

Urban Practices, Policy Tools, and the Poverty of Planning Theory”

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1. *Let's Try It Again?*

Davide Ponzini proposes the tools of government approach to face complex urban planning problems. This approach has been little explored in Italy, but can count on important research and experimentation elsewhere. Certainly, this proposal was influenced by two recent research experiences: one semester at Yale, the University where, among others, Lindblom and Hirschman were protagonists of seminal innovations in policy studies; one year at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, where Lester Salamon, probably the most prominent and influential author on this topic (Salamon, 2002), has been working for decades. In this phase, policy tool study is not a neglected topic in Europe. Recently Patrick Le Galés and Pierre Lascoumes explored the issue (Lascoumes and Le Galés, 2004 and 2007), apparently without reaching innovative contributions. The intention of the authors was to leave behind traditional functional approaches, oriented to selecting efficient instruments for solving policy problems. In fact, each instrument contributes to structure public policy processes and the related social relationships, influencing both expectations and actors' actions. It seems necessary to confirm that policy instruments should be interpreted as social institutions capable of modifying rules and behaviors and that the social and political interactions subsequent to the adoption of a given tool must be considered. However, in this regard there are few innovative results. Le Galés and Lascoumes formulated a new hypothesis for classifying the increasing variety of instruments available, but one can question the choice of case studies such as urban projects or neighborhood policies, which are complex programs rather than specific tools of public intervention. The impression is that the most recent contributions in this field, at least in Europe, still concern the definition of conceptual frameworks and disciplinary taxonomies.

Progresses regarding the selection of effective tools are of little relevance, not only in relation to traditional questions of policy design, but also for the social and political structuring effects that particular tools can determine in specific contexts. In this sense, it seems difficult to achieve more convincing results. Therefore, it is necessary to reconsider the reasons for interest in this topic and the potential results we can expect from its development. This is the aim of the following notes, which are first of all meant for the Italian case, but probably could be more far-reaching.

2. *The Crossway Architecture/Policy Analysis*

It is common knowledge that in Italy, as in other Mediterranean countries, urban planning and development projects are generally part of Architectural Schools, with particular attention to the questions of analysis and design of physical transformations. However, it must be noted that architectural and urban planning culture have included policy studies for the past several years. This trend became clearer and clearer as the limits of the traditional approaches have been recognized: such as the synoptic and prescriptive conception of master plan, or the confusion between urban design and architectural design, that often brought the responsibility of significant urban transformation into the hands of famous architects, even though these problems could not be solved simply through architectural projects. With some difficulty, even in Italian Schools of Architecture raised awareness regarding strategic analysis of needs and priority functions, regarding processes of collective definition and management of policy problems, and the analysis of urban impact of physical transformations. It now seems clear that a transdisciplinary dialogue between architectural and policy studies tradition must be developed. At the same time, the references to planning theory doctrines have become more uncertain. Indeed, from the perspective outlined here, little space is left for planning culture, which seems to represent a confused and to some extent inconsistent disciplinary framework, and whose contribution with regards to the two cited traditions is difficult to evaluate. Perhaps a planning discipline does not exist, as Wildawky (1973) anticipated many years ago; or perhaps it is risking to become superfluous with regards to the most rigorous contributions of policy studies, on one hand, and of town planning and urban projects on the other.

3. *The Poverty of Planning Theory*

Some time ago I expressed heavy doubts about the emerging tendencies in this field (Palermo, 1992 and 2004). Two crucial limits have been soundly confirmed through the years: *eclecticism and conformism*. As a discipline, the so called “planning theory” could not define a shared and rigorous

paradigmatic framework, nor it could develop a fruitful challenge among competing paradigms. No clear choices have been taken. Despite the evident inconsistencies among emerging positions, varied contributions are uncritically accumulated. The trend was made evident in John Friedmann's work (1987), which is considered groundbreaking by many planning schools. The author, assuming as the main issue the links between knowledge and action, outlines four profiles among which more or less radical differences may be highlighted, without making explicit the conditions and limits that could justify their sense, without expressing a critical evaluation over positions which appear less and less defensible. One can find two references to the rational tradition, in a technocratic version ("social engineering", as rational problem solving to be guided by public institutions) or as a methodological approach (a generic reference to "policy analysis" as a rational method to face collective problems). The remaining two profiles express an evolutionary vision of change, following an incremental and adaptive interpretation, or a more radical and alternative one to existing situations. The taxonomy reflects contingent trends and each profile is represented in a disputable way: generic genealogies, eclectic and not always justified references, almost inadequate historical and critical evaluations. Neither choices nor true discussions: heterogeneous fragments are accumulated, largely drawing on other disciplinary traditions.

Conformism derives from the uncritical agreement with cultural trends coming from the outside. This was the case of scientific conceptions of planning unwisely adopted by Andreas Faludi in the early 1970s (the same author was soon forced to make substantial corrections). Also, the contemporary radical geographical thought inspired by Marxism tradition is evidently antithetic to the latter theory. In the last fifteen years, the most diffused, but nonetheless uncritical and conformist, reference is "collaborative planning" (Healey, 1997). This is merely an ideological vision if proposed in exhortative manner, without reflecting on the conditions in real contexts (for which it is sufficient to see the inspiring analysis of Lindblom and Hirschman). Paradoxically, Patsy Healey recognized the fundamental political dimension of urban planning, but she renounced exploring it, supposing mainly cooperative interactive networks, following inclusive and deliberative processes (John Forester at least proposed a more critical framework, 1993). These are three prominent authors, but their vision are mutually inconsistent and each one is questionable (I developed this criticism in several books starting in the early 1980s, unfortunately in Italian; English references can be found in Palermo, 2006).

My doubts were confirmed by the recent and wide ranging reader edited by Patsy Healey e Jean Hillier (2008). If the aim of the work is to document the discipline's identity and consistence,

Wildavsky's doubts find further legitimacy. In my view, there are two main critical points. First of all, the uncertain originality and the scarce rigor of the theoretical elaboration. In fact, we are dealing with a field of theories and practices where we can always find pre-existing and more grounded references, pertaining to more prominent disciplines, such as policy studies, organizational and choice theories, economic or social geography or urbanism. It is rare to find an improvement of current knowledge. Difficulties and doubts are simply removed; the shallowness trying to fulfill a lack of grounding traditions with generic philosophical explorations (regarding Habermas, Foucault or recently Deleuze) is truly striking. The second criticism is the porosity of the field, using a Healey and Hillier metaphor: as capacious as it is indefinite, namely lacking identity, guidance and action principles, due to its apparent omnivorousness, accumulating diverse paradigms and experiences, in a confused framework of eclectic themes, visions and practices, not always congruous and often inconsistent. Indeed, it is difficult to distinguish the professed planning field through objective criteria, which do not consist of merely nominal references to school or planning institutional figures which have little in common: not the object, nor the interests, perspectives, traditions, nor the experiences. Planning theory deals with physical transformations of space, but also with general problems of societal guidance (however, the reader overlooks the themes of physical planning, only referring to Peter Hall's interpretations of town planning paradigm and briefly to Howard and Geddes works). It aims at substantial knowledge of cities and society, but it can be reduced to a procedural expertise, related to decision making and management processes. It expresses normative ambitions with regards to transformation and change, but it can also be limited to descriptive and interpretative contributions. It can express radically critical orientations regarding real socio-spatial conditions and trends, but it can also strive for inclusive and collaborative forms of ideal public decision making. These miscellaneous references are reproduced without a sound critical framework: only a common sequence of several paradigmatic visions added to the pre-existing and heterogeneous ones for each phase, whose rationales, effects or mutual relationships are not investigated. In this way it is possible that Healey e Hillier, at the same time, uncritically revisit rational approaches to planning in the 1960s and 70s (inviting the reader to avoid severe criticism toward an evidently untenable approach), they exalt the communicative conceptions, diffused in the 1990s, overlooking the cultural and social problems deriving from deliberative and inclusive ideologies, but they are also sensitive to irrational tendencies in postmodern thought (as the inappropriate use of Deleuze proposed by Jean Hillier). It

seems difficult to understand the sense of this disciplinary framework. Aaron Wildavsky once warned: “If planning is everything, maybe it is nothing” (1973).

4. *A Void Full of Interests*

The impression here is that in the planning field themes of paramount importance are faced with striking superficiality. The field implies conspicuous interests concerning collective problems and being at the center of attention for a long time. The identity and intellectual perspective of this approach to such themes is not clear. Instead a great void of principles, visions and inquiry techniques appears and needs to be filled with external references. In this sense one can see the use of Habermas’ thought in the “communicative turn” in planning, or the reference to Foucault for the analysis of the relationships between power, visions of the world and real practice. The current and clamorous example is Jean Hillier’s proposal of a Deleuzian theory in urban planning (*Stretching beyond the horizon*, 2007). I found this work as irrelevant as it was groundless. The author argues for the necessity of renewing planning theories and practices, since they are not adequate to new problems and conditions of contemporary society, in an even more fluid and uncertain world. To this extent Hillier believes Deleuze’s work to be the basis for elaborating a post-representational theory of dynamic complexity and a speculative and creative conception of planning, as a social practice exploring virtual opportunities and temporary synthesizing multiple emergent tendencies in inclusive and collaborative ways. This vision leads to at least four radical objections. First of all, in order to emphasize her innovative contribution, the author overlooks and simplifies influential traditions, that are significantly less rigid and reductive than they are outlined to be. For example, one can easily show that pragmatic culture in planning (well expressed in Donald Schon’s excellent work, 1983) already implies a “post-representational perspective” (see Richard Rorty, 1982) and an experimental and creative conception of planning (for example Wildavsky, 1979). Secondly, the reference and the use of Deleuze’s thought imply a banal idea of theory, that in the end reveals a positivist framework: a preconstituted theoretical language is adopted with the aim at capturing real phenomena (“throwing the nets”, following the neo-positivist metaphor). Pragmatic, hermeneutical and also post-structuralist reflections already showed the limits in this dualistic approach to theory and experience. The third criticism regards the merely formal use of deleuzian language. Naively enough, contingent dynamics are believed to be represented through fluid concepts, without reflecting over Deleuze’s substantial contributions, that are not compatible with some planning traditions shared by the author. For example, following Nietzsche, Deleuze elaborated an interesting

conception of evaluation as an artistic practice creating new visions of the world, but Hillier does not criticize the most orthodox methodologies in evaluation, that usually carry out mainly rhetorical functions in ordinary processes (the author seriously takes into consideration Brian McLoughlin's old "systems approach"!). Deleuze interprets sense making as a contingent and singular event, independent from any profound essence. However, this conception is antithetic to both radical and cultural influential approaches to planning (see the reader, 2008). Most of all, with Guattari, Deleuze proposes an irrational escape with regards to contemporary social problems: he does not articulate critical interpretations of the world (because this undertaking seems doomed to compromises), but he delusively tries to deny the existing one, gazing for a utopic space, where desires can expand in any direction, as rhizomes, without constrictions. In my opinion, Hillier should consider what is more rhizomatous than globalization today and how we can conceive these autonomous and irresponsible tendencies in order to find a collaborative synthesis! Moreover, the last criticism regards the concrete results of this new theoretical vision: it confirms the proper articulation between programmatic framework and local projects, it looks at rhetorical or routine strategic planning experiences, it proposes an embarrassing deleuzian new reading of the bureaucratic compromise that is the European Spatial Development Perspective or of the simplifying "hierarchy of objectives" adopted in economic-spatial programs, when it is too difficult to produce more interesting results (the case of the transportation plan in Kosovo). I do not think that more interesting results may derive from here.

5. Choose the Paradigm

Getting back to action and real problems, I think a clear paradigm choice is necessary to propose a general vision of the world and a specific conception of what can be asked of policy analysis and design. In this sense, planning theory mediation does not seem useful, since the planning field will be so confused and irresponsible: it is better to directly refer to policy studies, which are capable of offering clear and well-defined options. My hypothesis here is that good reasons support "political realism" as a vision and "policy inquiry" tradition as practice and technique. It is not my intention to articulate here but only to affirm this orientation (the topic is explained in my own cited books and this brief article does not allow me to discuss it thoroughly; an accurate review of the policy study paradigm can be found in Regonini, 2001). Here, I only say that a pluralistic and conflicting, rather than communitarian or collaborative, vision of society is fundamental. I also consider the critical and reflective pragmatist culture as the most fruitful root to interpret, design and to manage

policy processes, despite the reductive interpretations emphasizing incremental and conservative limits (in Italy, Lanzara's works supported an innovative interpretation of this paradigm: see, 1993). It is possible to disagree with this hypothesis, which at least constitutes a clear reference, orienting inquiry, evaluation, and operative choices.

6. *Jointly Framing Policy Tools and Policy Design*

This framework is clearly incompatible with rational and methodological conceptions of policy design that are still present in many handbooks. On the other hand the critical experimentation of the "modern project" in architecture and urbanism brought the same conclusions. Every representational and rational conception of a project constitutes an ideological simplification, which is of little relevance, with exception made for rhetorical functions. The alternative is an approach to the project as a collective inquiry, carried out through transactions and conversations among multiple actors, aiming at potentially different goals. The complexity of problems, whose definition cannot be given *a priori*, but is shared during the process, derives from different representations of the actual condition that mobilized actors provide and from their strategic interactions. The possibility of success comes from the capability of building a shared representation envisioning a solution and mobilizing cooperative behaviors. This approach puts the fundamental notions of the pragmatic culture to use.

In this frame the reference to policy tools is evidently a key point. It deals not only with operational capability, which becomes a requirement and a measure of quality and effectiveness of the policy process. Nor can one propose a defined repertoire of problem solving technologies among which rationally selecting one of them in order to optimize the outcome. The options at our disposal assume a constitutive function from two different points of view: concretely interpreting policy guidelines and programs (which remain vague until the policy tools are specified); generating collateral effects, which are not always wanted or expected, touching orientations and behaviors of the multiple involved actors. In this sense, tools induce first of all *generative* experimentations. This awareness seems to grow over time. It seems incorrect to affirm that the original approach was merely functionalist and problem solving oriented (this view is proposed by Le Galès, but even Salamon's early analyses recognized that tool choice is intrinsically political and as well as the importance of context and of the potential effects induced by specific instruments). As Ponzini argues, this attention should be more accurate and articulated. It is not the case of choosing the most appropriate single instrument. A neglected theme in the literature is the analysis of contextual

impacts and the dynamic interdependencies of tool mixes that are commonly deployed in complex situations. We would need of a sort of *balance sheet* regarding direct, indirect and joint effects of integrated tool sets, in relationship to types of problems and contexts.

In this regard, a more exhaustive and shared classification of the matter is required. The taxonomies proposed in literature are countless, but apparently temporary (see the essential review in Howlett and Ramesh, 1995). Reasonable variations are always possible, but the instability of the frame does not favor the development and evaluation of impact and context analysis that are the main objectives. My impression is that classification should not be merely technical, but founded on different policy principles. Several instruments allow the *accountability* principle to be applied: first of all in terms of information, screening, and certification. Other instruments aim at fostering *learning* opportunities: the adoption of standards and best practice diffusion. Other tools have the goal of *enacting* contextual actors: through incentives or sanctions, also leading to contractual relationships. Others have *redistributive* intentions, such as the vast field of economic and fiscal policies. Moreover, there is the influential section of so called *regulative* interventions, regarding acts, laws and procedures. Current experiences show that different tools are not alternative options, but should be properly combined with regards to the problem and the context. A critical point is that they imply different cultures in collective action: for example, a long tradition of regulative and redistributive policies could make policies of active and responsible mobilization difficult to achieve. For this reason, it is important inquiring into the joint effects of different policy tools. A clearer taxonomy will be possible after clarifying the questions about the use of policy tools in real planning processes.

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