Postpolitical correctness?

Jonas Bylund, Department of Human Geography, Stockholm University

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What role does planning have in a world where everything is political, yet not much of it seems to be democratic in kind? This question was posed at the recent symposium *Is planning past politics?* (for short). Three strands framed the discussion of the state of politics in planning in the symposium, organised by Jonathan Metzger, Philip Allmendinger, and Stijn Osterlynck, who did a great job to promote discussions on the topic. Presented as the post-political theory, the displacement of politics, and the agonistic theory, these three strands was used as dealing with how to think about planning and politics in a sense when not everything is political. Central to the ‘motivation’ behind the symposium was thus that on the one hand planning is always political, *pace* Wildavsky (1973). On the other hand politics is perhaps not what it used to be, if we consider thinkers such as Honig (1993), Rancière (1999), Mouffe (2005), Žižek (1999), and Latour (2005a), who were loosely put together as post-foundational theory. These interlocutors, as the sample of theorists were quickly dubbed to be during the symposium, the organisers state, ‘are all united in their ambition to articulate a more disruptive or at least transformative understanding of the meaning of “the political”, through questioning the cavalier contemporary usage of the terms within the public debate and the social sciences’ (quote from the invitation). However, the intuition making kin of the three strands, then, seems to be that

genuine political activity and democratic achievements rely more on something Other to formal procedure in the sphere of politics.

The many paper presentations, too many to discuss in total here, and following discussions were drawing on this framing and became highly interesting, pertinent, and unsettling. One of the strong undercurrents was the theme of how to do planning and how we study this activity, questions which will hopefully never be settled absolutely. For instance, Karin Bradley and Moa Tunström on Swedish sustainability discourse and negotiations in planning practice, a theme which Maria Håkansson elucidated as well, and Cathy Wilkingson on ‘greening’ urban sprawl in Melbourne. Many of the interventions presented on how planning and politics deal with specific issues communicated the outrageousness of democratic deficits and simply bad (or evil) planning. Here, Oren Yiftachel on the grey spacing of land in Israel, Mike Raco and the London, UK, hyper-pluralism of decision-making and public health issues, and Guy Baeten on the depoliticised ‘neo-Modern’ development schemes in Malmö, Sweden, were pertinent. Lastly, the symposium brought together many strands in search for how to talk about what is wrong in current and past Western planning. Among others, Philip Allmendinger and Graham Haughton discussed the role of planners to make post-politics work, Richard Ek and Mekonnen Tesfahuney elaborated the relation between values and planning as war by other means, and Barbara Czarniawska asked questions on the central planning in Poland in the 1980s compared to big firms in the USA and whether planning can be seen as being ‘pre-political’.

Hence, it is not surprising that the post-political theory strand early on set the register for the three days of discussions. The establishment of a framing vocabulary is not uncommon in planning studies or elsewhere in the academe, and it is of course inescapable if the intention is to discuss a certain topic. However, for all the good, well-meaning intentions in post-foundational political planning studies – or what shall we call it? – caution is perhaps to be advised. Should we be wary of a new kind of political correctness in planning studies? I do not mean the kind where we are directly avoiding certain expressions or actions which might ‘exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against’, as my laptop dictionary defines the conventional kind. Rather, should we be concerned with a kind which works through theoretical positions?

Post-politics is a collector, a regime, a condition, and it is coming to your local theatre, it is soon everywhere. All political activity is up for colonisation at the moment, it seems. It will transform all politics – and in effect planning – to a rigged game of sycophancy, so to speak, in that decision making space is made so narrow so as only to allow a minuscule debate in highly restricted discourse. Since there has been a debate after all, it can shamelessly be called democracy by its instigators. Or so the characterisation runs by planning students who use the notion to characterise contemporary ‘apolitical’ politics. The notion is on the verge to becoming a generic shorthand for our understanding of much urban and regional planning. The antidote, as far as I understand the discussions (and cf. Swyngedouw, 2009), is to take care of and nurture the rare and fragile proper political irruptions which are ascribed the potential to destabilise post-politics (at least for a while).

Ironically, one can wonder whether the genre of post-political diagnosis is itself at risk of attracting a post-political condition? That is, soon any kind, any action or statement, in or to characterise formal or informal decision-making settings which does not try to – or even succeed in – taking account of any voice, any articulation whatsoever in whatever way, which claims that it has bearing on an issue, will be condemned as acting post-politically.

It is a matter of ‘discourse 101’: I remember a keynote by David Harvey at the International Conference of Critical Geography in Mexico City, 2005. It was an analysis of neoliberalism and its philosophy. A Harvey keynote. But it was the first of a five days long conference. It became very hard to discuss critical geography without relating it to that particular keynote – or, rather, the particular notion dealt with in it. Which of course is the point of a keynote: to set the key in which a conference can ‘jam’. However, there were also sentiments among many scholars of being forced into using ‘neoliberal’ and its derivatives. Many felt – for good or for bad – that there was no escaping that version of the world in whichever particular setting was up for critical inquiry. To the point of self-ridicule, trying not to say the word every other sentence, some participants started using formulations like ‘the NL-word’ instead – even in paper presentations.

In the academe, in research, and perhaps especially in the social sciences, we often see the same kind of dynamics: a notion, a concept, signifying a topic in a quite particular way (a framing) seems to colonise (or at least establish trade posts for slave trade) discourse and aspire hegemony. Many times, if not most, it is possible to

kindly acknowledge arguments but still ignore ‘the game’, so to speak. The post-political vocabulary may be a bit different, as it draws on not only ‘categorisation’ but a very Modern mechanism of setting up clearly ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides of the dualism (see e.g. Woolgar, 2002, on the critique against conceptual binaries in the social sciences). Dualities such as these, according to much STS thought and other ‘post-’ thinkers such as Deleuze, tend to freeze thinking rather than open it up. In human geography, my main field of academic training, the critique against dualisms many times converge around a statements such as:

Binary structures ... establish relations of opposition and exclusion rather than of sameness and interconnection between the two terms involved. Much of human geography, then, has potentially accepted uncritical accounts of power relations simply by endorsing binary thinking. (Cloe and Johnston, 2005, p. 12).

Like Bartleby, who unto his master’s command says ‘I prefer not to’ (Melville, 2004; cf. Stengers, 2005), a choice of not using the vocabulary could be one way to enhance the critique? How do we keep the lesson to be learnt by these accounts without having everything pushed through the dualist post-political/proper political grinder? These very effective categories can indeed hinder creative diagnosis with different answers on possible solutions (i.e. both analytical and normative statements). Otherwise, and here is the ironic twist to these two operators which make up the sorting principle in the post-political correctness: in the worst case, articulations which prefer not to use the vocabulary of post-politics and the proper political – the first principles in the grammar package – will be considered to be noise, not ‘realist’, and thus made irrelevant by a mechanism not dissimilar from that which is the main target of critique in the ‘genre’. A proper political attitude could very well be to encourage many different languages, vocabularies, practices of making diagnosis and propose possibilities which does not even use the words ‘political’ or ‘politics’? Just as there are ways to make a social analysis without really using ‘the social’ (cf. Latour, 2005b).

So, what is the role for planning when everything is politics but not much of it deemed proper? To at least try, even in the face of post-political correctness? This is perhaps what Eric Swyngedouw meant – or could mean? – in the comment on the summation of the first day: ‘dare to fail’, which is also an encouragement of perhaps trying to do something even in the face of being accused of recreating post-politics?

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