

The Political Ecology Approach to Planning in a Global World

A Latin American Perspective

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PLANNING PRACTICES from the global North have been adapted to the South, but the process has been far from seamless. Local realities are different, due especially to the major social inequalities and severe environmental degradation in Latin America. Some of these social and economic problems are generated by a conception of development that is based on capitalist ideologies, which favor the accumulation of economic resources through the exploitation of nature.

The role of planning is to spatialize public interests and to intervene in market processes in order to defend those interests. Besides addressing economic and political forces, planning should primarily bring solutions to undesirable social and environment problems and be an instrument to achieve environmental and social objectives at the national, sub-national, regional and city levels. A political ecology perspective would help to understand and address unequal development, understood as a concrete result of the exploitation of nature in a capitalist system. Hence, a political ecology approach aims to reconcile nature and society, and to understand their interaction.

Globalization, Competition and Territorial Fragmentation

In a globalized world, certain state powers are limited by world forces and international regulatory bodies that are mostly interested in sub-national, regional and



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local areas. Often times, traditional economic activities are replaced by new ones, which are carried out by transnational companies. One of the most common trends is the entrepreneurial attitude of city and regional governments, reinforced by an increased competition between them to attract external investment and greater involvement of the private sector. Investors look for key positions on the international scene to locate their operations. Economic forces affect some cities more than others since national economies are unequal. A few cities at the top of the hierarchy prevent many others from accessing economic opportunities.

In the context of a globalized economy, in which radically unequal political and social power has led to territorial fragmentation, planning policies have defined social and environmental goals that are relevant enough to be a priority over economic and political interests. However, spatial planning and policies are mostly focused on urban development, largely ignoring social and environmental dynamics in rural areas.

Urban Planning and Rural Land

Consequently, planning tends to be urban-oriented; yet the profound changes in the agricultural sector and the use of rural land pose a grave threat to rural economies and societies. Spatial planning is influenced by intergovernmental relationships, politics and development responding to the objectives of urban elites.

There is no consensus on what, exactly, the “rural” is, should be or expects to be; there are, instead, different concepts of rural depending on the world region and the country. For some, it is a landscape on which a network of widely spaced small towns and villages have developed. For others, rural areas are simply defined as “not urban”. Different concepts of the rural are linked to social, economic and cultural histories in each national context.

Depending on the concept, planning policies are designed to either protect the countryside from physical development and preserve it as a green landscape, as in Britain, or to protect agriculture and farming areas, as in France. In the first case, rural towns have been largely framed within the context of the town and country planning system, and the protection of the countryside from physical development by the central state. The second case is the result of the joint work of “communes” or municipalities, in accordance with the decentralization of responsibilities and resources to local governments, for the delivery of policies and services, including agrarian production. However, the focus on planning policies is still characterized in terms of urbanization and population density in rural settlements, which includes established patterns such as town and fringe, village and dispersed.

Transferring Spatial Planning to the Latin American Context

One of the challenges that Latin America has had to face is the need to resolve the tensions and contradictions between the various territorial policies that are driving its current development such as: territorial development, municipal spatial planning, land use plans, ecological zoning and decentralization. These tensions are posing various conflicts around planning policy definitions and their complex implementation systems. Tensions involve challenges to economic, social and territorial cohesion, governance efficiency and environmental risks. Territorial problems are mainly related to environmental impacts due to unregulated land use changes, unsustainable production activities, rapid population growth, population concentration in cities and the intense urbanization of unplanned settlements. These dynamics, combined with an extreme gap between rich and poor, are tightly related to a development model based on a capitalist ideology.

In general, planning strategies in Latin America focus on unplanned rural and urban land occupancy and use, degradation of environmental resources, endangered biodiversity and multiculturalism, regional development disparities and population risks caused by pollution and an uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources. Given these challenges, national governments are shifting decentralized municipal planning to a more regionally oriented development model. Other major Latin American obstacles for development are the disarticulation be-

tween territorial and other sectoral policies, unbalanced socio-economic, environmental and territorial development and a divergent relationship between development ideologies, environmental policies and planning policies. These circumstances are worsened by the prevalence of sectoral policies over regional ones, the predominance of private interests over territorial plans that come with corruption and political weakness and a lack of financial resources to carry out and control planning strategies.

Nature and Culture as Profitable Resources for Territorial Competitiveness

Across Europe, social and environmental values have become increasingly important in local decision-making; however, differences between countries have clearly been influenced by the ability of social and environmental movements to gain access to formal power. Overcoming social exclusion and environmental degradation is a hard task for local governments since they do not have an independent planning approach. This is mostly due to their competitiveness and the need to attract significant public funding, which requires the support of higher levels of government. Usually governments give priority to infrastructure so as to increase competitiveness, which paradoxically exacerbates social problems and environmental impacts. Impacts on the equitable distribution of resources increase the tension between small and large cities or states, and rural and urban areas.

Furthermore, under the market economy model, territorial development is the strategy by which material conditions can be developed, putting them into practice through better infrastructure and reformed conditions for increased productivity and competitiveness. It is dangerous to see territory only as a productive factor and a source of “natural capital,” where the environment and the people *become* capital from a commercial point of view. Hence, territorial competitiveness conceives people and culture as resources from which it is possible to obtain economic profit at a low cost, thereby degrading environmental and human conditions.

Towards Balanced Urban and Rural Development

Environmental sustainability should be considered a major dimension of territorial development, overcoming the passive vision of nature preservation, but also considering the potential of natural resources (water,

geography, climate, ecology, earth, air) as sources of development and social cohesion. Planners must introduce an urgent shift from traditional “urban planning” to a more holistic conception of planning with a sustainable vision of a balanced urban and rural development.

In this context of a nature dominated by society, nature has become a commodity, objectified and associated with profit. Therefore, the question is, first, to untangle the economic, political and ecological processes involved in the territory and, second, to understand how nature becomes urbanized, whose nature it is and the uneven powers that compete for the domination of nature. In this sense, there is a need for planners to focus on the uneven distribution of both environmental benefits and damages for economically and politically marginalized communities. That means that while environmental (social and physical) qualities may be enhanced in some places and for some humans, they often lead to a deterioration of social, physical and/or ecological conditions and qualities elsewhere.

Planners and policy makers often fail to recognize the intimate relationship between capitalist forces



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and socio-environmental justice. Capitalistic natural-resource extraction (mining, large scale mining, cash-crop monocultures heavy industry, etc.) triggers several adverse social and environmental consequences. These environmental problems also relate to urban and industrial pollution due to current rapid industrialization and urbanization favored by the development policies of central governments, which go hand in hand with capitalist expansion, political power and personal enrichment.

The transformation of nature through urbanization or exploitation causes environmental deterioration and socio-environmental problems. Hence, political ecology is about defining political strategies based on the democratic participation of communities in the organization of their environment.

An Urgent Need for Change

There is an urgent need for change to transform the highly unequal power relations between rich and poor and between the rulers and the ruled. To address this issue, the discourse of sustainable development in the Latin American context first needs to be altered to include local level decisionmakers and local grassroots actors like farmers, industry workers and miners, as well as the traditionally powerful actors, like large production companies, multilateral institutions and government actors. Going forward, policymaking should be driven by the concepts of environmental and social justice in order to overcome environmental degradation and social segregation.

In Latin America there is a correlation between environmental risk, poverty and minority communities. Only in the late 1980s did Latin American governments introduce environmental laws and institutions based on European or US guidelines, with very limited or non-democratic participation of the affected communities. Transferring policies without a comprehensive understanding of the local context results in dysfunctional or ineffective implementation. It is not a matter of simple transplanting: they should be adapted as hybrids, fusions of imported notions with local, indigenous ideas or experiences. As a second course of action, environmental justice – spatialized through planning strategies – should include elements of both Northern and Southern conceptions of social and environmental consciousness. Local languages, principles,

tactics and questions posed by environmental justice provide opportunities to reveal new insights, ideas and ways of understanding the extreme social and environmental challenges that Latin America is facing.

There is a correlation between planning policies and regional spatial strategies to address environmental and social problems in European and Latin American contexts. This relationship creates an opportunity for North-South and South-South cooperation. As a third step, this correlation could be enriched through utilizing the theoretical concepts of political ecology and environmental justice, in order to structure practical and participatory actions to spatialize and organize

development actions in urban and rural contexts. Such actions could promote social and environmental justice through policy-making that includes the work of diverse groups like scholars, activists, professionals, scientists and community leaders, as well as local communities.

Planners and policy makers should assume the role of active agents of change by promoting critical and analytical scenarios to different community, productive, government and political actors at the local and regional levels directly involved in territorial development. In doing so, they will contribute to the democratization of knowledge and help build political capacity. **P²**

Call for Papers: Detroit, Fall 2015

Progressive Planning, the magazine of Planners Network, invites critical articles about the state of planning in Detroit for its Fall 2015 issue.

Once idealized as an icon of American modernity, Detroit's drastic population decline and high poverty and unemployment rates put the city at the center of many conversations from professional planning discourses to the sensational social imaginary surrounding shrinking cities. Historically, like residents of many industrial cities, Detroiters have faced displacement from state sanctioned mega projects, discriminatory suburban housing policies and uprisings in response to racial injustice. Though land values and population have drastically decreased, urban morphology continues to be shaped by the privatization of public land holdings and market centric solutions addressing primarily economic conditions of Detroit. The prowess of a city built and sustained by union wages of auto workers now finds itself bankrupt and polarized by the increasingly conservative politics of a newly-minted right-to-work state. Within this context, working class and African-American Detroiters have found themselves increasingly at the margins of formal planning conversations. This exclusion is seen in large scale water shut offs, the auction of tax foreclosed properties to out of state and international investors, and the development of formal plans that aim to "right size" less economically viable neighborhoods. As a necessity, politically marginalized Detroit communities have responded through the imple-

mentation of informal, survivalist strategies such as urban agriculture, ridesharing networks and a scrapping economy.

Today, rhetoric that describes Detroit as dead or dying, stagnated and suffering from irreversible damage, at times obfuscates the active continuation of urban policy supporting spatial injustice and political marginalization of local communities of color through neoliberalization.

Progressive Planning critically explores the politics behind the planning and their effects on sustainability and justice. We go beyond "best practice" models to investigate the true social, political and ecological impacts of both mainstream and alternative planning schemes.

Articles must be written in a critical and journalistic voice. Authors should avoid jargon and present a clear point of view. Articles should be no more than 2,000 words in English and written for a general audience. Do not use footnotes or bibliography. Please adhere to the guidelines for submission: <http://www.plannersnetwork.org/magazine-publications/magazine-guidelines-for-submission/>.

Please send submissions to Lisa Berglund at liber@ucla.edu by September 1, 2015.