

Jean Hillier/Patsy Healey (ed.): The Ashgate Research Companion to Planning Theory. Conceptual Challenges for Spatial Planning

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Review: *Frank I. Müller*

◆ All articles in this volume address the following fundamental question: how can planning best leverage its *other* – chaos, unplanned change, life’s creativity – in sum, the unplannable factors that materialize in environmental, political and economic crises?

In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Planning Theory* Patsy Healey, specialist in architecture and urbanism, and Jean Hillier, expert in epistemologies of planning and ethics, recollect a multidisciplinary variety of power-critical accounts to “planning theory”, while geography (nine “representatives”) clearly dominates. Paraphrasing the introduction by Jean Hillier, the central concept of planning theory, “spatial planning”, refers to ways of conceptualizing the distribution, interrelation and circulation of things and humans in space as well as its sustaining rules of power and the agency of the actors involved in controlling regulation (1-34). Written for planning practitioners and for academics, the companion neither prescribes one single definition of what planning ought to do nor limits planning to a certain corpus of involved actors. Rather, the compilation critically reflects the theoretical and practical complexities inherent to planning theory. Each of the 17 articles trigger an active reading experience in rural and urban spatial planning.

Planning means looking at crisis from a temporal and spatial distance, a distance that the epistemological fathers of Editor Jean Hillier, Bergson and Deleuze, call virtuality: planning calls for agency while always remaining virtual

and future oriented (12). Furthermore it opens a political dimension to theorizing. Planning not only has to reflect on how things are – to improve them or keep the status quo – but also must imagine a better future and ask how we want things to be, and therefore includes desires, fantasies and emotions. The editors argue for spatial planning to become praxis-in-process – a process of influencing the spatial distribution of resources and humans and land-use activities by “doing theory.”(3). The central, constructivist, objective of the volume is to reflect on the ontological difference between planning and actual change by presenting methodological tools..

Theorizing planning, as the editors add, has to include the internationalization of knowledge production and a detailed understanding of the working of power. The constructivist path towards the steering of spatial relations, one might expect, could locate itself inside co-existing knowledge and production systems, and their seemingly incommensurable ethics and regulative orders. Does it do so?

The book is divided into three parts: “Perspectives on Spatial Planning Practice”, “Conceptual Challenges for Spatial Planning Theory“, and “Spatial Planning in Complexity”, each of which addresses the experimental character on planning praxis. The multifaceted topics range from governance (Gualini) and ecological sustainability (Swyngedouw), via whiteness (Huxley), indigenous rights and coloniality (Howitt and Lunkapis) to urban informality (Roy) and the “utopian city” (Pinder). In struc-

turing the contributions, the editors opt against a “controlled pluralist structure based on a theoretical frame”. They understand “the book-rhizome” as “a product of the connections between its component chapters” to which “the individual chapters perform ‘lines’ which transgress the boundaries between disciplinary traditions, between theory and practice, making connections between papers, becoming intertwined in readers’ minds to provoke new modes of thought” (p.21). The tripartite structure does not prescribe an order for reading, even less so because the conceptual debates, the papers intervene in, interrelate, and crosscut those lines. In accordance with the invitation to a rhizomatic reading, this review addresses articles related to my central interests: urban informality, the post-colonial metropolis, spatialized power, and planning epistemologies.

Planning and the city

I found Ananya Roy’s chapter to be among the most interesting articles working on “the urban”. The professor of City and Regional Planning at Berkeley is the leading contemporary academic in de-constructing the notion of informality; and to shift its understanding from “unplanned, chaotic and disorderly forms of urbanism” towards its entanglement “with structures of planning” relating state and community action (87). From this perspective she questions not only the planners’ fantasy to effectively tame space, but also the prevalence of euro-centered geographical epistemologies that are inherent in it, and that idealize a neutral administrative planning body opposed to a deviant dis-order, exercised by the urban poor and their informal economy.

Planning and the spatialization of power

I found Howitt’s and Lunkapi’s work on colonialism to be exemplary, due to its close

grounding in region-specific findings. It addresses the way “indigenous Rights” claimed by Aborigines in Australia challenge spatial planning. Against a presumed political neutrality of planning, it shows the extent to which spatial planning can include the silencing of rights and of non-technocratic planning. The coexistence and heterogeneity of histories, voices, cultures and lifestyles seriously questions the adequateness of Eurocentric “top-down” planning tools, as well as the exclusionary effect of spatialization when it circumvents alternative approaches: what the authors call “insurgent” and “transformative” planning and communicative, participatory action.

Epistemologies of planning

Articles on epistemologies of planning face a constructivist paradox: Does reality exist only if and when it is being planned, and only then? Various accounts that range from Foucault’s genealogy via Dewey’s pragmatism and Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory to complexity theory argue that planning, as its existence in the human activity vocabulary is undeniable, should be limited in its self-confidence to effectively manage, steer, govern, or whatever else metaphors express spatial control.

For taking recourse to Cybernetics (Ashby 1956!), a discipline “concerned with the functioning of all machines”, I consider Karadi-mitriou’s approach as the most innovative one in this volume. The expert in spatial planning, complexity theory and urban regeneration policies states an easy formula: the bigger the difference in complexity between controlling and controlled system the greater the necessity of the former to be restrictive. In other words, a planning system (a state, a firm) will fail if it cannot either strengthen its restrictive functionality or its internal complexity and participation-building channels of communication

that negotiate self-organizing social systems. Thus, total control is not only “undesirable” but also practically impossible, and successful planning has to accept the “unmanageability of reality” (443). Somehow I found the argumentation paralleling that of Swyngedouw (Trouble with Nature) who, by deconstructing notions of “nature” and “sustainability” shows the contingency of effective control. Against the necessarily “violent act” that is planning, he proposes to reclaim “proper democracy and proper democratic public spaces” (314) of enunciation and affirmation of difference.

Critics

The volume shows that planning, if it refuses a transcendental subject’s view on reality, remains an open process. It can never fully control; but it is political in re-figuring space and social relations of power.

There is much to learn from reading this book: that planning is a complex activity including a variety of scales, institutions, actors and norms; that it has a temporal dimension, too; and that its praxis goes beyond developing and applying administrative tools. The contributions translate basic questions of practical knowledge and theoretical philosophy (i.e., in the Kantian formulation, “what we ought to do”, and “what can we know”) into: Should we plan? Whose living and construction experience can we account on? What are the limits of control? To which the volume’s authors also add the power-critical: Who is legitimated to plan for whom? I appreciated very much the deep and explicit encounters with philosophy, which, coming to a point of critique, is nevertheless still European-/US-dominated.

The index reveals that the countries named in the volume sum up to five. Theory building on planning, one could conclude, is not space relative. The geographical bias of the compila-

tion lies in the global North-West as the editors admit (p.5). Thus, references to Latin America or other regions are few; a colonialism-sensitive perspective, except for the one mentioned article, is painfully absent. This is surprising, considered that colonial re-ordering and spatial planning have such importance in the history of global inequalities, especially in colonizing command headquarters, i.e. metropolis. To give an example: Gualini’s contribution is critical towards European based definitions of “the State”. He discusses the major shift in the governance debate, namely the de-centering of involved actors and the overcoming of spatial and scalar fixity and observes an “empowerment of local societies” in challenging the idea of a monolithic state as site of regulation (76). Such a Foucault-inspired perspective on the concrete logics of regulation and the actual rules of conduct – the “Governmentality” – could be enriched by insights on practices of the State from other parts of the world. Examples would be Shalini Randeria’s work on India’s “Cunning State”, or Markus-Michael Mueller’s perspective on policing in Mexico (“Negotiated State”) who argue against a top-down theory, and demand openness towards historically-established fragmentations of space and ordering power.

To contest the Northern/Western universalism through experiences from other parts of the world would also be coherent with the stated aim of internationalizing knowledge production. That perspective would need to understand the active role of space itself. This shortcoming in the volume is also found in Scott’s two recent compilations, *Readings in Urban Theory* (Wiley 2011) and *Readings in Planning Theory* (2011), which also remain silent on the location of knowledge production and its political dimension. For a perspective assuming the importance of colonial difference and located experience in planning, I

would recommend the compilation edited by Roy and Ong (Wiley 2011), “Worlding Cities”.

Beyond or beneath the complex theoretical challenges posed by the authors the pragmatic question remains, whom this book can be recommended to. The Companion is strongest when it brings into one volume so many academic experts in spatial planning. It is strong for its call to understand planning theory as agency; yet its weakness I see in failing to present examples of fruitful translations of knowledge and action. Most definitely this is not a beginners’ guide to planning – it is written *by academics for academics*, and among these, for theory aficionados. For a real dialogue between practitioners and the academia would need more grounding, real world examples and inductive argumentation. So, while the editors urge planning practitioners to lean back from action and reflect upon, “what is the action for” (14), these in turn, I suppose, would regret the helpfulness of flying on the philosophical heights of the volume. A reader interested in knowing, what planners do, in consequence, will stay unsatisfied. ♦