

Planning is Dead, For Now

Urban planning has succumbed to the hegemonic neoliberal episteme. No longer are cities seen as oeuvres, they are now “unseen” spaces that exist as a backdrop to support the market. To contend with these new constraints, urban planning research has shifted its focus to remain relevant and competitive. This essay will explore the dominant types of research that planning scholars currently undertake as a result of this shift. To accomplish this, three questions will be addressed. First, what is the neoliberal episteme, and, by extension, how did it emerge? Second, how does this episteme affect planning scholars? This section will address current trends in planning research and pedagogy. Finally, where to go from here? This final question will describe potential steps to reassert the role of planners based on the work of prominent scholars.

Emergence of the Neoliberal Episteme

In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott traces the cause of “the most tragic episodes of state-initiated social engineering”. He attributes these episodes to four complimentary elements: the administrative ordering of nature and society through abstraction, simplification, and standardization, a high-modernist ideology, an authoritarian state willing and able to wield its coercive power, and a prostrate civil society. The key element for the purposes of this paper is the high-modernist ideology, characterized by an unwavering belief in the ability of scientific and technical progress to solve the world’s problems as well as the objectification of the urban environment and society at-large. This ideology privileges technocratic knowledge above all else, but to what end? Scott argues that, in conjunction with the other elements, this high-modernist ideology is a means to legitimize state power. Using the example of cadastral mapping, he writes:

this transformative power resides not in the map, of course, but rather in the power possessed by those who deploy the perspective of that particular map. A private corporation aiming to maximize sustainable timber yields, profit, or production will map its world according to this logic and will use what power it has to ensure that the logic of its map prevails. The state has no monopoly on utilitarian simplifications. What the state does at least aspire to, though, is a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. That is surely why, from the seventeenth century until now, the most transformative maps have been those invented and applied by the most powerful institution in society: the state.

(Scott, 1999)

This is power is due to the fact that mapping is a process of knowledge creation, rather than revelation. Maps are imbued with an internal logic – the values, judgments, and agendas – by those that draft them (Kitchin et al., 2009). Maps have a purpose. However, the process of mapping is one of simplification and abstraction, requiring, in Scott's words, "a narrowing of vision." It alienates the urban from society, making the environment ostensibly amenable to the tools of those in power (the state in the Scott's example). This embodies the failure of high-modernism, the condemnation of the city to obsolescence by the functional demands of power and control, thus destroying any possibility of a coherent urban life (Habermas, 1989).

In the wake of the failures of social engineering emerged a new order: neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is an encompassing term used to categorize public policy related to globalization, financialization, deregulation, corporate power, and more. While the shift away from state power is markable, the tools used to ingrain power are strikingly compatible. Most importantly, neoliberalism holds the consonant belief that science is the pinnacle of human achievement (and also devoid of meaning). Therefore, it is fitting that Scott goes on to compare capitalism to modernity, writing: "large-scale capitalism is just as much an agency of homogenization,

uniformity, grids, and heroic simplification as the state is, with the difference being that, for capitalists, simplification must pay” (Scott, 1999). It is no surprise, then, that the tools of modernism – abstraction, simplification, and standardization – have survived, repurposed for a new goal: efficiency for the sake of profit-seeking. This rise of neoliberalism, of the profits-over-all-else mentality, is what I call the neoliberal episteme.

Foucault theorized episteme as “the ‘apparatus’ which makes possible the separation, not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not be characterised [*sic*] as scientific” (Foucault, 1970). The neoliberal episteme is then the hegemonic discourse which situates neoliberal research as objectively true. It is a social construct that shapes habits and informs ethics. It forces other forms of research to conform to the standards laid out by this encompassing discourse, a trend that is not new. In the mid-twentieth century, for instance, Carl Hempel laid out his deductive-nomological model for scientific inquiry, suggesting that true scientific explanation is derived from the interaction of particular facts and general laws. This model was derived from his belief that the motivation for scientific research was “man’s persistent desire to improve his strategic position in the world by means of dependable methods for predicting and, whenever possible, controlling the events that occur in it” (Hempel et al., 1962). What is unique about the neoliberal episteme is its pervasiveness. Where Hempel’s vision of scientific research was constrained to scientific research, neoliberalism is a political-economic and sociocultural identity.

What does scientific research in the neoliberal episteme look like? Following neoliberalism’s ideological constraints, research is profit-driven. This is not always evident, but the implications on planners will be explored in the following section. Neoliberal research also seeks to be objective and devoid of meaning. As a result, the most legitimate forms of research under this ideology are strictly quantitative. There is little room for hermeneutics in the

neoliberal research regime. Finally, in conjunction with the preference for market-based solutions over state planning, research is often decentralized, devolved to the local level. This, again, will be explored in the following section, but what I am alluding to is “bottom-up” planning.

Planning and Neoliberalism

One of the consistent themes of this paper thus far is neoliberalism’s opposition to the state. It is easy to see why a movement like this gained traction after the failures of state planning throughout the twentieth century – detailed by Scott and by well-known events like the Cold War. This theme is so important because urban planners are creatures of the state. Thus, the ideology that devalues the state also devalues urban planners. As a result, the role of planners has shifted dramatically in order to stay relevant. Grand plans by the likes of Robert Moses or Le Corbusier have been replaced by piecemeal interventions. This is most evident in the trend towards “bottom-up” planning, which ostensibly decentralizes the control of planning interventions to the people that are effected directly. In practice, however, this is realized in one of two ways. First, responsibility for planning interventions is placed on people with no experience, no resources, and no time. At best, this yields a new community garden, a mural, or the installation of a handful of “Neighborhood Watch” signs. Nothing against any of these examples, but the idea that murals will save Detroit is laughable. This type of bottom-up planning is simple social appeasement. The second type of bottom-up planning results when a local group, often a nonprofit staffed with professionals, receives funding to carry out some larger-scale intervention. Rehabilitating abandoned properties and building affordable housing are two common planning interventions undertaken by the booming nonprofit sector. However, these organizations exist solely through the goodwill of others. The custodial rights for these

interventions are located in and mediated by distant decision-makers. Ostensibly for local empowerment, this is capital dictating a favorable urban planning agenda.

The neoliberal episteme is also evident in planning pedagogy. Most notably is the need for objectivity. This is evident in the deification of statistical methods. Statistics and data-driven coursework is now required universally. Even those with no interest in statistical methods must be familiar with them in order to comprehend the extant literature and to contribute “legitimately” to the body of knowledge. The quantification of research is almost necessary to receive funding, as well. Planning is not unique in this respect, likely because statistics are ostensibly objective and value-free, both desirable in the neoliberal research regime.

While the quantification of research is certainly concerning, there remains a deeper issue. Why? Neoliberal ideology spouts the benefits of a decentralized, market-driven economy; local power over state control. In a sense, this holds true. Universities are decentralized and now serve as a means of entry to the job-market. This positions students as consumers:

the consuming student seeks out the simplest and most economic way of procuring their degree and in so doing internalises [*sic*] this form of consumer identity [and] places themselves outside the intellectual community and perceive themselves as passive consumers of education who abdicate their own responsibility for learning. (Naidoo and Williams, 2015)

Students want an experience and skills that will guarantee employability, not knowledge that will change the status quo. In that sense, education has succumb to the “race to the bottom” mentality, every school converging on the same values that attract student-consumers. This ideology requires an internal, top-down logic to reproduce itself. Professional schools, like planning and business, are founded on a positivist epistemology that depends on explicit goals. This has resulted in a clear hierarchy of science, one in which research is filtered through

education and into practice (Schön, 1983). So while universities are decentralized, it is the fact that they all must operate through the same logic that causes issue. They are all controlled by the thirst for capital.

In summation, the field of planning as it stands today is wildly misdirected, corrupted by the neoliberal episteme. It is quantitatively-oriented, taking its epistemological foundation for granted. Ostensibly bottom-up, planning interventions are either ineffective or are mediated from the top-down. In planning research, the same is true. Funding for research is determined by higher authorities with an agenda. While parading as objective, neoliberal values are attached to every dollar circulating through academia. This cycle has been reinforced by a new era of student-consumers all focused on the same end: jobs. In the near-term, this is our fate. There is a hope, however, that we can shift the trajectory just enough in the near-term to alter the long-term status quo.

The Future of Planning

In *Seeing Like A State*, Scott traces the how episteme came to dominate metis, the “wide array of practical skills and acquired intelligence in responding to a constantly changing natural human environment.” In Scott’s view, reasserting the “indispensable role of practical knowledge, informal processes, and improvisation in the face of unpredictability” is enough to rebalance the equilibrium between metis and episteme (Scott, 1999). This solution is much too simple, for if reasserting metis was all that was needed to counter the hegemonic episteme, then episteme would not be dominant in the first place. Don Schön takes Scott’s solution one step further, suggesting the issue is one of rigor or relevance. The solution he advocates for is an epistemology of practice, one which deemphasizes the role of science in favor of design (Schön, 1983). I take his conception of science to be narrowly neoliberal science. Thus, Schön aims to disadvantage the quantifiable and technical research that is synonymous with present-day science

in favor of more fluid and spontaneous practices. Like Scott, Schön wants to reassert metis, but he also wants to actively discount episteme. I do not believe that either of these solutions goes far enough. As I see it, the solution is clear: planning must first consciously acknowledge its epistemic constraints. It must then move to break out of these constraints. Planning research must take place outside of the neoliberal ideology; instead of being controlled by the episteme ideology it must inform it. How can we reposition planning so as not to be decentralized and market-driven?

Herein is a plea for the reassertion of normative social theory in planning research. There must be an explicit willingness to problematize the goals we, as planners and educators, take for granted. This is supported by David Thatcher, who proposed the normative case study as a means to contribute to value rationality. He cites the ability of normative reflection “to rethink the ideals to which we are committed” (Thatcher, 2006). Similarly, Danish planner Bent Flyvbjerg echoes this case for more normative approaches to scientific research, writing:

the purpose of social science is not to develop theory, but to contribute to society’s practical rationality in elucidating where we are, where we want to go, and what is desirable according to diverse sets of values and interests. The goal of the phronetic approach becomes one of contributing to society’s capacity for value-rational deliberation and action. (Flyvbjerg, 2001)

It is the imbuing of research with values that will move planning research outside of its neoliberal epistemic constraints. This process allows for the challenging of goals, which in turn weakens the objective truths legitimized by the episteme. To put it another way, the quantification of social science research has created the false perception that anyone able to interpret statistics is intellectually capable of assessing truth claims. I am unsure if this perception can be dismantled from within, and therefore needs to be attacked from the outside by

reasserting the importance of technocratic expertise through qualitative means. To avoid the failures of high modernity, this technocratic knowledge must be intimately tied with praxis so as to remain accessible to all, as Flyvbjerg suggests with his conception of the phronetic approach to science. It is this grounding of knowledge in experience and context that will allow planning to contribute to society in significant and valid ways.

This yields a final question: how can we be sure that significant and valid planning is also truthful? John Dewey would suggest an educated and communicative public acting within a democracy would serve this means well, democracy as a truth machine (Dewey, 1927). This is, at some levels, an argument for pluralism – or at least not against it. But pluralism is not all good. Dangerous ideas and falsities can still proliferate in a well-educated and transparent democracy; truth is not a matter of popular opinion. How is one supposed to defeat falsities that are reinforced by the prevailing episteme? Planning and the rest of the social sciences must establish independent, credible agents of truth. These are apolitical experts that will serve as a reference point to evaluate research, separating the good from the politicized.(opinion). They will be barometers of truth. This, in conjunction with Dewey’s educated and communicative public may be the answer. It will allow for a rich public debate that shifts away from the true-false dichotomy, focusing at last on the truth and truth alone.

To end, it is fitting to come back to the conception of the city that has been interspersed throughout. The city was once a collective, evolving space created and recreated to meet the demands of those who used it. High-modernism attempted to flip this, creating space in an effort to control how those in it. Neoliberalism has continued on this trend, conceptualizing cities as producers of capital, of space to be consumed. I believe that it is through these epistemic conceptions of the urban that planners can begin anew, challenging the current order.

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