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Planners amid the storm: Lessons from Israel/Palestine

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How do planners reconcile their professional role with the surrounding political environment? How do we measure and make sense of the gap between the progressive potential associated with planning as a social practice and the considerably grimmer reality emerging in so many concrete examples of planning conflicts and controversies that deny this potential? These are amongst the fundamental questions raised by Cliff Hague's (2016) commentary in issue 17.1 of this journal (February 2016), based on his experience as chair of a UN-Habitat international advisory board that authored a report on planning in Area C of the West Bank.

These issues remain a central concern for planning theorists and practitioners who have been engaged directly in addressing these issues for at least 30 years: most readers of *Planning Theory and Practice* would certainly consider the idea that "planning is politics" as a rather obvious starting point for any conversation on the subject. And as a student of Jerusalem and Israel's settlement policy, I cannot but concur with Hague when he notes how the reality of Israel/Palestine reminds us of these dilemmas in a particularly dramatic manner; indeed, the UN-Habitat report is just the latest addition to a long and ever-expanding list of reports, books and papers focusing on planning conditions in the Israeli-controlled West Bank – all invariably pointing to the partisan and asymmetric functioning of the local planning system.

But where exactly does this leave us if we are to reflect on the implications of this (admittedly rather extreme) case study for planning as a profession and a discipline? Hague calls for international professional bodies to denounce the instrumental use by Israeli authorities of bogus planning arguments with the purpose of containing Palestinian development: as he notes, often in the West Bank "'good planning' is the rationale for oppressing poor people". While Hague's call certainly deserves support, his commentary also invites further reflection on the very idea of "good planning". As I have argued elsewhere (Rokem & Allegra, forthcoming), the reality of Israel/Palestine provides at least two interesting lessons in this regard.

To begin with, Hague's piece is a stark reminder of the obvious: planning challenges typically have a social and political dimension that needs to be carefully considered; in this respect, the quest for "a set of propositions that are defensible in deeply rational terms that can enable planners to advocate for authoritative choices" (Hague, 2016) is destined to failure. This is the first lesson coming from Israel/Palestine: "rationality" and the "public interest" do not exist in isolation; rather, various rationalities and interests compete for legitimacy and influence over the planning process.

During my research in Jerusalem I have interviewed professionals working in Israeli planning institutions. My respondents were invariably ready to acknowledge the politicization of planning issues

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and even the partisan nature of the planning system. At the same time, however, they stressed the inherent value of "good planning"; within a given set of constraints and opportunities, the argument went, planners should mobilize the resources of their profession in order to minimize conflicts and deliver the best possible solution.

Indeed, this argument resonates with the experience of professionals all over the world: as Hague notes, all planners have to operate in "institutionally constrained spaces" – but what are the implications of this seemingly banal observation? Were my respondents simply making an excuse for their involvement in a highly unethical enterprise? Were they hiding a partisan political agenda under formal adherence to professional standards? While this may sometimes have been the case, I think that most of my respondents sincerely believed – as again do many of their colleagues working in less polarized contexts – that planners begin their work when politicians have already defined a general structure of constraints and opportunities. In turn, within this relatively narrow space, adherence to good planning practices and standards provide a sort of safe space where the progressive potential of the profession can be unleashed; most of my respondents believed, in other words, that the realms of planning and politics can be separated.

The history of Israel/Palestine certainly seems to prove that this is an illusion, irrespective of whether "good planning" is understood in terms of its potential to deliver rational/efficient solutions, or a more democratic/participative process. Could any genuine participatory planning intervention in East Jerusalem make up for the structural lack of representation (e.g. the absence of voting rights in national elections) of the local Palestinian population, and its consequences in the treatment of major planning issues? But the dilemma is not limited to planning in the West Bank: during the 1990s Israeli planners offered a decisive, creative contribution to the absorption of hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union (Alterman, 1995); given the sensitivity of demographic balances for Israeli-Palestinian relations, was this "good planning"? And for whom?

Planners in Israel/Palestine certainly speak a common professional language; all of them, including those working in Israeli public agencies, have for a long time adopted the vocabulary of participatory practices, multidisciplinarity and multiculturalism as the basis for a comprehensive, progressive approach to urban issues. In this respect, the key principles of the "Charter for Sustainable Planning" of the Israel Planners Association (e.g. commitment to "Community and Society", to "People", to "Effective Mobility", to "Public Participation", IPA, 2016) are certainly not devoid of influence on the activity of its members. They are, though, largely irrelevant to the Palestinians in the West Bank, where many IPA architects and planners exercise their profession. Yet at the same time, it is also important to note that adherence to similar principles by groups like Bimkom (a non-governmental organization (NGO) committed to human rights in the field of planning) amount to a comprehensive and radical challenge to this status quo.

What these examples make clear is that any notion of "good planning" – whatever the definition chosen – is devoid of meaning unless professional practices are considered within their social, political and institutional background. In the case of Israel/Palestine, the refusal to acknowledge the link between planning decisions and broader issues of sovereignty, equality and justice, inevitably relegates the notion of "good planning" to rhetoric, or to a purely technocratic or procedural approach that, as past history shows, can even accentuate the conflicts it is supposed to minimize.

Hague's commentary points to another important issue. Are planners powerless in the face of difficult power dynamics and entrenched conflicts? Is their role limited to the technical implementation of decisions taken by others? My experience with the planning community of Jerusalem suggests that this is not necessarily the case. However, contrary to the idea that planners' agency can only be deployed

in "safe spaces", sheltered from political influences, I am inclined to argue that planning practices (from drafting a regional planning scheme to making career choices) can only be understood if we observe them in relation to the environment in which planners operate. This is the second lesson from Israel/Palestine: planning dilemmas are not so much "compounded by the fact that planners have to operate within institutionally constrained spaces" (Hague, 2016); rather, an appreciation of the situated contexts of planning practices is the only genuine way to answer these dilemmas. Planners are more than well-trained professionals; they are fully-fledged political actors whose agency can encompass a wide range of skills, practices and strategies beyond a narrow understanding of the boundaries of their profession (e.g. lobbying, gaining access to powerful individuals and institutions, influencing clients and public opinion, as well as potentially manipulating rhetorics of depoliticization).

The case of Israel/Palestine offers many significant examples of planners' agency. Planners working with Israeli public agencies have not been slavishly following political directives: indeed, many of those I have spoken to could recall episodes in which planning considerations harmonized with the ideological imperatives of Israeli policies in the West Bank (e.g. in the post-1967 reunification of Jerusalem); or instances when timely action, personal connections and a strategic use of knowledge and information allowed them to have a decisive influence on planning decisions. For example, the members of the planning team that drafted a project for the Jewish settlement of Ma'ale Adumim, a suburban community of some 40,000 residents located on the periphery of Jerusalem, managed to introduce significant changes to the location and scale of the proposed development by pursuing a clear vision while at the same time giving decision-makers the answers they wanted to hear (Rokem & Allegra, forthcoming). At the opposite end of the planning system it is significant to note that almost all major human rights NGOs active in the West Bank work on planning issues (e.g. Bimkom, B'Tselem, the International Peace and Cooperation Center) – a fact that would be difficult to explain if planners were powerless. As Michal Braier, (2013) has argued, the approval of a growing number of independent plans submitted by Palestinians in East Jerusalem in recent years amounts to a silent but cumulative challenge to the planning system. Indeed, "counter-planning" mobilization by planner-activists on planning issues might even be understood "as a form of political representation that competes with other forms of representation" (Cohen-Blankshtain, Ron & Perez, 2013, p. 637).

Both the professionals who planned Ma'ale Adumim and members of Bimkom would by and large concur on what makes "good planning" possible – gaining first-hand knowledge of the urban environment, adopting sophisticated tools, fostering the participation of stakeholders, and so forth. Despite this agreement on procedures, however, their respective activities point to very different substantive notions of what "good planning" would be in Israel/Palestine.

So, what does "good planning" look like? The answer remains necessarily elusive. As political theorists have shown, experiments in procedural democracy will not necessarily solve substantive, contextual issues. Having long abandoned a purely rational and technocratic approach to embrace a more participatory ethos, planning is necessarily coming to terms with the same problems inherent to democratic theory.

Standards and procedures might be successful in taming politics *in* planning (i.e. conflicts and power issues developing around a given planning decision); they are less effective in tackling the politics *of* planning (i.e. the conflicts linked to broader social, institutional and distributive issues).

Indeed, when Hague asks professional bodies to take a stand against oppressive practices in Area C by declaring "not in planning's name", what is at stake, rather than defining the boundaries of the discipline, is precisely whether the planning community will mobilize on this issue. We cannot attribute an a priori progressive value to planning as a discipline, but we can be hopeful about the agency of

the planning community: "good planning" cannot solve pressing political problems; good planners should certainly try.

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