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Planning as a problem

Planning as a problem

Francesco Ventura

Planning 'as a problem' is the focus of a new book by Stefano Moroni, *The city of active liberalism* (2007). Starting from this book and comparing its theses with other perspectives, this article will critique current theories and practices of planning in general and of urban planning in particular. The first section summarizes Moroni's point of view; the second presents other philosophical contributions that shed new light on the subject. *The city of active liberalism* is a critique of the plan as a system of concrete rules tending to a final end-state through the coordination of various independent activities. The plan is seen as a device for leading the social system towards equilibrium and harmony. It is an idea based on the image of the market as a balancing device where the social system sometimes deviates from equilibrium due to market imperfections that only the public can correct. Active liberalism (that is, a refinement of classical liberalism of the kind defended by Friedrich von Hayek) is instead based upon an idea of the market as a catallaxis: a spontaneous self-maintaining order that can deviate from equilibrium in the formal sense. The idea is that the unintentional consequences of various individuals' intentional actions can converge into stable patterns of cooperation that are advantageous for everyone. In this perspective the role of the state is still decisive, but its function is quite different. If we accept the idea that a spontaneous beneficial order can emerge from the interplay of different individuals, then the state's role will be to guarantee the general framework within which this

can take place. This has to be a continuous activity (the liberalism must be 'active'). The central point is that this is very different from the notion of constructing a 'made order' through deliberate planning. It is, in fact, more in line with the old ideal of the rule of law, whereby the state was called upon to produce rules of a prevalently negative and strictly non-discriminatory nature, rules that remain certain and stable over time. According to active liberalism, each individual has the right to profess his or her idea of the good life. It is not the state that must establish a common idea of the good life and try to lead the social system in this direction. The sphere of the good is clearly distinguished from the sphere of the right. The incompatibility of traditional urban planning with this perspective is quite clear: think how traditional planning seeks to impose an end-state situation authoritatively, by presenting a preferred urban order that society must reach. In this case the aims/objectives of individuals in using goods are reduced to means in light of a common (planning) end. Now let us take a look at a different, but similarly critical, approach to planning. In this perspective, planning again appears to be problematic. The main reference here is to the work of Emanuele Severino (2006), who has observed that the will to dominate 'becoming' through scientific prediction and planning is the hallmark of modern theories of the state and the market. In this perspective, a further criticism of planning can be made for its attempt to deny 'becoming'. Active liberalism pays more attention to becoming, accepting the spontaneous flux of the market within a framework that does not try to indicate the direction of that flux;

however, it also tries to dominate becoming. The rule of law is the technique that active liberalism uses to 'control' becoming, and, more specifically, the catallaxis. When Aristotle speaks (in *Physics*) about luck or chance (*tyche*), he observes that becoming, which he calls *autómaton*, i.e. generating (*máomai*) by itself (*autó*), is a spontaneous phenomenon without immediate causes, something completely unpredictable. At the same time, however, he reduces this characteristic only to a particular kind of occasional becoming, one that he distinguishes from other more frequent phenomena such as the becoming of nature (*physis*) and the becoming of techniques (*téchne*), of which we can have a scientific understanding and thus be able to predict. For the sake of argument, we could accept the fundamental belief of Western thought, i.e. the idea that there is really 'becoming': things emerge from 'nothing' and return to 'nothing'. It is Aristotelian and Platonic metaphysics that introduced this notion, one which until that point was not completely evident. And from this notion emerged the conviction that human beings can have an unlimited dominion over reality. But here a paradox arises, for if we accept becoming in its strictest sense then we cannot predict events. To be able to predict events is to deny becoming. Yet this is exactly what planning theory and practice usually assumes, in its certainty that knowledge interpreted as episteme can help human beings to control the world. Epistemic dominion can thus be interpreted as the illusory cure to the anguished unpredictability of becoming. A cure, as Nietzsche once observed, that is surely worse than

evil, because it simply denies life. In particular, the idea of the episteme as an absolute and incontrovertible truth is completely different from the idea of science as a form of hypothetical knowledge. Science is valuable and helpful precisely because it renounces to the epistemic illusion. Science accepts the idea that knowledge is provisional and always subject to discussion and falsification. The real opposition, which is fundamental if we want to be able to correctly interpret the situation, is not then the opposition between plan and non-plan, but that between an epistemic notion of the plan and a hypothetical notion of the plan. In previous work, I have tried to demonstrate, in a way similar to Moroni's, that there is incompatibility between land-use planning that tries to achieve particular end-states through imperative law and the liberal-democratic ideal. In the case of planning, the hypothetical and intrinsically uncertain predictions of the plan are transformed into certainty through law. Each land receives a specific destination and function in order to reach a predefined end-state. In a liberal-democratic regime, it is not possible to oblige landlords to implement the plan, but denying any other transformation not specified therein achieves an identical result. Here, planning rules prohibit the free exchange of goods: or, better, it is possible to exchange goods within the framework of the plan itself, which contributes to determine their final value. The lands' exchange value then derives partly from the legal framework. In this light, planning techniques are more outdated than political and economical ones: this is true only if the former take as a given their ability to construct collective designs

for the city.

But we can also interpret traditional planning and its spread from a different perspective, i.e. as the point of convergence of the interests of public officials, speculators and professionals.

In the first place, from the point of view of political activity, the plan is a crucial mechanism and a decisive opportunity: to plan the various pieces of land in a differentiated manner is to have enormous power in the political-economic arena. The imperative design of the city gives politicians the possibility of negotiating various options. Moreover, thanks to traditional urban planning speculators have an exceptional opportunity to speculate and profit: the plan protects their land destinations without risks, granting them legal certainty. The success of market operations is thus legally secured.

In the end, planners have a strong interest in maintaining this model of action: they play a central, complex role because, from a technical point of view, they can argue in favour of a particular design of the city in the attempt to harmonize the various instances, and look for rhetorical devices to defend collective choices. Clearly, it will take a long time before this idea of planning will come to an end!