

“Roles of planners reflect their perception of power”

(extended abstract)

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Today, many planners study cities as self-evolving systems, accredit citizens with competences to make decisions and promote an idea of non-interfering. But they marginalise the fact that such systems are often run by those who do not hesitate to use power; power is one of the key phenomena which adds dynamics to social systems and is unavoidable. During the history, many thinkers characterised power in terms of contradictions as subject-driven or relation-based, dominating versus empowering, and static contra dynamic. Since power is a malleable variable which eludes complex investigations, contemporary planners tend to ignore, neutralise or avoid it. However, in democratic societies, where power shifts from authorities towards citizens whereas expectations, legitimacy and responsibility remain bound with representatives, understanding the patterns of power becomes urgent. Speaking about ideal cities, planners should recognise mechanisms in which power works and be able to use such knowledge for the general goodness of inhabitants. This paper shows that if we combine existing approaches towards power according to how they reflect the factors of time and scale, then disparate views turn to mutually instructive, complementary and supportive. This unusual optics might also inspire planners to rethink their roles.

The perception of power differs significantly according to if we favour continuous evolution or discontinuous eras, and, in the second case, according to how continual evolution is disconnected. The works of Weber (1972), Foucault (1979, 1998 and 2007) and Lukes (2005) suggest that societies (and cities) develop along an endless spiral consisting of three elements: an overall *context* (historical situation, socio-economic conditions and climate), *intentions* (innovative visions, ideals and desires) and the behaviour of *actors* (groups, institutions and individuals). When pondering continuous evolution, many authors sense that power lies in the history – in the triple spiral itself rather than in its individual elements – which is out of humans' control. Batty (2010) argued that city is a complex system which evolves by its own rules and planners, who do not fully understand these rules, should not interfere. When facing the history, planners having this attitude often feel powerless, prefer careful observation to proactive action and hesitate to lead city development. A desire to understand holistic processes in which cities evolve positions planners to a rather passive role of trend-watchers, analysts and moderators. Such roles are frequent in planning based on critical theory, complexity theories or evolutionary governance theory.

On the other hand, the advocates of discontinuity (Foucault, Kuhn) argue that if we want to study what is happening and how it is happening, it means to explore

‘something concrete’, we need to disconnect the history and specify an object of our study. Since the spiral contains three principles, there are three options of how to start observations, considerations and interventions: via the principles of *context* (Sun Tzu, Machiavelli and Foucault), *intentions* (Plato, Kant and Habermas) or *actors’ behaviour* (Aristotle, Bourdieu and Arendt). An element in which the spiral is disconnected determines our perception of power and roles we take. *Context* is a fundamental base – this currently prevailing certitude demanded a large number of case studies in planning discourse. In these stories, planners see their roles greatly as to honestly describe the situation at hand and oppose those with power in terms of providing relevant information, setting up appropriate agendas and keeping on specific terms (Forester, 1982; Flyvbjerg, 1998, 2002; Richardson, 2005). Other authors believe that concepts such as democracy, tolerance, justice, participation, ethics or truth should guide human behaviour regardless context. Having these ‘universal’ *intentions* in mind, planners often see their roles as to keep eyes on fair processes, facilitate discussions, keep balance among participants, strive for mutual trust and be advocates of those without power (Healey, 1997; Campbell and Marshall, 1998; Stein and Harper, 2003). The third option – to disconnect the history via *actors’ behaviour* – is not fully appreciated. This third principle points on spontaneous human actions, which are often emotional, intuitive and sudden. Even though they are rooted in moments, they are not necessarily context-based. Kahneman (2011) demonstrated that most human actions come out of subliminal perceptions rather than rational thoughts or evaluated external situation. As Arendt (1958) stressed, spontaneous actions dominate political domain. Yet, planning discourse does not pay much attention to this challenge.

Besides an element of disconnection, concrete observations also involve the factors of *scale* (society, city and person) and *time* (the time-spatial characteristics of particular phenomena, affairs and events). These factors are relative; ‘years’ can mean a long-term perspective at the scale of individuals but a moment for society, and ‘hours’ may cause a key modification of particular development project while being invisible when analysing historical affairs. The factors of time and scale allow for a significant variety of alternatives while remaining structured. For instance, Habermas (1984, 1990 and 1992) believed in intentions (to reach discourse ethics) and rooted his approach in an ideal speech situation, which remains of a meeting. Consequently, even though communication is considered universal, communicative rationality, which relies on the power of correct means, is a tool that works primarily during particular events

(within a specific group of actors, at a given place and during a short period of time). Contrary, Foucault (1979, 1998 and 2007), who stressed the power of context, analysed how particular phenomena evolved inside relatively stable but large time-spatial ranges (countries during centuries). Since reciprocal influence becomes visible after a long time, Foucault, not Habermas, could proclaim that power is dynamic, symmetric and based on relations inside a pool of actors. But sometimes, the factors of time and scale are underestimated. An example is the use of complexity theories in planning. Complexity is a feature of entities which evolve continuously during the history (a large scale during a long time). Nevertheless, planners promoting complexity aim to ponder the very opposite issues – a wide range of factors during a relatively short-term, space-limited and unstable projects (de Roo and Silva, 2010; Hillier, de Roo and van Wezemael, 2012). The risk is that planners who feel helpless when considering the power of systems might ‘give up in advance’ even during projects in which active intervention would be desirable.

Special attention should be paid to individuals. (Neo)liberal democracy is by definition individualistic and neglecting the role of individuals in such individual-driven society is a considerable reason of many problems we face. Even though the historical role of rules might be out-of-date, Machiavelli (1998), Nietzsche (1968, 2007), Weber (1918/9) and others warned that as long as humans will think, make decisions and act, they will also strive for individual power. In planning, the role of planners as individuals is changing. In the past, planners were experts having power to lead plans. Later on, power was subscribed to local actors and planners became moderators, facilitators and the guardians of correct procedures. The currently influential idea of self-evolution favours passive considerations to active decisions. On the other hand, researchers who explore power generally advise for proactive attitude. Probably the most radical alternative was stated by Flyvbjerg (1998, 2001), who called for personal interventions to power-relations. I think that one more matter is worth attention here. New trends in psychology (e.g. Thaler and Sunstein, 2009; Kahneman, 2011; Houdé and Borst, 2014) advice that we should pay higher attention to individuals’ subliminal perceptions, how these can be influenced and how inhibitory control is useful for development. In this perspective, the role of planners should be enlarged to nudge participants into desired direction, frame tasks, anchor discussions and inhibit automatic reactions in favour of careful considerations.

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