

grapple with the complexities of French planning, so that in turn I could brief my students. And I had a hard time of it. Such French sources as I could find, and the few English sources which then existed, all seemed to be based on assumptions that I did not seem to share. Intrigued, I dug deeper.' Sharpe (1975: 26–7) makes a more general 'ontological' point that 'countries are really very different', and he pointed to the 'immense difficulties in making comparisons of public policies in different countries and of the machinery and processes through which policies are given effect'.

This view, highlighting the importance of culture, would suggest that to understand planning in a different country from our own we need to understand how planning is interpreted and understood by those who work in the system and interact with it. For example, Booth (1996: 2), interested in how development is controlled in Britain and France, writes 'Britain and France have radically different understandings of the nature of the state, of the nature and purpose of administration, and by extension of the way that [planning] control should be practiced'. The concept of 'town and country planning' as used in Britain follows, then, from a particular view of planning rooted in a set of institutions and a history which shapes how planners in Britain (and planning academics like Booth mentioned above) see planning. This concept is different from the concepts of 'urbanisme' or 'aménagement du territoire' which are used in the context of French planning.

One might conclude from this perspective that it is a sufficiently challenging task to study the system of planning in another country without introducing a comparative element. Here the aim of research would be essentially descriptive. Cropper (1986) indicates that an ethnographic account might be the aim in these studies with the purpose being to present as authentically as possible, the experience of planning, and of those in planning in the place in question. This would provide an understanding of planning in that place of how and why actors operate in the way they do in that locality. But there is a practical dimension to this: how well-versed a researcher is in the language of the country in which the study is to be conducted, language being a key mechanism through which social reality is represented (see the discussion in Chapter 8 on discourse).

Following the logic of this argument, in order to understand how 'planning' operates in another country requires that a considerable length of time to be devoted by comparative researchers on their research learning the culture of planning, compared with studies restricted to their own country. Established research staff may have this luxury but students may