The Case for a Southern Perspective in Planning Theory

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ABSTRACT

In a number of disciplines scholars are questioning the relevance of theoretical positions which claim general and global applicability, yet are grounded in assumptions about social and material conditions which are more specific to a global North context. This paper focuses on the recent interest in urban planning theory to develop explanatory and normative theory that directly addresses the problems and issues of cities in the global South. It suggests a number of starting assumptions, very different from those that inform much current planning theory, which need to inspire the development of planning thought with a global South orientation. These are illustrated through an example of state-society conflict in an informal settlement. While there is certainly a case for developing a global south perspective in planning theory, it is also important to specify the limitations on such an exercise to avoid the trap of creating new theoretical binaries.

Keywords: Conflicting Rationalities, Global South, Planning Theory, Urban Informality, Urban Planning Theory

INTRODUCTION

Urban planning is just one discipline in which scholars have been raising awareness of the relative neglect of global South perspectives in theory development, as well as the tendency to assume the universality of theoretical ideas even when they have been shaped by global North experiences and ideas. In urban planning Yiftachel (2006a), Roy (2009a; 2011a), Watson (2009a; 2012) and Brownill and Parker (2010) have, in various ways, pointed to the essentially parochial nature of much of mainstream planning theory. For many decades the intellectuals who led the field in planning theory have lived and worked in the Euro-American regions and, consciously or not, have produced ideas about planning (largely published in English language journals also based in these areas) shaped by the context in which they function. While much good theoretical and practical work has emerged from this part of the world, it is usually taken for granted that these ideas and theories are also valid in the rest of the globe, and that underlying assumptions regarding the nature of cities and their societies, economies,

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culture and governance are so similar from place to place that the need to geographically specify the relevance of ideas is not necessary. While such universalizing of ideas can be challenged, even within the Euro-American regions, the authors referred to above have questioned many aspects of current planning theory in terms of relevance in cities of the global South. Urban planning issues and problems (such as effects of climate change, housing and infrastructure shortages or traffic congestion) may be important in many parts of the world, but in rapidly growing and poorer cities of the global South the severity and impact of these factors is usually far greater. More importantly, the usefulness of, and implementation of, normative planning ideas is inevitably shaped by context. The generalization of ideas and policy transfers across very different societies has often resulted in serious planning failures and can only be considered with great caution.

While the questionable generalization of theory in social science disciplines is probably not uncommon and may do little more than raise an opportunity for critique, in the applied discipline of urban planning, theory is intended to play an important role in informing practice. Errors in planning practice can have significant impacts on people’s lives and on the environment. Cities of Africa and the global South more generally are littered with failed planning efforts (British Garden Cities and New Towns, or rigid and mono-functional zoning schemes and regulations have produced landscaped suburbs and orderly development mainly for the wealthy) based on erroneous assumptions about household survival strategies, levels of car ownership and movement patterns, attitudes to land, institutional capacities, or socio-cultural decision-making processes. At the same time planners in practice in these regions have little to draw on from Northern planning theorists when it comes to taking action: how, for example, to approach participatory processes in situations of deep and irresolvable conflict; how to respond to rampant profit-motivated land development where regulatory frameworks and master plans are outdated and unworkable; how to propose forms of strategic planning and decision making in institutional settings driven by political cultures of patronage and paternalism, and so on. This lack of informative ideas points to the urgent need to “internationalize” planning theory by drawing on ideas and understanding from beyond the global North, and by emphasizing the context-dependency of planning along with a necessary wariness of “best practice” transplants and unsubstantiated universalizing of theoretical concepts (also see Healey, 2012).

Interestingly, urban planning is not the only discipline to question the wider validity of Western scholarship in recent years. The rise of Eastern economies and growing awareness of the demographic dominance of global South regions and cities (with 72% of the world’s urban population living in global South cities in 2007 and set to rise to 83% in 2050 – UN Habitat, 2009) has probably encouraged a wider shift to an academic interest in the global South. In sociology, Connell’s (2007, p. ix) book questions the “…belief that social science can have only one, universal body of concepts and methods, the one created in the global North…”. Her more recent contribution (Connell, 2013) argues for recognition of a globally operating “political economy of knowledge” which shapes and controls the kind of knowledge produced in Southern regions and marginalizes its contribution to dominant theoretical production by labeling it as “mere” data collection.

In anthropology, Comaroff and Comaroff (2012, p. 1) seek to counter the positioning of Western enlightenment thought “…as the wellspring of universal learning…” while the global South is seen as “…a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means. Above all, of unprocessed data.” Instead, they suggest that researching in the global South offers privileged insights into the workings of the world at large, as it is in the global South that the impacts of its relationship to the global North have been most starkly felt. Both Connell (2007) and Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) are making the important point that there is a need to go beyond a recognition of regional difference. They are arguing that this
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