

Book reviews

Planning Theory

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Francesco Lo Piccolo and Huw Thomas (Eds)

Ethics and planning research surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009.

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Having approached this volume from a sceptical standpoint on ethics in planning, I have been favourably impressed by the reflections it prompts – although not to the effect of dropping my scepticism altogether.

The strength of this volume lies in highlighting the relevance of the topic and the inevitability of taking position with regard to it. While directing attention to a range of ethical implications in planning, the volume focuses on a specific set of ethical issues concerning the role of planning in the production and management of knowledge. The starting point can be summarized as follows: since designing and conducting research involves assuming an explicit or implicit ethical standing towards our social world, planning researchers need to develop reflexivity and awareness – a meta-ethics, so to speak – of the ethical issues and dilemmas involved in their work. Neglecting the need for reflexive sensitivity on ethical issues is neither politically nor epistemologically innocent, and can be seen as contributing to the (re-)production of the very conditions that should challenge our ethical consciousness and our moral conduct as planners.

The contributions presented stem from the AESOP working group on ‘Research Ethics and Planning’, particularly from a round-table organized during the 2008 AESOP congress in Naples. The aim was to promote a reflection about ethics in planning research that considers the social context of moral perception and behaviour, and to pursue a shift in perspective ‘from individual moral probity to the circumstances which help researchers develop and use sound ethical judgement’ (p.3).

As Lo Piccolo and Thomas observe in their introduction, while the social science literature on research ethics is increasingly sensitive to the social context of research – including issues concerning power relations within research issues as well as power relations between researchers and ‘those with whom they have dealings’ (p.1) – there is comparatively little related debate in planning. They contrast this observation with a perceived need for a discussion focusing on disciplinary-specific contexts – as ‘circumstances are central to ethical judgement’ (p.4) – and for drawing upon the experience of a practice community, as well as for the opportunity to consolidate it on the grounds of an ethical reflexivity.

Among the general issues to be addressed accordingly are: relations between researcher and client; the 'life' of research findings (exploitation, instrumentalization); and the role of research in broader policy and political context and its possible role in facilitating 'ethically troubling' projects (p.5); to which more specific issues are added, concerning the definition and use of space, the construction of and struggle over identities, the distribution of resources, the hegemony over territory, and related issues of power.

The editors rightly underline the 'exploratory' character of this collection, and refrain from trying 'to argue a case for any particular approach to ethics' (p.256). This choice is motivated by the uncertain and contested state of theorizing and debate on ethics, but also, more specifically, by the multifarious implications ethical issues bear in planning theory and practice. This overall attitude – despite some differences – is well represented by the editors in their own contributions. Thomas's chapter on the 'ethical virtues' of planning researchers heads towards 'the notion that if researchers are not to feel that their conduct, while judged ethical, is still in some sense arbitrary and/or simply blind rule-following then they need to think more about the practice of research, in its institutional context and within their own lives, rather than about ethics as such' (p.29). Lo Piccolo similarly pleads for an ethical reflexivity not seen as a solution to ethical problems but as an opportunity and a necessary avenue to exploring ethical terrains and dilemmas (p.249). Again in their conclusions, the editors sum up this view by stating that 'planning researchers need an ethical sensitivity which sees it as more than a personal quest for truth and understands the complexities of the circumstances under which research may be undertaken' (p.257).

The volume thus refrains from advancing stipulative or 'foundational' solutions to ethical dilemmas in planning research. Most contributions consistently resist the temptation to translate any theoretical ethical frameworks into normative recommendations. That said, it is also fair to say that contributions are more convincing when they keep to this sensitizing effort than when they attempt (as in a few cases) to address possible normative orientations.

Taylor discusses the merits of a utilitarian-consequentialist understanding of ethics, but also its blindness towards other ethical issues, highlighting the contradictions emerging when an ethical commitment to criteria such as distribution, justice and truthfulness, is confronted with the utilitarian-consequentialist orientation which may prevail, for instance, in professional research. From this, Taylor infers possible consequences for an ethical training of researchers, whereby ethical dilemmas (like truthfulness vs. utilitarianism) appear to be solvable only within an attitude of situated reflexivity, grounded on an awareness of the social embeddedness of research practice and of its broader implications.

Thomas moves from a similar perspective when he discusses an 'ethics of virtues' approach. However these virtues may be defined, these are clearly dependent on world views, frames, cultural norms, and grounded in the social-constructive engagement of 'ethically sensitive' agents with their world. In this respect, an unreflexive reference to virtues – as often the case with ethical codes of conduct – may merely become reproductive of socially dominant frames of what is morally appropriate. He therefore insists on the need to nurture the 'sensitivity of the researcher to the morally salient

characteristics of whatever he or she encounters', which 'must rely on the development of such a capacity by the researcher, rather than reference to an external source of guidance' (p.36): the capacity of 'being virtuous', in other words ... But this is also a social endeavour: it involves educational training and the constitution of appropriate frameworks of reference – ethical codes of conduct being only secondary, possibly useful but also problematic measures – and, above all, providing for 'a forum for discussion of ethical concerns', for a 'collegial life which provides a context which can help keep us sensitized to ethical considerations of our work' (pp.36–37). In such a forum, a conception of ethics can be nurtured in which 'virtuous behaviour involves engaging in practices which are based upon and help sustain a shared conception of "what matters"', seen as something 'which can be discussed and debated rationally' (p.38).

In his contribution on pragmatic ethics, Verma only scantily hints at the consequences all this may bear in terms of a conception of the public and the public sphere in light of reconstructing a sense of 'moral community'. Moving from a discussion of ethical questions arising from interdisciplinary research such as in the context of planning for 'sustainability', he pleads for a pragmatically conceived ethics of competence-responsibility capable of addressing the cognitive ethical challenges of research involved in dealing with complex planning endeavours. Verma calls this a 'systemic theory of ethics', based on 'new comprehensiveness' and on a 'predictive knowledge' that 'involves the tracing of "what-ifs" on a long time horizon', and requires teaching planners 'to understand the social effects of technology, its risks, its potentials' (p.52). In his outright normative arguments, however, there is little that may seriously sound other than a petition of principle. Despite claims to the contrary – such as '[t]ying its justification to ethics rather than pure epistemology' (p.52) – and in the absence of a serious discussion of the social and political implications of ethical reasoning which other contributions in the volume underline, an 'ethics of prediction' resembles a renewal of empiricist expert epistemology more than a critical actualization of philosophical pragmatism.

What these implications may be emerges from the second section, centred on ethical issues related to institutional frameworks, and from the third section, which brings experiential accounts of ethical dilemmas in practice.

Goonewardena, Imrie and Brinkman analyse the pressures researchers are undergoing under neoliberalization tendencies – in relation to trends towards entrepreneurialism, output orientation, competition, and their institutional enforcement in higher education systems – and the way the commodification of knowledge affects the core values of academics, with profound consequences for research ethics. Further contributions address the institutional frameworks in which planning research is commissioned and produced (Mello, Schilleci) and the consultancy market and professional–client relationships (Brinkman, Healey). In general, significant aspects highlighted are the resulting threats of political-institutional manipulation of research findings (Healey), including subtle forms such as the avoidance of ethically embarrassing topics, particularly in contexts where institutionally driven research stands vis-à-vis the ideal of a value-driven research (Brinkman, Schilleci).

Key issues emerging from the reflective accounts of experience in dealing with ethical issues are power relations within the research process, as well as the way cultural frames of planners may either reflect them or act reflexively upon them. These are mostly

accounts of personal experiences with the implications born by political contexts in which researchers are involved – including the role and influence of emotions in the research process. Remarkable in this respect are Lieto's underlining of the political biases in the relations between research and ethics and of the need to contextualize planners' ethical claims, Attili's and Lo Piccolo's discussion of ethical issues involved in the 'power to narrate' and in the expectations carried by planners, and Porter's self-critical account on the ethical challenges of positionality and power involved in the framing of knowledge and the conduct of research. Lieto and Forester-Laws address more explicitly the political dimension of engagement by the researcher – with reference to the way relevant knowledge is framed and its production socialized through the mediating role of the planner – in contrast to assumptions of a value-free technical knowledge and expertise. Forester and Laws focus on what they call a 'naturalistic' approach to research ethics in the practice of mediators of public disputes. They point to the ethical imperatives facing the mediator dealing with situated, specific, applied problems: planners-as-mediators need to learn about the implications of a situation in order to be able to address the ethical challenges of dealing with issues of trust, respect, representation ... Ethics is intended here as an expression of the planners' will, detached, however, from considerations of the ethical dilemmas that may be involved in the very definition of the situation in which they are to act. By this, their argument falls short of contributing to the broader questions raised by the volume, concerning the conditions under which ethical issues for planning research emerge and are defined, as no relation is explicitly established to the ethical challenges raised by the broader context of social and political relations under which practices such as dispute resolution and mediation are defined.

The volume is particularly compelling in raising sensibility on a range of practical dilemmas of ethical concern for planning research. A meta-ethical attitude pervades most contributions, which refers to a pragmatism-inspired understanding of knowledge, of its production and meaning, as indissolubly tied to the always situated and contextual nature of purpose-oriented social agency and to the ethical orientations that sustain it. An aspect which emerges with some force – if not always explicitly – in this connection is the complex intertwinement and mutual implication of epistemological and ethical issues, and the impossibility of a reflexive ethical discourse outside of a consideration of the group processes, the interaction modes, the institutional settings, the cognitive-symbolic frames and even the ontological assumptions that preside over processes of the production of knowledge.

This is, however, where scepticism may still be in place. There is obviously a potential as well as a risk in assuming a disciplinary perspective on issues like ethics. The potential lies in a self-conscious understanding of the possibility of contributing to a public ethics as the bearer of specific societal roles, skills, forms of knowledge, and even values, related to planning, in the framework of a certain conception of the public role of the planning profession and of planning practices. A philosophical-pragmatist understanding of the role of knowledge in constituting the public may be key to this. But this involves precisely a conception of the public and of processes of the constitution of a public sphere in which planning agency may unfold such a contribution. While a tradition of critical thinking about planning in the public domain is significant in planning theory and practice, ethical thinking seems capable of contributing rather little.

The risk, on the other hand, is that of losing sight of the ‘trials of strength’ that may lie behind the way planners and planning researchers perceive and frame ethical issues, and of the fact that planners themselves may well be entangled in related practices as they argue about ‘ethics’. Verma’s ‘systemic ethics’ hegemonized by planners’ practices of ‘prediction’ on the one hand, and Thomas’ ‘moral community’ of academics holding forums of on-going ethical reflexivity among themselves on the other hand, can hardly be satisfying answers.

There are other directions shown in the volume – which, however, if taken to the extreme, may go so far as to question the whole endeavour. We are, in fact, reminded that the issues underlying ethical discourses may be, after all, better understood as political. In this respect, it is no point contrasting macro-political structuralism with micro-political actualism; at issue is rather, as Lo Piccolo himself – quoting Mazza – remarks, the illusion of pursuing ‘a clear moral aim [...] without assuming a partisan stand’ (p.248). In this respect, as Goonewardena puts it, one could just plainly point at the ‘inadequacy of ethics’ (p.57) to address the issues raised by the volume.

There is more to it. Behind the ‘ethical turn’ in politics, as Goonewardena reminds us, lies the risk of an ‘eviction of politics by ethics’ (p.64). The ‘institutionalisation’ of ethics – for instance in academic research – may go hand in hand with ‘the concomitant exemption from its scope of the political questions that really matter in social struggles over planning’ (p.58). The planner may happen to be left by this with nothing more than ‘a useful moral shield – to be wielded against any perspective on planning that may reveal the gap between his liberal humanist values and economic-corporate interests’ (pp.58–59): condemned (in the words of Marcuse) ‘ethically to fulfil unethical tasks’ or, at best, to ‘being moral without having to change the world’ (pp.61, 65).

As moral dilemmas are ‘nothing more nor less than the products of social relations underlying planning’ (p.64), Goonewardena tells us, ethical debates that do not address these relations are ethically blind. Admittedly, most of the contributions are aware of this. But a point of scepticism remains nonetheless. There is no way of escaping ethical issues in planning research, as this volume argues. But the risk of ethical self-deception is never really far away.

Peter Marcuse, James Connolly, Johannes Novy, Ingrid Olivo, Cuz Potter and Justin Steil (eds)
Searching for the just city: Debates in urban theory and practice, Abingdon, UK and
 New York: Routledge, 2009. 283 pp. GB£90.00/US\$166 (hbk) ISBN 978-0-415-77613-4;
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Susan Fainstein(2010) has given a boost to reflections about the role of “justice” as a goal for urban planning, as a tool for evaluating urban policies and dynamics, and as a meta-norm that could be used for political mobilization and coalition-building. Fainstein’s approach is groundedly pragmatic: she defines a “Just City” as being concerned with achieving the right relationships between growth, distribution and equity, between process and outcome, and between universal principles and situated, context-sensitive action