

Moral Geographies: The Planner in Place

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Regional planning and applied geography are distinct fields, but the conceptual spaces and practices of each have considerable areas of overlap. For both, the objects of study are often places and, at a larger scale, regions. In their respective professional discourses, place and region tend to be characterized as location in abstract space, for example generic places within an urban spatial structure or types of regions within a national space. This relatively limited conceptualization neglects the specificity of place as the context for human action (Entrikin, 1991). Place as context or milieu is always understood from a point of view, and this link with a subject would seem to be an important theme in professional discourses that share a concern for normative relationships between people and their environments.

Indeed, place and region gain importance in modern societies because of their inherent normative dimensions. To be a part of a place or a region is to be part of a constellation of settings that help construct and reinforce individual and collective identities. These identities are often fragmented and may involve a variety of spatial scales. They become further complicated through their linkages with cultural definitions of insider and outsider, core and frontier, and self and other. Modern concerns with moral disorientation are connected to the cultural frameworks that constitute the fragmented and mutable human geographies of everyday life. This rich cultural dimension draws attention to the limits of treating place and region as purely spatial objects or as simply outcomes of social forces, and instead encourages their reinterpretation as part of the complex and densely textured moral geographies of modern societies.

In their professional practices, the applied geographer and the regional planner often seek to remove themselves from the web of these moral geographies. Their intellectual tool kits contain a universalistic logic in which place is a generic category, for example a slum, a transportation corridor, an historic district, or an underdeveloped frontier region that can be treated by the planner's universalistic

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therapies as in regional development and urban renewal. Planners see the problems they address as related to social concerns that occupy particular locations in a spatial grid. The problems can literally be mapped into the space of the city or region, as can their solutions. Local knowledge helps to provide context, but it is not given the same weight as more universalistic formulas in the construction of the built environment or in development strategies for regions. Only very recently has there been an explicit consideration of the way that planners and applied geographers work both on *and* in places and regions.

This change in outlook is evident in intellectual debate surrounding the role of the professional expert and the application of knowledge. The perspective of the expert has been challenged as has the relationship of point of view to final outcome. For place-makers such as applied geographers and planners, this change is reflected in the concern about the value of a 'distanced' perspective in creating better living environments and the ability to create ideal environments through the application of rationalist principles of design and social order.

RATIONALITY, ENVIRONMENT, AND POINT OF VIEW

Last year, the Whitney Museum in New York displayed a work by the artist Francesc Torres entitled *Assyrian Paradigm*, which is a model of a city constructed of playing cards and ruled by a pair of dice. The architectural critic for *The New York Times*, Herbert Muschamp (1992), used this artwork as a counterpoint to his observation about the underlying premise of the planning profession, which is that: "the training planners undergo, their titles, licenses and job descriptions are all based on the assumption that reason can influence events." Stated another way, these credentials are based on the belief that reason can help build better environments, which will in turn have a positive influence on events.

Muschamp's article concerns the impact on the planning profession of the 1992 civil disturbances in Los Angeles. He discusses the hope of regional and urban planners that these events will once again bring issues of metropolitan regional planning to the American political foreground. For this to happen, however, the planning profession would have to present its visionary, as opposed to its bureaucratic, face. For many in the United States, planners contribute to the problems of urban decay or regional decline rather than to their solutions. If surveyed, many Americans would no doubt choose a metropolitan region organized by chance to one organized according to the rationalist principles of urban and regional planners.

Public skepticism about planning in the United States parallels intellectual debate about the role of the planner in modern societies. Both have centered upon the question of whose interests dictate what constitutes a better environment. For much of the 1970s and the 1980s this debate has concerned the role of the state and the technical expert in modern life. Underlying these issues of

modernity, rationalization, and technical expertise is a more fundamental question about knowledge and its application. In applied fields such as planning, who decides the questions to be asked and the methods to be used? Who determines significance? Critics of the role of experts in modern societies focus upon the anti-democratic conditions created by allowing experts to judge social significance, and hence to act as arbiters and manipulators of social values.

From the political left, this criticism has centered on the class interests that shape the planning profession, its perspectives and policies. Planners are viewed as the pawns of capital and thus the servants of the capitalist class or defenders of the status quo. Thus, for David Harvey (1985), planners cannot escape the ideological cage that society has constructed for them.

More recent critical analysis has considered the planner or expert as subject. This theme has been addressed by a loose coalition of critics, whom I shall label as postmodernists and who are linked by their concerns with polyvocality and empowerment. For example, postmodern feminists have called attention to the ways in which planners have been complicitous in creating environments that ignore or actively undermine the interests of women. Despite the often abstract tone of some of these criticisms, left-leaning postmodernists support a viewpoint of the planner solidly grounded in the interests of the dispossessed. Expressed in the terms of philosopher Thomas Nagel, these critics advocate a 'view from somewhere' as opposed to the 'view from nowhere' of the scientific expert (Nagel, 1986).

The incorporation of these themes into the discourse of professional planners has, not surprisingly, led to a division within the ranks. In his recent review of planning and applied geography, Robert Lake (1966) characterizes this division as a growing split between planning theory and planning practice. According to Lake:

While planning theorists are responding to capital restructuring by discovering the critical politics of postmodernism, planning practice has turned in another direction, towards a 'new entrepreneurialism' involving direct participation with private capital in economic development ventures. (1992:417-19)

Lake's rather bleak picture of modern planning, torn between critical theory and opportunistic practice, suggests that this traditional gap in planning has become an abyss. If his characterization is correct, it would appear that planners no longer share the model of their profession as an applied social science.

The model of the planner as practicing social scientist has been borrowed from engineering, and the common references to planning as social engineering are not completely inappropriate. In the twentieth century, engineers have tended to be thought of as applied physical scientists. Similarly, planning professionals have tended to be trained in social science disciplines, and they frequently apply the theories and methods of these fields. One aspect of this training is the practice of

distancing the subject from the objects of analysis through the adoption of a theoretical attitude. This practice is especially evident in the way that planners have used the concepts of place and region.

PLACE, REGION, AND FRONTIER AS NORMATIVE CONCEPTS

Places and regions are both the objects of and the contexts for the projects of planners and applied geographers. As objects, places are locations and spatial 'containers' for social problems and the planner's remedial strategies. In this meaning, place refers to an external world independent of subjects. As context, place and region provide the milieu for human action, including that of the professional planner. From the first perspective, the frontier is defined by lines on a map, and from the second, the frontier becomes the margin in at least two possible senses depending on its relative position in the individual's or group's project. It can either be ignored as peripheral or it can assume the more important role of the yet-to-be-created future (Fussell, 1966).

The coherence that the concept of place as milieu offers in drawing together the many heterogeneous elements that make up our environments is gained through the judgment of the individual or collective subject. However, the reality of the social, economic, political, cultural and natural forces that are part of our environment and that compose place obscures this perspectival character and makes place more object-like. The geographer makes judgments about the relative significance of a particular part of the world and about what to include in his or her description. Such acts draw together these heterogeneous processes into a conceptual whole that constitutes place or region, and that thus defines the frontier.

Judgments associated with a theoretical construction of place and region require the mental distancing of the theorist from any particular place and time. It is this distanced gaze that allows the theorist to see beneath surface phenomena to underlying structures. Place, region, and frontier, however, have no essences or universal structures to be uncovered or discovered by the geographical or planning theorist.

Places, regions, and frontiers are constructed not only by geographers and planners, but also by actors in everyday life through acts of judgment ranging from the simplest forms of naming to the more complex processes of reconstructing cultural narratives. Place in this sense is closely tied to the projects of intentional agents and to culture. Individuals construct narratives about their relation to the larger community and these employ the cultural narratives that link them to place and that create frontiers. The cohesion of cultural groups is created in part by the stories that members of the group share about their origins and their history in a specific place. What differentiates the experts' narratives of place from these others is their outsider's distanced perspective. The cultural and moral

frontiers created by cultural groups may not coincide with those that are displayed on the maps of experts.

The postmodernist criticism of the distinction between subject and object has drawn attention to this gap. However, this criticism seems to be more a reflection of a cultural belief structured around the binary opposition of purity/ pollution than a matter of logic. The dichotomy of a pure, impossible-to-obtain objective viewpoint and a polluted, ideological viewpoint is overdrawn. Rather, emphasis should be given to the question of whether it is possible or desirable to obtain a more or less distanced perspective toward an object. The important issue is not whether a pure objective vision is possible, but rather one of judging what distance is appropriate for best understanding a particular problem. Postmodernists tend to speak in terms of an absolute separation of subject and object instead of a continuum that links the two poles of the subjective and objective. The planner often hides behind the mask of scientific neutrality by offering a 'view from nowhere' of the scientific observer. But, their necessary commitment to a particular set of social norms whether progressive or conservative 'locates' them and shapes their view of the world. Their view thus becomes a view from somewhere, albeit a somewhat distanced view.

The position of the planner in relation to the community, and thus in relation to place, is analogous to that described by the political theorist Michael Walzer (1987) in his discussion of the social critic. According to Walzer, we normally think of the social critic as a member of a society who expresses discontent with certain aspects of the collective life of that society. It is a view from within the society. We also, however, assume the importance of the social critic distancing himself or herself from the object of study. Walzer phrases this assumption in the form of a question:

Don't the conditions of collective life—immediacy, closeness, emotional attachment, parochial vision—militate against a critical self-understanding? Criticism requires critical distance. It is not clear, though, how much distance critical distance is. Where do we have to stand to be social critics? (Walzer 1987:36)

For Walzer (1987), some distancing is necessary, but the striving for the 'view from nowhere' is counterproductive. If we move too far in the direction of the view from nowhere we lose sight of the concern with finding the best means for creating better environments, and move instead toward proving the correctness of a particular view. Walzer claims that the universalism attributed to particular sources of morality, for example the Bible, or classical Greek or Enlightenment ethics, is not something that comes from the sources themselves, but rather is something that we give to them through the re-application of their principles. In citing the Biblical example of Amos the prophet and social critic, Walzer concludes that:

[Amos] knows one nation, one history, and it is that knowledge which makes his criticism so rich, so radical, so concrete. We can, again, abstract the rules and apply them to other nations, but that is not the 'use' that Amos invites. What he invites is not application but reiteration. Each nation can have its own prophecy, just as it has its own history, its own deliverance, its own quarrel with God. (1987:94)

Places and regions are constructions of group and individual narratives that connect the group to its home-place, and it is only from this centered perspective that the idea of social and cultural frontiers becomes significant. Planners and applied geographers are members of these groups. The scientist, in searching for a view from nowhere, seeks to remove himself or herself from place, but the planner is more like the social critic than the scientist. In seeking to create better living environments, the planner cannot be disconnected from the community. Planning theory must at its core be a theory of action with a strong normative dimension. Lacking universal norms for creating better environments, planners require an awareness and an appreciation of the local, the provincial, and the regional.

However, they also must be able to see beyond the local. Like Walzer's social critic, the planner is ideally someone who is connected to place and community but who is able, nonetheless, to establish some critical distance from it in order to present a vision that is more cosmopolitan than provincial. It is from this vantage point that the frontier comes into view as part of the community's yet-to-be-created future (Fussell, 1966).

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