exemplifications of some

contemporary practices and behaviours in planning work that, as illustrations, can enhance the understanding of the theoretical reasoning presented in the paper.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section broadly outlines a post-foundational understanding of ideology, with a particular focus on the work of political philosopher Ernesto Laclau. After that follows a section that more closely discusses semiotic signifiers as the key functional units of ideology, with a particular focus on the role played by linguistic concepts in such dynamics. The subsequent two sections present the empirical examples of the ideological functioning of the concept of 'sustainability' within strategic planning work and a consequent analysis of the former through an application of the approach presented in the previous sections. The final discussion reconnects to this introduction to again stress the importance of paying critical scholarly attention to the various types of practices through which planners become embroiled in ideology dynamics in their daily work.

A post-foundational understanding of ideology

'Ideology' is, admittedly, a slippery social scientific concept that comes with a heavy load of disparate theoretical baggage (see e.g. Geertz 1964; Freeden 1996, 2003; Žižek 1994). However, we suggest, like so many other polysemous and contested concepts, it is also an indispensable resource for the critical study of contemporary planning and governance practice and its inherently contested meaning by no means precludes an analytical productivity, but rather places greater demands on those using the concept to carefully explain exactly how and why they choose to do so. Our specific motivation for deciding to work with the concept of ideology is that it indexes and draws attention to an inherently political dimension of planning and governance practice. The concept of ideology simply captures and highlights power dynamics relating to struggles of political influence in a more explicit way than many other related concepts such as 'culture' or 'institution'. In this regard, we find particularly valuable how contemporary theories of ideology have contributed to widening the ambit of the concept to not only denote espoused doctrinal beliefs, but to also include the subconscious reproduction of what is taken to be 'naturally' desirable within a specific group at a certain time and place, thereby making some course of action appear more appealing and worthwhile than others.

One such recent application of the concept of ideology can be found within the post-foundational strand of political theory. The post-foundational conceptualization of ideology is most certainly not the only one around, but we find this approach particularly appealing since it steers clear of any form of residual traditional Marxist conceptualization of ideology as 'false consciousness' on the one hand, and – on the other hand – the risk inherent in some poststructuralist approaches to completely dilute the concept of ideology into a simple synonym of culture, 'the social' or discourse in general. Marchart's (2007) influential account of post-foundational political theory focuses on the post-Marxist strands of political philosophy, but explicitly opens up for the broader application of this concept to also include other strands of social theory, e.g. those grounded in liberal or conservative traditions of thought. There isn't the room to here discuss in detail all the nuances of the differences between the various post-foundational approaches (but see e.g. Norval 2000; Marchart 2007), and in this paper we will therefore primarily [2] focus on the important contributions of political philosopher Ernesto Laclau, as developed both in collaboration with Chantal Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) and individually (e.g. Laclau 1990, 1996a, 1996b, 2005, 2006).[3]

Characteristic to most post-foundational approaches to political theory, and particularly so Laclau's, is their understanding of the social formation of society as fundamentally fractured and riddled by numerous crisscrossing conflict lines. Hence, any constitution of a society will by necessity be a creative act that succeeds in somehow bringing together numerous disparate social groups into a temporary, and perhaps only partially stable configuration. 'Society', or any other level of political formation, such as a party or NGO, is thus according to this perspective never a given entity or 'natural kind', but rather the result of a laborious process of producing unity across differences or as

noted by Laclau (1996a, 59), 'the impossibility of universal ground does not eliminate its need: it just transforms the ground into an empty place which can be partially filled in a variety of ways (the strategies of this filling is what politics is about)'. The practice of 'politics' is thus aimed at stitching together, or 'suturing', the fundamentally fractured ground of society, which in post-foundational political thought is sometimes referred to as 'the political', following the definition of these terms provided by Laclau's longtime partner and collaborator Chantal Mouffe (2000, 101).[4]

It is important to stress here that such post-foundational approaches are not to be confused with a normative *anti*-foundational philosophical stance. Analytically recognizing that society does not exist as a given, natural object is not the same as normatively celebrating this condition. Rather, the necessity of constantly reproducing the 'impossible object' of society, generating the means of social action, is recognized (Marchart 2007, 145). When practically applied in empirical social scientific research, a post-foundational analysis particularly takes an interest in the concrete practices whereby the absent ground of the political is somehow temporarily filled in, or at least papered over, so as to generate the preconditions for broad, collective action. As eloquently put by Marchart (2007, 2), a post-foundational approach

> does not lead to the assumption of the total absence of all grounds, but rather to the assumption of the impossibility of a *final* ground which is something completely different as it implies an increased awareness of, on the one hand, contingency and, on the other, the political as the moment of partial and always, in the last instance, unsuccessful grounding

thus highlighting the precariousness of any attempt at generating and mobilizing coalitions for collective political action.

Ideology is the concept of choice that is utilized by a number of the post-foundational political theorists to denote discourse that serves to stabilize society by providing the grounds on which social collectivity can be constructed by temporarily 'suturing' the fundamental conflict lines that inevitably exist in any given social collectivity. Ideology is thus definable as a temporary discursive 'fix' of a fundamentally intractable problem: the lack of any given ontological foundations for social collectivities. As specifically defined by Laclau in one of his early paradigmatic works, '[t]he ideological would consist of those discursive forms through which a society tries to institute itself as such … insofar as the social is impossible without some fixation of meaning … the ideological must be seen as constitutive of the social' (Laclau 1983, 27). Consequently, Laclau identifies as ideological those discursive operations that manage to bring together some of the bits and pieces of a fractured social collective into an, at least temporarily, partially coherent whole; so to say temporarily mending the holes of the always incomplete and patchy social fabric of any society.

A successful ideological operation is to Laclau that which manages to bring together a plethora of disparate societal actors, with many potential conflict lines between them, into a workable political coalition towards action. As such, ideological operations by necessity must succeed in downplaying or obfuscating deep-seated differences so as to bring together a fundamentally disparate group of actors into a manageable entity.

Following from the above, three particular aspects of Laclau's understanding of ideology deserve to be highlighted here. First, in relation to traditional Marxist theories of ideology as 'false consciousness' resulting in actor's misrecognition of the true nature of their objective interests, Laclau takes a nuanced position, retaining the idea of misrecognition, while dismissing the notion of essential or objective interests:

> The ideological would not consist of the misrecognition of a positive essence, but exactly the opposite: it would consist of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture. The ideological would consist of those discursive forms through which a society tries to institute itself as such on the basis of closure, of the fixation of meaning, of the non-recognition of the infinite play of differences. The ideological would be the will to 'totality' of any totalizing discourse. And insofar as the social is impossible without some fixation of meaning, without the discourse of closure, the ideological must be seen as constitutive of the social. (Laclau 1983, 27)

The 'misrecognition' or 'distortion' performed by way of ideology, as understood by Laclau, thus amounts to the obfuscation of the contingent nature of any discursively articulated grounding for broad collective action, where 'totality' does not necessarily refer to an all-encompassing political ambition, but rather indexes the discursive production of unity across difference in a manner that obfuscates the fractured and conflict-ridden foundations of societies. In Laclau's early work, there is an expressed wish to find practices for 'stepping out' of ideology – a dream of a radical democracy that makes explicitly visible its own contingent foundations (see e.g. Laclau and Mouffe 1985, and in relation to planning, Grange 2014). However, in his later work, Laclau to some degree abandons this position, instead stressing the necessity of producing ideology-effects for any effort at mobilizing collective social action (see e.g. Laclau 2005) – rejecting any type of illusions of an 'the end of ideology' as 'impossible dreams' (Laclau 1996b, 321).

A second point follows from this first in seeing that ideology is, if not all-encompassing, then at least necessary for collective political action, it becomes crucial to remove all residual pejorative connotations of the term (Laclau 2006, 114). If ideology is a completely indispensable component of social processes, one can hardly be critical of ideology *as such*. Nonetheless, this by no means precludes a critical stance towards particular instances and forms of ideology, and their concrete effect, but rather forces any form of ideology critique to become much more precise and specific, and to focus more clearly on specific ideological articulations.

Third, as repeatedly suggested above, according to a post-foundational conceptualization, ideology-effects and those arrangements that produce them are understood to be situated and dynamic phenomena: that which serves an ideological function in one context at any given time, may not do so in another time and place. Thus, ideological functioning is always temporary, albeit to longer or shorter extents, and localized – albeit more or less widely so, and is dependent upon the specific character of local circumstances and traditions (Marchart 2007, 3).

The role of ideological concepts in a post-foundational theory of ideology

As already mentioned, post-foundationalists see ideology as a particular type of discourse. To them, ideology is discourse that generates a sense of shared societal mission, and which therefore can function as a temporary foundation around which political coalitions can be mobilized across social and political differences. However, this broad definition of the function of ideology does not properly explain how and through which means such effects are achieved. In this regard, Laclau (1996b, 303) suggests that an 'ideological distortion projects *on a particular object* … the impossible fullness of the community' [emphasis added]. Here we will focus on this key component of the 'particular object' that comes to assume an ideological function. Norval has also suggested that a Laclau-inspired study of ideology should focus on examining the dynamics surrounding 'those signifiers which embody the unity of a community which, nevertheless, cannot ever be fully achieved' and 'the mechanisms which makes this illusion possible' (Norval 2000, 330). Such an object can for instance be an item, such as a flag (see e.g. Billig 1995). However, following Laclau's (2005, 13) suggestion that rhetoric is 'the anatomy of the ideological world', we will here primarily focus the discussion on *linguistic* concepts or signifiers, i.e. words.[5]

The ideological function of concepts in planning has previously been investigated by, e.g. Gunder and Hillier (2009). Also Allmendinger and Haughton (2012, 94) have noted how 'seemingly uncontestable feel-good concepts' such as smart cities or sustainable development constitute a key resource for generating a veneer of consensus in planning processes, poignantly asking 'who could be "for" "dumb growth" or "unsustainable development"?'. Laclau understands that such concepts have an ideological function in that they serve as banners to rally disparate coalitions of political actors around, which can – at least temporarily – be united by a common political agenda. The function of ideological concepts is thus relational and mediating, in that they are made to serve as 'quilting points' or 'nodal points', through which social fault lines can be temporarily 'sutured', and around which diverse political coalitions thus can be stitched together. When

disparate political actors are enrolled under such a conceptual banner, it serves to defer, diffuse or displace pre-existing or potential conflicts between the actors and instead unite them in the pursuit of a (seemingly) common cause, thereby contributing to generating a hegemonic political formation at a specific time and place. Admittedly, ideological concepts can fill this function by generating quite different types of emotional responses, such as evoking fear or generating enthusiasm (see also further Laclau 2005, 110 on the affective dimension of ideological discourse). But regardless of the exact emotions they solicit, the ideological effect is that of actors setting aside their 'petty differences' so as to work together towards a 'greater cause'.

Since the primary function of ideological concepts is to facilitate the stitching-together of a workable political coalition of disparate actors and their equally diverse goals and ideas, the concrete ideological functionality of a specific concept cannot be analysed in isolation. Rather, it's concrete functionality can only be understood in relation to the wider webs of meaning that are spun around it, and how it in various ways latches on to and ties together other ideas and signifiers at a particular time and place. Such a morphological analysis can be practically performed in many ways. For instance Freeden (1996) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) have developed different conceptual frameworks for this purpose. We do not have the room here to go into the concrete similarities and differences between these approaches (but see Norval 2000 for a detailed discussion). However, if focusing more specifically on the approach of Laclau, he conceptualizes the successful ideological operation as an active connection of a set of existing but disparate ideas to a unifying nodal point or 'quilting point' (*point de capiton* in French), which comes to function as a central unifying concept. This discursive operation produces a 'chain of equivalence' through which these different ideas are brought together into a unified discourse, all united under the common quilting point (see further Laclau and Mouffe 1985). When successful, the previous jumble of ideas and demands become assembled into a common cause under the banner of the quilting point, thus simultaneously (1) connecting these ideas to the residual existing meaning and affective investments of the quilting point, (2) concretizing the meaning of the quilting point through the other concepts and ideas that are connected to it – and (3) through this generates a unified discourse that can serve as a platform for bringing together a set of multiple and disparate actors in collective political action. The relationship between the quilting point and the connected ideas becomes multidirectional. It produces both expectations that if we can only achieve X (quilting point), society will be healed and we will accomplish goals A, B, C (a set of disparate ideas); and, the other way around: if we accomplish goals A, B, C we will manifestly realize X (quilting point) – and society will be healed.

While effective, ideology consequently produces a 'mythical space' around the quilting point in which any concrete societal demand may be attached to the quilting point, which comes to embody a promise to 'set things right' and of a future 'healed' society, transcending the perceived ails of the present. This generates a social imaginary, a 'horizon', whereby the present is understood in light of a seemingly desirable collective future (Laclau 1990, 60ff). Given the above, the concept that functions as a quilting point and comes to serve an ideological function through bringing together a plethora of divergent ideas and claims into a unified discourse understandably cannot be too concrete in its own specific meaning, since this will limit the range of disparate ideas and expectations that it can be made compatible with. Therefore, as noted already in 1960 by Foley (1960, 212), 'ambivalence or ambiguity in the ideology may materially enhance its chances of appealing to a greater spread of persons and groups', a point further stressed by Freeden:

> "In effect, vagueness and elusiveness are frequently necessary to, and functional in, the political arena. Politics consists not only of decision-making, which demands decontestation, but also of the mobilization of support. The latter requires the construction of consensus, or at least the corralling of members of a society into overlapping positions in order to optimize backing for a political stance. In those situations, consumers of political language must be offered sentences that are sufficiently open in their meaning for different individuals and groups to read into them their own preferences and to gloss over distinctions […] elusiveness is not simply dissimulation, trickery or sloppy thinking – though it may be any of these – but the harnessing of political

> language in order to provide one of the most valuable scarce resources of politics: public political backing." (Freeden 2003, 56–57)

Laclau also recognizes vagueness as a key characteristic of efficient ideological signifiers, suggesting that these necessarily will be 'tendentially empty and essentially ambiguous' (Laclau 1990, 65, 118). However, concepts that are utilized to fill an ideological function are not necessarily vague from the outset (although this might potentially be of help). Rather, as Laclau points out, the ideological signification of a concept generates curious endogenous dynamics through which 'this particular object, which at some point assumes the role of incarnating the closure of an ideological horizon, will be deformed as a result of that incarnating function' (Laclau 1996b, 303). This occurs as the meaning of the concept becomes progressively 'hollowed out' by all the polysemous additional meanings that become attached to it when it is put to use in political coalition building, e.g. within consensus-producing planning processes. Laclau himself describes this as 'destruction of meaning through its proliferation' (Laclau 1996b, 305). This could perhaps be labelled as a 'bandwagon effect' of effective ideological signifiers. When an increasingly broad and motley palette of potentially conflicting interests and demands become attached to an efficiently functioning ideological master signifier this also inevitably becomes the first step in its 'logic of the dissolution', which eventually will lead to a breaking point. At this point the vagueness becomes so distinct and conspicuous that the rallying and unifying function of the concept comes under pressure either through an increased recognition of its fundamental meaninglessness, or through the enforcement, in one way or another, of a very precise definition of the term. Either of these developments will inevitably lead to the (re)surfacing of previous or potential conflict lines between the disparate actors that previously have been successfully rallied around the concept. Thus, even if ideologically functional concepts and the mythical spaces that they facilitate allow the possibility to project all sorts of 'win-win' and 'shared fate' fantasies Laclau nonetheless cautions that they 'move on an unstable balance', and whereas 'for longer or shorter periods they have a certain relative elasticity', eventually 'we witness their inexorable decline' (Laclau 1990, 67).

All the above again points to the spatiotemporally situated dynamics of ideological signifiers and their related effects already discussed in more general terms in the preceding section. It further also highlights how ideological effects are only ever temporary, and can never fully or permanently suture the fundamental conflict lines of any society, only temporarily displace them. However, it is important to point out that the exact length of time that any such ideological operation is effective remains, of course, an empirical question. It is to the latter that we will now turn in the next two sections of the paper, which will be focused on demonstrating the types of insights that can be generated by applying a post-foundational analysis of ideology in a planning studies context.

The career of 'sustainability' as a key concept in strategic planning work

Gunder and Hillier (2009) have charted how sustainability became a global core concept in planning education and policy in the first years of the twenty-first century to the extent that 'sustainable development is the now dominant spatial planning narrative' (Gunder and Hillier 2009, 20). According to their analysis, it is 'the very vagueness of the concept' that leads to acceptance or at least acquiescence with 'its often ambiguous principles', where 'the success of the sustainable ideal … is due especially to its unifying promise, the way it seems to transcend ideological values of the past' (141). Thus, as the supposedly dominant ideological concept of planning discourse in our present time, the development of the ideological purchase of the concept of 'sustainability' comes across as a potential 'paradigmatic case' (Flyvbjerg 2006) for the illumination of the dynamics of ideology that we have been discussing in this paper so far. However, staying true to the practice-focused research sensibility and the spatiotemporal situatedness of ideological functionality discussed above, we find it interesting to try to delve a little closer to how planners themselves

reflect upon how they utilize the concept in their everyday work, and to consider how their thoughts and experiences rhyme with the ideas discussed in this paper.

To explore this issue in some empirical detail, we will therefore present and discuss research results from two recent studies: on strategic planning in the UK Cambridge region and on urban strategy-making in Sydney, Australia. The research materials that constitute the empirical foundation for the following discussion consist in the Cambridge case of extensive document studies of regional and local plans and strategies, as well as 15 interviews with present and former officials and consultants involved in plan making at the County and City level, conducted during 2015–2017. The Sydney example is based on a longitudinal case study of the making and the effects of the *Sustainable Sydney 2030* strategy. More than 30 interviews with senior managers from the City of Sydney as well as other key actors were conducted between 2007 and 2016. Cambridge and Sydney are two quite different planning and urban policy contexts for numerous obvious reasons, however there is unfortunately little room to go into the details of these here (for further details regarding Cambridge see e.g. Healey 2007; Boddy and Hickman 2016; Peacock and Allmendinger 2020; for Sydney see e.g. Kornberger and Clegg 2011; Kornberger, Meyer, and Höllerer 2018).

As argued by Žižek in the passage quoted in the introduction, ideology dynamics do not tend to present themselves at face value. Consequently, any attempt at teasing out ideological positions and excavating ideological functionality from complex and entangled practices can be expected to demand a high degree of interpretive work. The bulk of the empirical research discussed in this paper was carried out as part of a research project that had as its core ambition not to study ideology in planning, but rather to try to trace the functioning of sustainability as an actant in urban planning and development processes.[6] The project thus focused on investigating how sustainability was being performed in the studied contexts and practices and what difference the mobilization of the concept of sustainability appeared to make in the processes in which it was deployed. Bluntly put: what did it matter, according to the practitioners themselves, whether the things they were doing were performed under the auspices of 'sustainability' or some other concept? What did the concept of sustainability add to the mix of urban strategic planning practice – and what practices was the concept most closely related to or manifested through, in the eyes of the interviewees?

What we found interesting in the analysis of our interview materials from these two different authorities in different countries were the manifest similarities in just how the interviewed practitioners described the utility and function of the concept of sustainability within the processes they were active in. Thus, the purpose of presenting these research materials from two very different empirical contexts is not at all to make a comparative analysis in the strict methodological sense – which would demand a much more broader and thorough discussion of similarities and difference between the cases. Rather, our aim is to highlight what we saw to be some manifest similarities that turned up in both cases specifically in relation to how key interviewees presented the function of the concept of sustainability in their work. The way they talked about sustainability echoed previous readings on the dynamics of ideology, as understood by postfoundational political theorists. This intuition led us to re-engage with and develop our understanding of postfoundational political theory and related approaches to ideology, which in turn helped us begin to tease out further interesting aspects of the empirical material.

If one were to classify the above-described research procedure, it can probably best be labelled as founded upon an abductive approach. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018, 4) defines an abductive approach as one in which one, or a number of case studies, are interpreted from a hypothetic overarching pattern, which potentially explains the case(s) in question. In an abductive approach, they further note, empirical facts or 'clues' may very well be combined with or preceded by studies of previous theories. However, the theory is not applied mechanically, but utilized as a source of inspiration for the discovery of patterns that bring understanding. Thus, the research process 'alternates between (previous) theory and empirical facts (or clues) whereby both are successively reinterpreted in the light of each other', whereby the researcher(s) 'as it were, eats into the empirical matter

with the help of theoretical preconceptions, and also keeps developing and elaborating on the theory' (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018, 5–7). The latter being quite a precise characterization of how the relationship between theory and empirical material has developed in the process of assembling the argument presented in this paper.

It is here important to be clear that in this type of qualitative research work it is difficult to apply traditional positivistic measures of research quality such as validity and reliability *stricto sensu*. Therefore we have instead striven to produce a research account that is transparent with regards to the interpretations made as well as the empirical and theoretical basis for them, and which therefore (hopefully) conveys a sense of *plausibility* and also (again, hopefully) comes across as *rich in points* (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2018). Following the suggestion of Alvesson & Sköldberg we have also striven to maintain a high level of reflexivity throughout the interpretive process through, e.g. highlighting where the empirical results come across as somewhat incongruous with the theoretical framework as well as discussing where alternative interpretations come across as equally plausible. Further, with regards to our research materials, which have primarily consisted of semi-structured interviews, we have kept in mind the caveat presented by Czarniawska (2014) that the content of such interviews must not be mistaken for pure representations of the exact unfolding of events, or even of subjective feelings and thoughts. Rather, they must be understood as narratives of self-representation produced by the interviewees and thus part of a person's attempts at making sense of a complex reality. Further, interviewees may be more or less strategical in how they approach the interview situation and the degree to which they censor or consciously rearticulate their experiences in the interview situation.

The Cambridge example

Historically, resistance to development has been strong in and around the city of Cambridge despite significant pressure associated with the growth of technology and bio-technology University spin-out companies and demand from firms seeking to relocate to the region. This mismatch between demand and supply came to a head in the early 1990s as businesses, local authorities and the University focused upon a pro-growth strategy. The way forward was to highlight not simply development but *sustainable* development. What this meant was left deliberately open allowing different interests to read what they wished into it. This shift echoed the turn towards an emphasis on sustainable development in national UK planning policy in in the mid-90s (Owens and Cowell 2002). Cambridgeshire County Council was seen to first adopt the concept in its own planning policy with the 1995 *Cambridgeshire Structure Plan Review* (Healey 2007, 144). An emphasis on environmental sustainability and social equity was further strengthened within Cambridge City Council with the 1996 *Cambridge Local Plan* (144). With the revised RPG6 – the *Regional Planning Guidance for East Anglia to 2016*, published year 2000, from the Government Office for the East of England, sustainability considerations were once again stressed (150–2).

The concept of sustainable development remained popular in Cambridge planning contexts throughout the early 2000s, as evidenced by the drafting of the 2003 *Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan*. This was very much in line with national planning policy which continued to emphasize sustainability, for instance through the 2003 *Sustainable Communities Plan*, released by the (then) national planning ministry, The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. Despite the number of documents both at national and local level referring to sustainability, deeper understanding of what it meant in practice, and how to measure it, was rarely, if ever, elaborated.

While the concept of sustainability became increasingly used in both national (e.g. in the *National Planning Policy Framework*, NPPF) and local documents (e.g. the *Cambridge Local Plan 2014*), a slight shift in focus can also be observed in the titles of local and regional policy documents from 2007 onwards, which have increasingly focused on the more tangible concept of 'climate change'; a concept which is used often to denote work towards more specifically reducing carbon emissions and protecting the environment. This is used in document titles, conversations and

written text to convey meaning, strategy and future objectives. Thus, while sustainability is still routinely referred to within texts, it is not often used to *define* a policy. Another notable change is that Cambridge City Council, in contrast to many other English local authorities, does not have a department (service area) dedicated to sustainability. Previously, there was a Sustainable City Team/Reference Group operating from the 1990s to 2011/12. This team was within the Planning Policy Service (in turn within the Environment Department), but was disbanded as the Council renewed its approach to sustainability, as part of a wider restructuring of services within the Council. Instead, the City Council now has a designated 'Climate Change Officer' working within the service area of Corporate Strategy (within the Strategy and Partnerships team).

In relation to the use of sustainability as a concept, a public servant in a pivotal role with respect to Climate Change/Sustainability policy at the City Council points out:

> In my last authority, sustainability was a big key word, and we preferred to use that word rather than climate change. But in this authority I think the key word is climate change, um, within that … which is interesting. And, you know, generally we want to reduce carbon emissions here, I think in my last authority it was about being sustainable in all sorts of ways, but the climate change strategy, you know, it's about more than just carbon emissions … In my previous authority … I was the sustainable development officer. But it's moved away from that term, to be honest. (Interview data, 2016)

Further, with regards to the usage of the term sustainability within planning contexts in Cambridge, an experienced planner at the Country Council also notes that it is 'a word one uses with a great deal of caution nowadays because it's so misused' (Interview data, 2016). In relation to this expressed skepticism about the usefulness of working with the specific concept of sustainability it is interesting to note that very little of the content of the planning policy in the Cambridge region has changed since the early-2000s, when this concept was more clearly at the centre of local planning discourse. However, the rhetorical dressing and motivation of these policies have successively shifted over the past decade or so, so as to focus more specifically on 'climate change' rather than 'sustainability' more broadly. Reflecting on why the concept of sustainability has receded into the background in planning policy discourse in Cambridge, one of our interviewees suggested that this was partly a conscious operation on behalf of the involved staff: 'we just tried to find ways of 'rebranding' it, almost, to give it more purchase' (Interview data, 2016). Further developing this line of thought s/he notes that 'we just stopped using the "sustainable development" phrase because it got a bit … It got a bit tired, I suppose' (Interview data, 2016).

As retold by the interviewed planners, in the Cambridge context, the dwindling purchase of the concept of sustainability evinces the temporality of its ideological functionality. Whereas the concept in the early 2000s was seen as a potent and successful vehicle for promoting growth-oriented policies, this ideological function of the concept came to wane with time, and was eventually increasingly instead replaced by 'climate change' which was then considered to 'to the job' of promoting existing policies, or slight variations of them, more productively.

The Sydney example

The focus of our Sydney example is the *Sustainable Sydney 2030* strategy adopted by the City of Sydney under the leadership of Lord Mayor Clover Moore.[7] Running as an independent candidate, she emerged as the unlikely winner of the election in 2004. In terms of content, *Sustainable Sydney* proposed a strategic vision around a sustainable city: it identified three key values of the city (i.e. 'green', 'global', and 'connected'), defined ten strategic directions and elaborated on them through ten concrete project ideas that were designed to bring the strategy to life, such as reconnecting the harbour with the city, integrating the Western edge of the city, or implementing green transformers across the city. In terms of process, *Sustainable Sydney* was the most extensive consultation in Sydney's history. 12,000 people were engaged through workshops, roundtables, public events, and

exhibitions; hundreds of thousands more were reached through extensive media coverage and the city's online channels.

The urban governance environment of Sydney has been described as 'exceptionally fragmented' (Brandtner et al. 2017, 1081), consisting of 31 local councils, an influential state government (New South Wales), and national government. While Sydney is a metropolitan region of 12,368 sq. km. with a little more than five million inhabitants, the City of Sydney is but one of the 31 local governments with an area of approximately 25 sq. km., mostly containing the city's Central Business District, and a population of around 240,000 residents. The governance of the greater urban area is compacted through the antagonistic relationships between levels of administration as well as a tradition of sectorial approaches to problem-solving within the city administration itself. In light of the above, the Sustainability Director of the City of Sydney has described his role in the organization in general, and the Sustainable Sydney process in particular, as a 'catalyst for change' with the aim of bringing together disparate sets of actors both within and outside the organization and to enable them to move towards the articulation of a shared vision. His designated 'environmental working group' therefore spanned 'across the organization where we get representatives from all these different groups and parts' (Interview data, 2008), who are brought together to discuss and share ideas on a broad range of topics more or less specifically related to the subject area of sustainability/environment.

Follow-up interviews in 2016 revealed that the *Sustainable Sydney* strategy played an important role in generating widespread consensus among key actors in the City around a broad vision:

> If you want real change you're actually going to have to become very good at advocacy. So our role is to build consensus around vision. It's not to deliver all the actions in between but it's to build the consensus, put that vision out there and say this is the right vision for the city, independent of whether we have the ability to - full control over all the actions that need to get there. (Interview data, 2016)

Developing this line of thought further, our interviewee explains:

> what I consciously feel in industry is the fact that we put those – we build that vision and we have that – that signpost [i.e. 'sustainability'] out there allows industry – or it gives industry a hook to hang their work around as well.

This functionality as 'hook' exemplifies sustainability's ideological function as a concept that could bring together many disparate actors and interests and orient them towards each other and towards the production of a 'consensus vision' centred on sustainability.

Importantly, in becoming the central keyword of the strategy around which a multiplicity of hopes and demands were articulated, the received meaning of the concept became increasingly broad and vague. As a senior manager reflected on the journey of the notion of sustainability:

> Well at the time - there's always a bit of tension. So sustainability and the environment tended to mean environmental sustainability - tended to at times. It's evolved and been a much broader kind of concept. So I think it's probably time for a change. It probably has – it's still got credibility because of obviously Sustainable Sydney 2030, the S and the S kind of work as a title but the concept of sustainability is absolutely still there. It would just be – it might be called something else in the future. But the theme – it's all about developing strong, fully well thought through business cases that are broad, that consider social economic cultural and environmental outcomes and tries to get – maximize the collective benefits of those areas. (Interview data, 2016)

This quote shows how sustainability moved from articulating environmental concerns towards encompassing a broader agenda, including social and economic sustainability. At this point the concept appears to have possessed strong ideological purchase, and the City of Sydney hung its entire strategy on the sustainability 'hook'. However, the senior manager also suggested that in the future 'resilience' might be 'the next flavor' that comes to replace sustainability in this function, clarifying that '[t]o me it's just a naming convention. Industry get a bit sick of the same thing for too long. They like change. So the same actions might happen on the ground but the name might change over time' (Interview data, 2016).

Sustainability analysed as a dynamic ideological signifier

The planners that we interviewed did not themselves refer to any of their practices as ideological. On the contrary, they often emphasized the commonsensical and pragmatic character of their work and the interventions they were advocating. Nonetheless, their descriptions of how they worked with the concept of sustainability, and the utility they ascribe to it, very much dovetails with a post-foundational understanding of the function and character of ideology.

In our interviews, the Sydney respondents were particularly outspoken about the function of the concept of sustainability in their urban strategy work, which they highlight more as performative than substantive, in that the concept functioned as a quilting point around which diverse actors both within and outside of the city organization could be brought together and united around a common 'consensus vision'. In this work, one of our informants described that the concept of sustainability functioned as a 'hook' upon which diverse actors could pin their disparate interests and agendas. Considering that the concept of sustainability figures as the key term of their whole strategy, it is further striking to note the weak level of attachment to the concept by those responsible for the strategy, even – somewhat remarkably – by the manager that has this specific term in his job title. He himself declares sustainability as a mere 'naming convention' that could easily be exchanged for anther concept at any point, where 'the name might change over time' even if 'the same actions might happen on the ground'.

Similarly, in Cambridge, the concept of sustainability was the key reference point that functioned as a discursive battering ram in facilitating a shift to a more development-oriented urban planning regime after decades of fierce opposition. Nonetheless, beyond a shift to a more development-positive attitude, the concrete meaning of the term 'sustainable development' was deliberately left open, allowing different interests to read what they wished into it. Nonetheless, our interviewees suggest that sustainability today is a word that one 'uses with a great deal of caution', due to the rising doubts about the concrete meaning of the concept. These doubts about the usefulness of the concept arise simultaneously with a distinct shift in the rhetoric employed in Cambridge towards instead emphasizing the tackling of 'climate change' as a central aim, where one of our informants suggests that this was a conscious shift, a way of 'rebranding' existing policies to give them 'more purchase'.

Considering the above, it does not come across as far-fetched to identify the function of sustainability in these cases as ideological, in the sense this term is conceptualized in post-foundational theory. Further, the interviews point towards a recognition that if it isn't the concept of 'sustainability' filling this ideological function in strategic planning work, it will be some other concept serving this role. This suggests that ideologically functional concepts constitute a recognized component of strategic spatial planning practice. It serves planners as a tool to generate traction for their proposed interventions, enabling them to 'corrall in' and enrol key actors in fractured governance landscapes in which 'command and control' is no longer a viable planning approach, and coalition building based on voluntary participation forms the only possible basis for engagement and implementation.

On the basis of the preceding theoretical discussions there are two aspects of ideology dynamics in the empirical material that we see as particularly important to pick out for further discussion. They relate to, on the one hand, the dynamic 'hollowing out' of meaning of ideological signifiers and, on the other hand, the occurrence of unintentional reproduction of hegemony and propagation of substantive meaning through instrumental action.

The dynamic hollowing out of meaning of an ideological signifier

An aspect of a post-foundational understanding of ideology that has been particularly stressed in this paper is the spatiotemporal situatedness of ideology, as well as its inherently unstable and dynamical character which makes it prone to evolution over time as a consequence of both external factors and certain endogenous mechanisms. One such mechanism that has been discussed is the 'hollowing out' of meaning of concepts that assume an ideological function, whereby ideologically

functional concepts tend to have their meaning increasingly diluted over time, as an ever-increasing number of disparate, and often conflicting, projects and ideas are attached to the ideological signifier. The increased recognition of frictions between different incongruous ideas attached to a specific ideological signifier is, according to Laclau, the first step in the 'logic of the dissolution' of the mythical space around a specific ideological signifier, since this alerts an ever increasing number of actors to the impossibility of successfully implementing all these conflicting ideas. Our interview materials suggest that the ideological functionality of the concept of sustainability may actually have passed over the cusp of such a process of dissolution in both Cambridge and Sydney, with actors suggesting that there is currently a need to 'rebrand' sustainability and that they have stopped using the concept because it got 'a bit tired' (Cambridge), and that it is 'time for a change' towards 'the next flavour' (Sydney).

However, only one of our interviewees, a Cambridge informant, actually directly reflected in more detail on the reasons why the ideological potency of sustainability began to wane in the late 2000s. This interviewee suggested that it might have to do with the particular articulation of the concept that is provided by the English National Planning Policy Framework and subsequent court decisions following this, which – according to this interviewee – focuses narrowly on 'economic sustainability' ('i.e. if it makes money, it is sustainable'), leading to the concept with time becoming increasingly 'discredited' (Interview data, 2016). Such a perspective would suggest that, at least in a UK planning context, the erosion of the ideological functionality of the concept of sustainability may have commenced, or at least significantly accelerated, with the formulation and subsequent legal interpretation of the 2012 NPPF. This may seem to run counter to the suggestion that it is the increased dilution of meaning that weakens the ideological functionality of the concept, and would instead imply that it is the imposition of a very strongly articulated singular, hegemonic meaning that would disintegrate the vagueness of the signifier – thus precluding the possibility for very different interests to imagine that also their agendas and ideas could potentially be linked up to this concept. However, interestingly enough, Laclau addresses this exact dynamic in one of his books, where he suggests that attempts at imposing of a very narrow and precise definition of meaning for an ideological signifier following a period of distinct vagueness is not an uncommon dynamic (Laclau 1990, 67). Both of these developments – the hollowing-out of ideological signifiers through the proliferation of meaning and the conflict-generating 'recoil-effect' of attempts at imposing singular meaning – although running in seemingly opposite directions nonetheless both contribute to the demise of the ideological power of a specific signifier, in this case: the concept of sustainability.

Zooming out to the global level, it has previously been suggested that the hollowing out of the meaning of the concept of sustainability was a process that began already in the wake of the the 'triple bottom line'-approach to sustainable development that became established in the aftermath of the Brundtland Report of 1987 (see e.g. Davidson 2010; Gressgård 2015). Once again stressing the importance of studying ideology dynamics in their spatial and temporal situatedness, the research presented in this paper nonetheless shows that in some contexts the ideological effects of the concept were still strong many decades later, pointing again to how such processes can be expected to vary across different times and places and in relation to different domains of practice. However, relating back to the above-discussed recoil-effect of attempts to impose singular and clear meanings upon concepts that have had their meaning hollowed-out by way of ideological functionality, it is very interesting to note the recent and ongoing global rush to sign up to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, launched in 2015. These can certainly be interpreted as a form of recoil against vagueness and an attempt to fill the concept of sustainability with more precise meaning. But even if the 17 goals, 169 subtargets and 232 approved indicators may come across as a very definite concretization of the meaning of the concept of sustainability, this plethora of specifications is, due to its sheer extensiveness, in itself imbued with myriads of manifest goal conflicts and a good dose of ambiguity (see further, e.g. Weitz et al. 2015; Persson, Weitz, and Nilsson 2016).

Thus, even if aiming at specifying the meaning of the concept of sustainability, it is still dubious whether the UN SDGs actually offer any more precise definition or rather just collects the myriads of disparate and sometimes conflicting meanings that have become attached to the concept over time, and as such offering little guidance regarding which of these should have overriding priority. Thus, paradoxically, the attempt to specify the meaning of the term through the articulation of the goals may actually serve to sustain its vagueness, since different actors can subsequently take comfort in that the concept now appears to have a precise and operationalizable meaning, that the problem of vagueness and ambiguity has been 'solved' and that everyone is now on 'the same page' – but still implicitly prioritize very different aspects and interpretations of them. The effect of the introduction of the goals may therefore well be that the concept again regains some of the ideological potency that it over time has lost in some contexts, such as those studied in this paper.

Unintentional reproduction of hegemony through instrumental action

An interesting aspect of our interview material is the suggestion by a senior urban manager in the Sydney context that sustainability is merely a 'naming convention' and that the unifying concept around which a 'consensus vision' is built might change over time, but that this will not affect the substance of policy work, as 'the same actions might happen on the ground but the name might change over time'. This opportunistic attitude towards the usage of ideological operators deserves some further reflection from the point of view of a relational understanding of ideology, considering that the concepts that become utilized as ideological signifiers seldom come with a completely 'clean slate' of meaning and are rather generally already deeply enwoven into dense networks of meaning-making. For even if the concrete meaning of a broadly invoked ideological signifier will eventually be hollowed out this does not preclude that it, in an earlier phase, comes with a more clearly defined programme for action attached, or in the language of Laclau; a more singular and aligned 'chain of equivalence'. As Laclau notes:

> a chain of equivalences can in principle expand indefinitely, but once a set of core links has been established, this expansion is limited. Some new links would simply be incompatible with the remainders of particularity which are already part of the chain[… .] There is a resistance of meaning which operates in the opposite direction. (Laclau 1996b, 321)

What the above quote suggests is that in the opportunistic employment of an already ideologically charged concept, it is difficult to dramatically rearticulate the meaning of this concept in relation to the already established 'baggage' of meaning that the concept carries with it in that particular context, i.e. the existing extant relations between ideas and suggestions for action that are already attached to the particular concept. Referring back to our empirical illustration, in both cases one can find expressions of the idea that that it is possible to simply substitute one central ideological signifier for another and nonetheless keep all the substantial policies in place without any complication. However, in light of a relational understanding of ideology, the substituting concepts that are brought in will most probably come with their already attached sets of associated ideas and actions.

To exemplify what is at stake here, it can for instance be reasonably assumed that actors marshalled under the banner of 'equality' in contemporary societies will be moving in a different direction with regards to the concrete political agenda than those rallied around 'competitiveness', and that it is not so simple to take the suggested actions previously promoted under the banner of 'equality' and simply rebrand them as being about 'competitiveness', without this actually affecting the expectations for action that this new concept will bring into play among different actors. This is not due to some form of logical necessity, but rather has to do with the historically contingent but nonetheless actually-existing networks of meaning currently woven around these two different terms. Of course, 'competitiveness' can be consciously rearticulated to connect to questions of, e.g. general social welfare, the importance of life-long education for all, etc. – but given the strong

associations of the concept to for instance market deregulation, the promotion of private enterprise and the lowering of taxes, it will require quite intense and deliberate work to shift those patterns of established associations.

To return to the example of Sydney, one of our interviewees there suggests that 'resilience' is 'the next flavor', and that shifting the discourse towards centreing on resilience instead of 'sustainability' nonetheless will not affect the focus of 'action on the ground'. This apprehension comes across as improbable in light of how 'resilience' comes with its own already well established discourse that to some extent points in very different directions with regard to formulations of problems and their possible solutions than what the existing discourse on sustainability does (see e.g. Davoudi 2014). Of course, as has already been discussed at length, the existing associations can over time be rearticulated, diluted or dissolved, through the facilitation of a possibility to connect a wide range of disparate ideas to the same concept, which generates the 'mythical space' characteristic of an ideological signifier, and with time hollowing out its meaning. However, the – *with time* – is here the crucial qualifier and in a first instance it is more probable that the introduction of a new quilting point will initially instead contribute to promoting the constructions of meaning that are already since before associated with the term, and thus, even if only unintentionally, contributing to reproducing these. The more established a concept is when it is seized upon to function as an ideological quilting point, the higher will be the density of existing, relationally constituted meaning that the concept will bring into play. This makes the opportunistic usage of such concepts, as evinced in our interview material, less innocent than they are portrayed to be by their proponents.

Concluding discussion

The purpose of this paper has been to contribute to the analysis of ideology dynamics in planning practice by providing a concretization and specification as to exactly when, and why, planning must be understood as ideological when conceptualized through a post-foundational approach. It has further aimed at demonstrating the analytical capacity of this approach by applying it to research materials consisting of planners discussing their own usage of the concept of sustainability in strategic planning processes in Cambridge and Sydney.

In the paper we have suggested that planners generally do not consider themselves to be ideologues, but rather tend to see themselves as practically-minded people, working hard to pragmatically solve concrete problems such as providing better quality housing, protecting important ecological values or contributing to the upgrading of public spaces. But, we argue, it is exactly in their efforts to generate the governance capacity today necessary to move forward on such ostensibly non-ideological issues that they become deeply embroiled in the social dynamics of ideology. The reason for this is that in fractured governance landscapes, planners are forced to employ ideologically charged concepts to bring together the disparate coalitions of actors that are the necessary requisite for generating any form of policy alignment or traction in these planning contexts. It is therefore important for planning research to constantly reflect on the ideological dimension of also mundane and apparently apolitical planning work, so as to consider how the dynamics of ideology are being reproduced in these actions – and to what effects.

With regards to the more specific discussions regarding the ideological career of the concept of sustainability in the strategic urban planning processes discussed in the paper, it is suggested that the ideological functionality of the sustainability concept might be on the wane, and other concepts are to an increasing extent fulfilling the ideological function that stainability has provided in recent decades. This is similar to how Brown (2016) has observed the decline of sustainability as an ideological master signifier. Brown ascribes this decline to the effects of global economic crisis and the related neoliberal policy responses. Czarniawska (2020) presents a similar analysis, but also adds another potential explanation for this demise: that of a change in fashion. Our empirical observations also speak to the importance of the latter. However, in addition to this, the approach to

ideology dynamics inspired by the work of Ernesto Laclau that is presented in the paper further provides a theoretical framework that does not only take such changes in ideological 'fashion' as expectable, but further provides an understanding of how, and why, such shifts occur. With regards to such shifts in ideological fashions, it may well be that sustainability is again coming into vogue – riding on the back of the influential push for the adaptation of the UN Sustainable Development Goals at different scale levels and in disparate contexts around the world. Although these goals purport to specify and concretize the meaning of the concept of sustainability, their sheer scope offers an ampleness of ambiguity (while at the same time, paradoxically communicating clarity) that may be just what is needed to again fuel the ideological potency of the concept.

To summarize, in total, four particular strengths of the analytical approach presented in the paper have been highlighted. Firstly, in contrast to other poststructuralist approaches, the understanding of ideology presented in the paper is empirically operationalizable also in relation to everyday planning work, and can thus provide a means for grasping and elucidating some of the more delicate 'microphysics' of ideology dynamics in the mundane practices of planning. Secondly, the presented approach helps highlight the dynamic and relational character of ideology, and facilitates an analysis of the spatiotemporal situatedness of ideology, as well as providing a means of conceptualizing some of the endogenous mechanisms that partially drive these dynamics. Thirdly, it generates affordances for performing ideology critique, but in a nuanced manner, not by condemning ideology as such – which is instead seen as endemic to any form of collective political action – but rather in relation to specific formations of ideology and their concrete drivers and effects. Finally, the understanding of ideology presented in the paper provides an additional important component of a more fully elaborated framework for the analysis of planning inspired by post-foundational political theory, which has previously more narrowly focused on the notion of postpolitics but deserves to be more thoroughly developed.

Within these latter debates, Swyngedouw (e.g. 2007) has recurrently and vigorously argued that the concept of sustainability is the exemplary post-political ruse, in that its deployment serves to depoliticize debates about the future and has generally served to obscure important political dividing lines. Also Metzger (2018) has suggested that recent years have witnessed the development and refinement of depoliticizing techniques in planning, such as advanced forms of enrolment through participation, which certainly deserve a conceptual framing of their own – e.g. under the label of postpolitics. However, many of the 'techno-managerial' techniques of consensus-engineering that Swygedouw lambasts as characteristic of the purported post-political condition, such as the utilization of vague but positively charged concepts as foundations for building broad alliances, are techniques for winning political traction that have a history which stretches way beyond the advent of planning in its modern form. But even if these techniques and practices are in no way unique for the present day and age they are nonetheless central to the inherently political dimension of planning and governance practice, and therefore important objects of critical planning research. Therefore we suggest that bringing in the concept of ideology into the post-foundational analytical framework within planning studies can be of help in illuminating some of these practices and their effects, thus further enriching and nuancing the developing post-foundational framework for analysing contemporary planning practice.

To summarize and round off, we feel that the argument presented in the paper has offered a plausible account of how ideology is perhaps most helpfully conceptualized not as some abstract soup that planners swim in, neither is it best understood as an ominous cloud that floats above their heads and weighs down on them and their actions. Rather, ideology can be understood as part of the bread and butter of strategic planning practice. It is a resource that planners work with to help them achieve their practical, pragmatic goals. But at the same time it is a double-edged sword, for when the practicing planner mobilizes an ideologically charged concept and makes use of its power to rally disparate actors to support her cause, she at the same time reproduces it as a societal keyword and thus contributes to strengthening its legitimacy, relevance and

political standing. Through this, the strategic planner in her everyday work inevitably becomes ideologically implicated and an entangled player in broader struggles for political hegemony.

Notes

1. Proceeding from a Kantian definition of 'concept', Davidson (2010) makes the point that it is philosophically-terminologically incorrect to define sustainability as the former, and that it should rather be defined as a nominal. However, for the sake of simplicity and also relating more closely to other, more social scientific understandings of 'concept', the latter will be retained as a designator for sustainability in the present context.
2. See Marchart (2007, 3). Here one could also relate to e.g. the works of e.g. Freeden (1996) and Latour (2003). For a discussion of similarities and points of divergence between the approaches of explicit post-foundationalists Laclau & Mouffe on the one hand and Freeden on the other, see Norval 2000, who sees these approaches as compatible and in fact complementary. An important point to raise here is that Latour, in line with his Deleuzian and Tardean influences, bases his approach on an ontology of excess, whereas the Lacan-influenced work of Laclau, and even more explicitly – Žižek – are very strongly premised on an ontology of lack. However, as Norval 2000 intimates, a post-foundational approach to politics in general and ideology specifically could just as well be grounded in a philosophy of ontological excess, given that the Lacan-influenced idea of a lack of a natural object of society is nonetheless conditioned upon a positing of an ungraspable 'excess of world' (the Lacanian Real), precluding any possibility for final closure.
3. For a discussion of the similarities and differences between the related, and in planning theory better known, philosophy o Slavoj Žižek and the approach of Laclau, see e.g. Žižek 1989. See also Grange (2014) who draws on both the more strongly Lacanian/Žižekian work of Gunder (e.g. Gunder 2010) and more directly on the work of Laclau and Laclau & Mouffe to analyse ideology dynamics in planning. Compared to these previous important and valuable contributions to a post-foundational conceptualization of ideology in relation to planning the present paper adds a degree of specificity to the conceptualization of ideology, in contrast to Gunder's assertion that "ideology is everything", citing Žižek, or Grange's definition of ideology as "all-pervasive, penetrating all human relations" (Grange 2014, 2672). In addition, these previous contributions also move on a more abstract level of analysis, and we believe that a further developed post-foundational approach may help us come closer to the concrete micro-dynamics of ideology as they are reproduced in and through planning practice, particularly highlighting the practices through which planners themselves come to unwittingly become complicit in the reproduction of ideology.
4. It can be noted that this approach to politics very much resonates with that offered by Latour (2003).
5. Philosophically a distinction is sometimes made between a *word*, denoting a linguistic signifier, and the related *concept*, i.e. the various partially overlapping and/or conflicting meanings word is/has been made to signify (see e.g. Koselleck 2002). The understanding of the relationship between signifier and signified in relation to ideology will be developed thoroughly in the paper, but even so, the terms 'word' and 'concept' will here be used synonymously in the context of the argument to refer to more specifically to the signifier, i.e. the linguistic sign or word itself.
6. The project in question was Swedish Research Council/VR proj. 2014-01414, "Organizing Sustainable Cities". For an introduction to the material-semiotic understanding of the concept of actant, see Latour (2005).
7. See the dedicated website of the city: www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/vision/sustainable-sydney-2030

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