RE-ENGAGING PLANNING THEORY?
TOWARDS 'SOUTH-EASTERN' PERSPECTIVES

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Yes, this is what they did to Tallinn . . . in a city where about 50 percent of the population is Russian, they simply removed all Russian signs, billboards, street names and Russian sounding businesses . . . Russian is not an official language, so we cannot use it in planning discussions and city government . . . we are wiped out of our own city, where most of us were born . . . (we are) now the invisible half of this place which still remains our homeland. (Vadim Polischuk, Russian human rights activist, Tallinn, Estonia, personal interview, May 2005)

Tallinn, Estonia’s capital city is seen by ethnic Estonians as the jewel of ‘their’ ethno-national homeland. During the 1990s, following five decades of Soviet rule, they began a process of ‘Estonization’, which systematically disenfranchised and marginalized the large local Russian community. How does this link to planning theory? It does so very directly, as Estonization is a planning policy par excellence, being concerned with the heart of urban and regional planning – the shaping of urban space.

Yet, the example does not ‘sit’ well with current planning theories, which rarely address such a process of ethnically guided spatial change. Where was deliberative or collaborative planning? Where was communicative rationality? Did Tallinn’s planners try to reach consensus? The Estonian example
does not ‘respond’ to any of these key questions, all framed by the leading discourses of planning theories in recent times. On the other hand, Tallinn is but one of hundreds of similar cases, where people’s lives have been profoundly affected by ethno-spatial policies. This illustrates a conspicuous mismatch between the main concerns of planning theory and the actual, material consequences of planning.

The planning of Tallinn, similar to Sarajevo, Kuala Lumpur, Belfast, Gujarat, Jerusalem and Cape Town, to name just a few, also illustrates one of the main points I advance in this essay – the need to create new conceptualizations, not premised on the material and political settings of the dominant regions of the ‘North-West’, from which most leading theories emerge. Hence, it is high time to conceptualize from the ‘South-East’ (the wide range of non-western, non-northern societies), and create meso-level theories which would genuinely engage with the framing realities of various south-eastern regions. Such theories would avoid the pitfalls of false and domineering universalism; reject the postmodernist retreat from substance and values, yet offer meaningful generalizations to guide and inspire students, scholars and practitioners.

I further argue here that the ‘communicative turn’ among planning theorists, while insightful and rich, has also worked to ‘disengage’ the field’s centre of gravity from its core task of understanding and critiquing the impact of urban policies, as a platform for transformative intervention. Consequently, the communicative emphasis has resulted in several disciplinary blind spots. Two examples – the concepts of *ethnicity* and *homeland* – will be explored briefly in the essay’s final section. Introducing these concepts to the debates of planning theory could re-engage planning scholarship with the material basis of urban planning, and facilitate much needed south-eastern contributions.

Before putting flesh on these arguments, let me clearly qualify that the use of binary categories in this essay is aimed at sharpening the arguments, rather than at describing an ‘objective reality’. Needless to say, there are no clear-cut distinctions between North and South, West and East, discourse and materiality or homeland and diaspora. These categories should be seen as ‘zones’ in a conceptual grid which attempts to draw attention to the main loci of power and identity within an obviously messy, overlapping and dynamic world.

**Scholarly settings**

The main debates in planning theory during the last decade and a half have been commonly described as ‘communicative’, ‘deliberative’ or ‘discursive’, focusing on finding analytical and normative frameworks to understand and mobilize planners. These endeavors have been illuminating, drawing on major philosophical sources of inspiration, and debating thorny
issues such as power, consensus, communication, empowerment and multiculturalism.

Yet, the debate appears to have come to a cul-de-sac by increasingly focusing on an important, yet limited, sub-field – the world of professional planners. This search has employed ever-more sophisticated frameworks to analyze planners’ practices and perceptions, inspired by the likes of Habermas, Foucault, Rawls, Young, Lacan or Bourdieu, with a touch of remaining Marxist, rationalist and liberal perspectives. The competition between alternative theories – so critical to the development of any field – has thus focused on rivaling approaches to the study of professional planners, who form but one (at times marginal) element in myriad forces shaping the nature of cities and regions.

Most theories emerging from the north-west have therefore concentrated on planners rather than planning, the latter standing for the broader arena of publicly guided transformation of space. The emphasis on planners and decision processes has left a particular void for those working in the diverse south-eastern settings where decision-making is generally less transparent and organized, and where public participation and deliberation efforts are often perceived as ‘lip service’ or state co-optation, in a more uncompromising development environment characterized by ‘creating facts on the ground’.

From south-eastern perspectives, the credibility of leading communicative theories is challenged by a constant mismatch with a wide range of south-eastern ‘stubborn realities’ (to invoke a useful Gramscian term), where liberalism is not a stable constitutional order, but at best a sectoral and mainly economic agenda; where property systems are fluid; inter-group conflicts over territory inform daily practices and result in the essentialization of ‘deep’ ethnic, caste and racial identities. As perceptively noted by Vanessa Watson (2006), this has resulted in the development of conflicting and often irreconcilable rationalities. Moreover, recent economic policies, coupled with the latest spasms of globalizing capitalism have prized open insurmountable social disparities, deepening fragmentation and social conflict. It is clear, then, that despite major forces of globalization, the urban environment – and hence the practices and possibilities of planning – has remained vastly different in the diverse regions of the world.

Needless to say, discursive and material dimensions – that is, process and substance – are intimately linked, as they ceaselessly constitute one another. The point here is not to deride the many valuable aspects of deliberative planning, and the need to study planning processes, but to critique what appears to be a distorted balance between procedural and substantive aspects. This is troubling, not only because knowledge needs to be accumulated and theorized on all aspects of urban planning, but also because approaches to decision-making and planning practices may change or be long forgotten, while the material legacy of these decisions remains for generations.
What is the problem, one may ask? Using simple metaphors, the situation can be likened to medical theorists concentrating on the way doctors communicate with patients (which is, of course, important) in preference to studying the impact of medical treatment on the human body (especially the side-effects); or education theorists focusing on teacher-pupil interactions, while neglecting the analysis of how teaching influences levels of acquired knowledge.

Therefore, a concern with mainstream planning theory has been the degrees of removal it has created between theorists, theories and the materiality of planning. As theorists learning from the literature, we know now a great deal about planners’ deliberation, methods of consensus building, their values and even psychology. Mainstream planning theory can thus be (somewhat cruelly) characterized as ‘talk about the talk’. This has been accompanied by an underlying assumption that the ‘right kind of talk’ can provide answers to most planning conflicts. This literature says little about the actual impact of actions taken by planners and other key agents of spatial change, and about the possibility that in some settings talk may never lead to resolution, and may have the adverse impact of concealing or legitimizing planning oppression suffered by marginalized groups.

In this context, it is revealing that John Forester has recently defined planning as ‘the organization of hope’ (Forester, 2004), overlooking in this definition not only the ubiquitous existence of planning’s ‘dark’ and ‘gray’ sides, but also that planning, in most settings, is first and foremost the organizer of space. The main tools at the planner’s disposal are designed to shape cities and regions, and theories must be developed through this necessary medium. It is symptomatic, then, that despite repeated calls in the literature to ‘bring the city back’, and some exciting and grounded theoretical work on planning concepts such as ‘just cities’, ‘network society’, ‘partitioned cities’, ‘mongrel cities’, ‘ethnocratic cities’ and urban informality, such effort has remained at the margins of the theoretical debate. Most theorists who write in the leading journals have remained focused on decision-making and planners’ interaction with clients and power-brokers, thereby refraining from studying the messy interactions between planning policies, spaces and people.

**Positionality**

As is clear from recent critical theorization about ‘ways of knowing’, positionality is central to the production of knowledge. Hence, the dominance of discursive approaches is not accidental. While the language of these debates is often universal, implicitly pertaining to have global application, they mainly emerge from the dominant liberal North-West and reflect the concerns and intellectual landscapes of these prosperous, liberal societies, where property relations are relatively stable, and where most individuals,
even members of minorities, have reasonable (though often less than desirable) personal liberties, existential security and basic welfare provisions.

The dominance of the North-West in the production of planning knowledge is somewhat predictable, given the location from which the main journals are published and the global dominance of the English language. It is conspicuous that in the first eight issues of the new Planning Theory journal (2002–04), only three of 47 articles were devoted to issues emerging from the South-East, while 40 articles dealt with various aspects of decision-making and communicative processes. Mapping the ‘gatekeepers’ of theoretical knowledge (Table 1) reflects a similar picture: 168 of 203 scholars (82.7 percent) serving on the editorial boards of six leading journals hail from the Anglo-American countries (including Australia and Canada); 26 (12.8 percent) are from Europe, and only six, that is just over four percent, work in South-Eastern countries, including border cases such as Israel, South Africa and Singapore.5

Let us pause here for a second, and qualify some of the distinctions made above. Clearly, my use of North-South and East-West dichotomies is of course over-simplified. The production of space and knowledge in a world as intertwined as ours is complex, variegated, and contested, as to negate the existence of such dichotomies. There exist a multitude of gray areas, hybridities and dynamic ‘patches’ between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’ of the academic and professional worlds, as well as a plethora of differences within each ‘region’. Hence, the differences between North-West and South-East are, of course, just a matter of degree. Further, it is impossible to equate one’s place of residence with the nature of scholarship. Some of the most radical and counter-hegemonic texts, as we all know, have been written from the ‘belly of the beast’, by luminaries such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Yuri Sakharov, Edward Said or Herbert Marcuse, who showed that the grids of power imposed over daily experience need not colonize our consciousness.

### Table 1 Mapping the gatekeepers of planning knowledge: Editorial Board members of international planning journals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Anglo-Americans</th>
<th>Other ‘North-West’</th>
<th>‘South-East’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPS</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JPER</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning Theory</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4 (2 Israel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JAPA</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 Is.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan. Theor &amp; Prac.</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3 (1 Israel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPR</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 (Israel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, the power of ‘North-Western’, and particularly Anglo-American academia has been overwhelming in influencing the curricula, the teaching, and – most profoundly – the thinking, of scholars and practitioners in the South-East. For that reason, and bearing in mind the above reservations, I shall continue to use the awkward North-West-East-South terms, as an unsatisfactory shorthand for the difference between the power of the ‘metropolitan’ centers of academia and profession, and the multitude of ‘southern’ or ‘eastern’ settings.

Given the context in which north-western academia is produced, and the inevitable domination of western concerns on planning knowledge, it may be time for a conceptual change. Rather than wait for ‘better’ theories to emerge from the North-West, serious theorization effort should emerge from the (very diverse) settings of the South-East. But a warning is in order: this effort should not be perceived as creating ‘peripheral theories for peripheral regions’, but should constitute the basis for alternative knowledge. New concepts may not only be relevant to their own regional settings, but may also become a source of ‘reverse flows’ of theoretical knowledge, as northern-western cities increasingly face ‘south-eastern’ phenomena such as urban informality, ‘deep’ identities, open urban conflicts, and mass poverty. A serious elaboration on ‘theorizing from the South-East’ is clearly beyond the scope of this essay. However, a possible ‘first taste’ may include a brief discussion of two key concepts, currently very marginal in the theory discourse, but central to the production of space in most parts of the world – ethnicity and the homeland.

**Ethnicity, homeland and planning**

Ethnicity has been an immensely influential factor in modern politics, fostering powerful links between identities and space, by imbuing a wide range of spatialities, such as territory, homeland, region, city, locality, place and even the body, with potent political importance. It is therefore astounding how little theorization has taken place on the links between (spatial) planning and ethnicity, in contrast to other social markers such as class, gender and race. However, ethnicity appears to influence, and be influenced by urban and regional planning at least as powerfully as these other categories, if not more.

Ethnicity can be defined as ‘cultural identity, based on belief in common ancestry at a specific place’. While obviously constructed through ongoing struggles, power relations and blatant manipulations, ethnic identity – propelled by the ‘family myth’ of common descent – has remained an immense force in the making of collective narratives and the governance of public spaces, even during an era of structural and relatively rapid globalization.

It may be useful to distinguish analytically between two main types of ethnic identity – ‘immigrant’ and ‘homeland’, which should be perceived of
as two poles in a continuum of ethnic spatial mobilizations. Homeland ethnicity is held by groups who reside on the territory they believe to be the ‘cradle’ of their identity and history. Immigrant ethnicity, on the other hand, is based on distance from the homeland and long-term association with other societies. The former tends to form the basis for national or regional movements aspiring for statehood, self-determination, or group autonomy; while the latter tends to energize campaigns for minority and civil rights framed by a gradual (though uneven and conflict-riddled) process of integration into the ‘host’ society.

Ethnicity has been introduced into theoretical planning discussions mainly through the concepts of ‘difference’ and ‘multiculturalism’, both of which denote broader and ‘softer’, identity markers. Where ethnicity has been directly introduced, it is often confined to immigrant groups or marginalized indigenous peoples, and rarely addresses the immense power of ethno-nationalism and ethno-regionalism to influence planning in ‘homeland’ situations.7 There were several attempts to theorize the powerful links between ethno-nationalism, the state and urban policies, but these have been few and far between, and have not resulted in a fruitful theoretical conversation.8

A critical link here remains the state. Theories of the state abound, and their impact on planning theory has been significant. However, these have centred on discussions of the state’s (and planning’s) role in facilitating capital accumulation and developing regimes of regulation, surveillance and developmentalism. Little has been said in the planning literature on a most fundamental function of the modern state – imposing ethno-national spatial control, often in conflict with groups holding counter territorial claims.

The ethnicizing and nationalizing dimensions of planning are for all to see, as manifest in land policies, settlement systems, municipal and regional boundaries and cultural landscapes. Elsewhere I have termed this ‘ethnoocratic planning’ – being a regime furthering the goals of a dominant ethnic group while using a crude rhetoric of ‘democratic’ majoritarian rule (Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2004). In extreme (but far from rare) cases, ethno-national planning has caused massive destruction, violent colonialism and ethnic cleansing – all in the name of the ‘ethnic homeland’, as described below. Yet, this state-ethnicity-territory axis has been largely taken for granted by theorists – conservative and critical alike. They have simply assumed the ethnicized nature of space as an unproblematic point of departure, or wished it away as a temporary relic of the past. The theoretical literature has thus shifted attention away from a major force of controlling space and shaping social relations. My call is to foreground the never-ending struggle for ethnicizing space as part and parcel of theorizing planning, and hence as making the nation-state as dynamic and internal to the planning endeavor, and not a ‘flat’ and unexplored ‘given’. This is particularly so in cases of ‘homeland’ ethnic groups.9
The homeland can be defined as a territory believed to be the ‘birthplace’ of a group’s identity. It is often associated with a state scale, where ethno-nationalism has been translated into a major force of territorial transformation. However, homeland mobilization manifests powerfully on other scales – the neighborhood (‘urban turf’), the city, the region and in trans-state situations. This is reflected in the multilayered meanings of the word in various languages. The Arabic *balad*, for example, denotes both village and state; *moledet* in Hebrew stands for place of birth and national land; and *rodina* in Russian stems from a word denoting either family origin, tree roots, or a state territory. To be sure, homeland sentiments and mobilization are often ‘artificially’ constructed or invented outright, as in the case of ‘homelands’ in the Soviet Union, or apartheid South Africa. Yet in dozens of states, regions and cities, the homeland ‘card’ is critical for understanding the way space is planned, settled and transformed.

Ethnic attachment to the homeland frequently translates into a program of stamping exclusive ethnic control over contested territory. Here lies its direct relevance to planning scholarship, since the instruments with which ethnicization is practiced are often classical planning tools of development controls, investment incentives, housing programs, land allocation and boundary delimitation. The ethnic homeland is thus not a mere residual force which operates in some remote places as a relic of bygone pasts, but one of the most persistent, structural, and – most importantly – profoundly spatial forces shaping the outcome of planning policies. A cursory look around the globe would immediately illustrate the importance of homeland ethnicity for planning – from Quebec through Ireland, Spain, to virtually all the post-Soviet states, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. In fact, planning across the majority of the globe is deeply steeped in continuous ethnic struggles over space including, of course, major cities.

Yet, somewhat astonishingly, the homeland too has largely remained ‘untouched’ in planning literature, as well as in urban and even geographic scholarship. Here are some indicators: the ‘homeland’ is not even listed as an item in several important reference books and scholarly dictionaries (*Dictionary of Political Thought*, 1992; *Dictionary of Human Geography*, 1994; *Dictionary of Politics*, 1995). It is rarely mentioned in numerous urban, spatial and planning journals, readers and books; for example, in a search of a total of 414 scholarly pieces published by the six major planning journals mentioned earlier during the 2000–04 period, the term was mentioned in the title or abstract in only three articles; ‘ethnic’ or ‘ethnicity’ did not fare better, being mentioned only twice. By contrast, currently popular terms were discussed far more frequently; for example, ‘globalization’ was mentioned in the title of 42 articles, and ‘communication’ by 28.

These numbers, while obviously representing only a broad brush picture, reflect conspicuous blind-spots to major forces shaping spatial policy. These blind spots reflect the context, concern and challenges of the north-western societies in which most theorists work. Since in most of the liberal
North-West, ethnicity has by and large been privatized and homeland issues have been commonly appeased during the recent period of ‘long peace’ and economic prosperity.

In this scholarly dynamic, how do we move forward? A promising (though by no means only) option is to conduct ‘thick’ comparable studies as a base for generalization about the origins and impact of policies and urban struggles. This kind of grounded theoretical work would form a necessary foundation for mobilizing both professionals and communities. These theories would be grounded in the actual context of cities and regions, defined both geographically (African, South Asian or Baltic) or thematically (informal, ethnocratic, global cities), with clear possibilities to ‘cut across’ the North-West, South-East regions. Such theorizations are likely to ‘re-engage’ theory with the ‘coal face’ of the planning endeavor, thereby reducing the ‘degrees of removal’ prevalent in current theoretical debates.

In this vein, I offer the concepts of ‘homeland’ and ‘ethnicity’ as possible new focal points for planning studies, based on the vantage point of the Middle East, Africa, Eastern Europe and South Asia. We need to show how ethnicity and homeland, alongside other issues of development and governance, have shaped cities and group relations, and how power has spawned resistance to the darker sides of planning. But we need to remain watchful not to romanticize these concepts, while remaining critical about the regimes of planning ‘truths’ in all settings, and the contested and manipulative nature of these very concepts. Nevertheless, homeland and ethnicity can form central components of ‘meso’ level planning theories, alongside the key concepts of class, capital, gender and governance processes.

Such investigation should also continue to explore the ‘dark side’ of planning, as ethnic identities and ‘the homeland’ are commonly used by dominant groups to create hegemonic and oppressive projects of reshaping space. These are often premised on the dispossession and marginalization of the ‘Other’. But exposing the details of the ‘dark side’ is never an end in itself, as recently implied by some critics of the concept. It is only the beginning of unpacking the distorted ‘truth’ disseminated by power, as a necessary foundation for transformative mobilization, including the generation of innovative planning strategies to transgress oppression and actually improve people’s lives and places.10

Here planning theorists can be at the forefront of devising resistance, empowerment and liberation strategies, based on their insights into the working of hegemonic (spatial) powers. They can equip planners – in Tallinn, Jerusalem, Gujarat, Colombo or hundreds of other cities – with a range of strategies to contest spatial oppression, developmental inequalities and essentialized ethnicities. They can devise ways to resist and transform the harsh realities of land confiscation, forced removals, home demolitions, pervasive poverty, and endemic urban violence in an urban environment where consensus building and public deliberation are only a distant possibility. They can lead the efforts to recognize and make sustainable
multi-group coexistence in the city by putting planning ‘flesh’ on concepts such as ‘spatial justice’, ‘asymmetrical federalism’, ‘multiple homelands’ or new forms of self-determination. These have been articulated in the work of political thinkers John McGarry, Ranabir Samaddar and Iris Marion Young, respectively.

Let us conclude with a poem by Tawfiq Ziyyad, the late Palestinian leader and poet, who encapsulates the power of ethnicity and homeland embedded in the Palestinian strategy of Sumud – hanging on mentally and physically to their localities and lands, and refusing to fold in the face of Israeli expansionist planning strategies. The spatial and ethnic struggle over Israel/Palestine, the legacy of past colonizations and expulsions, the linking of planning knowledge to specific places and identities are all the very materials from which planning is remade daily in many south-eastern settings.

We are Staying Here (Hunna Baqoon)

. . . We guard the shades of our figs
We guard the trunks of our olives
We sow our hopes like the yeast of bread
With ice in our fingers
With red hell in our hearts . . .
Here we shall stay
Like a brick wall on your chest
Like a glass splinter in your throat
Like a prickly cactus
And in your eyes
Like a storm of fire
If we are thirsty, we shall be quenched by the rocks
And if we are hungry, we shall be fed by the dust . . .
And we shall not move
Because here we have past, Present
And Future.
(Tawfiq Ziyyad, 1978)

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Given the polemic nature of this essay, I have refrained from extensive citations from the literature, although the many authors who contributed to the planning theory debate have naturally been my main source of inspiration. Details of the works mentioned here, including full references, are available from the author.
2. See works by Patsy Healey, Jean Hillier, John Forester, James Throgmorton, Seymour Mandelbaum, Tom Sager, Judith Innes, Phil Allmendinger, Michael Gunder, Stan Stein and Thomas Harper, to name but a few leading theorists.

3. In comparison, my own scholarly and activist approach draws, intra alia, on neo-Gramscian and Lefebvrian inspirations, emphasizing the simultaneous material and discursive construction of hegemony and resistance.

4. See, for example, works by Susan Fainstein, Robert Beauregard, Tim Richardson, Bent Flyvbjerg, Leonie Sandercock, Manuel Castells, Michael Neuman, Margo Huxley, Emily Talen, Oren Yiftachel, Nezar al-Sayyad, Alan Mabin and Ananya Roy. It is also noteworthy that two stalwarts of procedural planning theory – Andreas Faludi and John Friedmann – have openly re-grounded their recent work in the spatiality of city and region.

5. This kind of ‘engaged’ scholarship does exist, mainly in fields including geography, anthropology, development studies and political science; but being published in these disciplines it often loses a critical focus on policy implications, and is often unexplored by planning theorists.

6. The journals studied included the *JPER*, *Planning Theory*, *Town Planning Review*, *Planning Theory and Practice*, *JAPA* and *European Planning Studies*. Even on the board of *Third World Planning* (now under a new title – *International Development and Planning Review*), only six of 28 members are from the South-East.

7. See, for example, the groundbreaking works of Leonie Sandercock, Ruth Fincher, Jane Jacobs, and Iris Marion Young.

8. See here, for example, the works of Huw Thomas, Roderick Macdonald, Scott Bollen, Tovi Fenster and Oren Yiftachel.

9. This is the approach taken by some scholars associated with ‘postcolonial’ studies, including Ella Shohat, Derek Gregory, Don Mitchell and Timothy Mitchell; recent work by Phil Harrison has attempted to bridge between this school of thought and planning theory.

10. A detailed response to the criticism of the ‘dark-side’ concept and an elaboration of the concept is now in preparation.

References


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