Preface and acknowledgements

This book has taken a long time to complete. In part, this reflects the fact that our object of investigation – the ongoing debates in the UK to problematise, frame and reframe a policy of ‘sustainable aviation’ – has constantly mutated. In fact, as we show in our final chapter, it is still a hotly contested issue. It is also because our interest in aviation and airports policy stretches back to our initial efforts to critically explain the emergence and impact of local opposition and protest to the building of a second runway at Manchester airport in the mid-1990s. Following a phrase employed in a Times leader, we explored the dynamics of the so-called ‘Vegans and Volvos’ alliance, which brought together local residents, direct action protesters and environmental social movements in a novel coalition. This coalition echoed the strategies and tactics of successful campaigns against road-building projects in the 1980s and 1990s, and thus extended the focus of environmental movements in the transport field. For our part, we endeavoured to analyse the way in which the practices of campaigners and local residents began to reshape the evolution of aviation policy in the UK more generally, even though their particular campaign proved unsuccessful. As protest against airport expansions developed, we continued our analysis of the different logics of collective action exhibited by various forms of citizen protest in the campaigns against the proposed expansion of Heathrow and of Stansted during the 1990s, and then into the first decade of the new century.

But following the announcement by the New Labour government that it intended to formulate a new long-term strategy for aviation, we also began to focus on the lengthy and widespread public consultations leading up to the publication of the air transport white paper in 2003, and the logics of aviation policy more generally. Our various
articles and essays on these topics not only charted and analysed these events and processes, but they also provided a vital context for helping us to understand and explain the evolution of aviation and airports policy in the UK over the last fifteen or twenty years.

Of course, the political import of aviation and airports in the UK (and elsewhere) stretches further back than this. Ever since the 1950s, various local communities, environmental activists and groups have viewed the construction and expansion of airports with suspicion and even hostility. The different proposals to build a third London airport in the 1960s and 1970s, and the intense political struggles they evinced, which culminated in the opening of the new terminal at Stansted airport in 1991, have been the subject of great public and academic interest. The battles that arose from subsequent proposals to expand Heathrow, Stansted and other regional airports, which we examine in depth in this book, have stimulated similar public interest and protest. Struggles over the building and expansion of airports have surfaced in all major industrial societies in recent times. Battles over Roissy-Charles de Gaulle, Nantes, Frankfurt, Narita and Schiphol, to name but a few, have shaped our understanding of the UK context, though our study has restricted its comparative focus to UK airports only.

Our concern with airports policy and the aviation industry in the UK since the 1950s is reflected in multiple problematisations, which we set out in chapter 2 of this book. Yet our overarching framing of the problem concerns the dynamic interplay between policy-making practices, on the one hand, and the political and policy coalitions which strive to shape the policy agenda and various outcomes, on the other. This is reflected in one of our key problematisations, which focuses on the seemingly intractable tension between aviation as a driver of economic growth, and the need to protect the social and natural environment from the deleterious impact of noise and aviation emissions. Indeed, although this problematisation has become dominant only during the last decade, like Marx’s (1973: 106–7) conceptualisation of the role of ‘one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest’ in any particular society, it provides ‘a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity’.

Equally, our concern with these various issues draws upon our interest in developing a distinctive poststructuralist approach to policy-making, especially with respect to questions about problem
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formulation, the framing and reframing of key societal issues, and the logic of policy change and inertia. Poststructuralist policy analysis, which we set out in the first chapter, provides the theoretical approach with which we seek to problematise and analyse the events and processes we describe in the book. Recent years have brought many new voices into the study of government, politics and policy analysis. More traditional, descriptive approaches, which focused on in-depth case studies of particular institutions or policy domains, have been challenged by more scientific paradigms, which have stressed the role of law-like explanations, or the importance of causal mechanisms, both of which ought to yield testable predictions. Interpretivists have rejected these more scientific approaches in the name of critical theory, more ethnographically orientated research strategies, or various forms of discourse analysis. The universalism of the scientific model has thus been questioned by more particularistic and singular analyses of governance and policy-making practices.

Our approach seeks to steer a course between the search for law-like explanations and the production of purely particularistic interpretations which self-consciously reject all general theoretical concepts and logics. ‘Theory-informed empirical research’ is one way of describing our approach, though this label can cover many different methods and logics of explanation. We accept this description, as long as it does not mean the subsumption of particular processes and events under general laws or overweening causal mechanisms, which cannot be shaped or ‘distorted’ in their application, and as long as it recognises the key role of constructing problematisations of particular phenomena and processes. Logics, practices and regimes are thus employed in this study, and not laws, causal mechanisms or contextualised interpretations.

Of course, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Only our specific interpretations and explanations of the problems we explore, using the approach we elaborate, can vindicate our methods, strategies and concepts. In developing this perspective, our ideas and approach have been shaped by their public testing in various forums and seminars. These include a Research Seminar Series sponsored by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), ‘Discourse Theory Network in Methodological Innovation’, which was convened by David Howarth, Aletta Norval and Ewen Speed from April 2008 until March 2010. The seminar series gave us the chance to present the basic elements of our theoretical approach, as well as various
substantive arguments pertaining to aviation, many of which eventually found their way into the book.

We have also been fortunate enough to present different parts of this book in numerous conferences, seminars, workshops and departmental seminars over the last ten or so years, as well as at the Essex Summer School in Discourse Analysis, where we set out our approach and its application to the case of UK aviation. In particular, we presented four of the main empirical chapters of the book at the annual Interpretivist Policy Analysis (IPA) conferences at Kassel (2009), Grenoble (2010), Cardiff (2011) and Tilburg (2012). Our approach to rhetoric, policy analysis and sustainable aviation was delivered at the annual Political Studies Association conference in Manchester in April 2009. We also had the opportunity to present our analysis of political economy and discourse theory to a conference at Cardiff University in May 2009. The revised version of this paper became the third chapter of the book, which we read to Departmental Seminars at De Montfort and Nottingham Universities in the autumn of 2009. The material comprising chapter 7 was presented to the Social Science Seminar Series at the School of Environmental Sciences at the University of East Anglia in May 2012. Many of the reflections that inform this book can be traced back to earlier discussions, beginning in January 2008, when we participated in a workshop organised by the Green Alliance, which was attended by Lord Anthony Giddens, Dr Paul Hilder and Steven Hale. They took shape and benefited from our many interactions with Eva Sørensen and Jacob Torfing, and their colleagues, during our visits over the years to the Centre for Democratic Network Governance at the University of Roskilde. During one such visit, we set out our initial thoughts on the mediatisation of airport struggles to participants at an international doctoral workshop in media, communication and journalism kindly organised in 2009 by Signe Jørgensen. We advanced these ideas, as well as our approach to ‘policy as practice’ more generally, with doctoral students at King Charles University in Prague in February 2011, where we were welcomed by Martin Nekola and Anna Durnova.

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