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Exploring Critical Constructive Thinking in Planning Studies

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> "Critical constructivists avoid reductionism and the naïve realism that accompanies it"
> Joe L. Kincheloe (2005)

One of the distinctive characteristics of urban planning as a discipline is its responsibility to educate practitioners who have to *'go out there and get things done'*. The world of planning today is seen by scholarly literature as an exciting, but also a challenging, profession in reference to the political economic framework which is dominated by authoritarianism, neoliberalism, informality, crime, fragmentation, depoliticization, and populism (see Filion, 2011; Gunder, 2010; Kunzmann, 2016; Ponzini, 2016; Ruming, 2018; Tasan-Kok & Baeten, 2011; Thornley, 2018; Sager, 2009; Roy, 2015). Although the practitioner's role is prone to high levels of political and economic pressures in this 'dark' impression, recent studies have shown that there is a tendency among planning practitioners to push boundaries (Forester, 2013; Tasan-Kok et al., 2016; Tasan-Kok & Oranje, 2017) and even to become activists (Sager, 2016). Furthermore, work with planning students shows that radical critical approaches in planning education may turn into mere cynicism when they do not offer an analysis of problems or offer tools for alternative and emancipatory ideas (Tunström, 2017). Keeping this viewpoint in mind, and the theme of the 2018 AESOP Congress in Gothenburg, Sweden, which was *'Making Space for Hope'*, I proposed to place 'critical constructive thinking' in planning research under the spotlight as a topic for discussion with PhD students and young scholars during the AESOP PhD workshop, which followed the same theme of 'hope'. It provided an excellent platform to debate for planning researchers on how to remain critical while still being able to provide constructive solutions in a landscape of complex social, economic and political relations and power dynamics. These are, I believe, also fundamental characteristic of planning practitioners and should be highlighted in planning education.

In a very simple way critical constructive thinking refers to searching for answers, alternative solutions, new approaches and methodologies while staying critical, which involves constant reflection and revision in the process of research. In order to explore the idea of critical constructive thinking in research we need to understand the idea of critical constructivism, which opposes positivism and argues that nothing represents an objective, neutral perspective (Kincheloe, 2005). This way of thinking has its foundations in social constructionist studies

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that seek to replace 'fixed and universalistic' approaches with more 'dynamic and particularistic' concepts (Weinberg, 2008). It means that over-generalizations should be avoided while being more reflective to the particular realities. Critical constructive thinking encourages analytical approaches in the research process but has a particular view on the knowledge as it is temporally and culturally situated and socially constructed in a dialogue between culture, institutions, and historical contexts (Kincheloe, 2005). Recognizing 'knowledge' as a social construction, and showing sensitivity to the local context and path-dependency are necessary characteristics of research in planning studies in order to: avoid presumptions, over-generalisations and stereotyping; to understand the complexities of the reality and its challenges; and to think of solutions for those challenges. With this in mind, I will, in this short essay, use the neoliberal political economic ideology and its implications on spatial governance, especially considering the actor relations, as a case to briefly illustrate how 'radical critical thinking' and 'critical constructive thinking' may frame the challenges of spatial governance differently, and how new avenues of research can be explored by deploying critical constructive approaches. Neoliberalism is the political economic ideology that marks the characteristics of state-regulated capitalism. I use neoliberalism here to refer to the market-oriented approach to urban development.

Planning practitioners make political choices to safeguard public interest, take proactive roles or even become activists within the machine of bureaucracy, which is in contrast to the elitist, self-centred view of modernist planners, recognizing the importance of collaboration, co-production and negotiation with public- and private-sector actors and social groups (Tasan-Kok et al., 2016; Tasan-Kok & Oranje, 2017). However, these progressive actions tend to mute the planners' individual stories of endeavor and hope, and mask the role these individuals have played in hard-fought victories by radically critical scholarly literature. The good news is that there is a new generation of planning studies which contains new approaches, formulations and methodologies which do not only invite us to formulate the challenges and problems based on research and data, but also to change our ways of conceptualizing, problematizing and operationalizing. Planning, from this uplifting perspective, can be defined as the 'organisation of hope' (Campbell, Tait, & Watkins, 2014). Although it sounds promising, this perception of planning requires the exploration of new approaches to deal with the current challenges planning practice faces today. Moreover, these new approaches should also reflect to the planning education and encourage critical constructive thinking in the curriculum.

With this perspective in mind, if we briefly look into how the 'stereotypes and characterizations' in spatial governance are formulated, we can see a polarized view in planning studies. On the one hand existing power relations are put under the spotlight and criticized for protecting market-centric state agendas, and for undermining or even blocking the possibilities of counter-hegemonic developments (Roy, 2015). In this approach simplified characterizations are deployed to present political power as a zero-sum game, leaving little room to comprehend the complex public and private sector profiles, instruments and relations that exists in the city (Raco, 2013). On the other hand, recognizing that the characterizations and stereotypes are based on dominant traditions in public policy (Campbell & Fainstein, 2012), 'sole criticism' is argued to be counterproductive as it tends to ignore the progress made in practice and misses opportunities for finding constructive solutions that can lead to social innovations and be taught as 'transformative practices' in planning schools (Albrechts, 2017). Contemporary planning studies contain new approaches such as activism, social action or co-production that link these polarized views under the umbrella of critical constructive thinking. Constructive thinking, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is about having, or intended to have, a useful or beneficial purpose and if advice, criticism, or actions are constructive, they are useful and intended to help or improve something. Critical constructivist thinking asserts that understanding the

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positioning of the researcher is essential to the 'production of rigorous and textured knowledge' (Kincheloe, 2005).

From this perspective it is fundamental to develop a 'dynamic appreciation of the way power works' at both macro and micro levels to shape our understandings (ibid., p. 119). With the neoliberal political economic ideology and its implications on spatial governance in mind, this requires: understanding the complex layers of multi-level urban governance; understanding the diversity of actors and "view of diverse actors" in diverse levels of governance; and preventing over-generalizations and stereotypes by making detailed studies on the complex web of networks and actor profiles and the knowledge they co-produce together. If we take the studies that relate the planning and property industry as an example, we can see one-dimensional views of property markets in solely critical analysis, which assumes an inevitability about the negative nature of urban development outcomes, while more critical constructive studies suggest that planning researchers and practitioners should develop a much more sophisticated understanding of the pressures and priorities of developers and their investors (Campbell et al., 2014). In other words, stereotypes or negative framings on property markets and market actors may overshadow the reality, which requires more detailed research and empirical knowledge to understand the complexity and diversity within the market. Another example is the post-political debates which debunk the 'consensus approach', which is grounded in Habermasian communication theory for circumventing disagreement and for excluding and marginalizing contestation and conflict, which leads to exclusionary practices (Bengs, 2005; Fainstein, 2000; Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002; Harris, 2002; Purcell, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2005). However, consensus is not a pre-defined and static outcome but a dynamic and sensitive process that planners could facilitate through accommodative roles that address disagreement by taking an adaptive, proactive and more human stance (Ozdemir & Tasan-Kok, 2019). These kinds of examples are on the rise in planning studies, which are dissatisfied with sole criticism and seek ways to step aside from 'standard (critical) analysis' in order to see the overlooked choices and missed questions, and misperceptions (Campbell et al., 2014). It requires, however, new empirical and analytical research to consider the process of planning in which some lessons can be produced to limit the negative impacts of rapid development on urban built environments and communities (Raco et al., 2018). A good example of this is the way 'slow planning' is explored by Raco et al. (2018), which studies regulatory complexities of the institutionalisation of a development-led, viability-based planning system based on planning gain negotiations and principles and shows how it has slowed decision-making time frames. This study shows that the slowing down has actually enabled more powerful interests to negotiate outcomes that are more favourable over the longer-term, and opened up opportunities for adaptable and well-resourced development interests to engage in market capture (ibid., p. 9). Such insights illustrate the antagonisms inherent in studies that focus on power relations in market-led urban development approaches, which prevents thinking outside the box and expanding on alternatives and solutions.

Planning education prepares practitioners for the reality by equipping them with theoretical and practical toolboxes to be able to comprehend the wider political-economic context in which spatial activities take place, and to be able to think outside the box. Planning education, due to the nature of the profession, also has to provide solutions and answers to the challenges of neoliberal urban development to prepare future planning practitioners by theoretically and practically equipping students to think critically and search for alternative solutions. To do that, I believe, planning educators have to follow critical constructive approaches to provide a platform for learning certain skills, developing ways of thinking or toolsets while theorizing on the fundamentals of the scientific discipline of urban planning. Some new studies such as Campbell et al. (2014), which 'speculates on' alternative results of events that might have been different and therefore could be different in the future in the face of neoliberal policy agendas;

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or Raco et al. (2018), which analyses a situation (of slow and complex planning arrangements) and turns it around to discuss new opportunities, shed light on what can be done by exploring new critical constructive approaches, deploying new research methods and using new interdisciplinary linkages. Considering the challenges of neoliberal spatial governance today, planning studies urgently need new approaches to allow deeper analysis, review overlooked choices, and provide critical constructive thinking based on new, analytical and empirical research, which should not leave any room for bold and stereotyped argumentations.

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