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The value of planning and the values in planning

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In July 2015, I took part in a well-attended roundtable debate organised by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) in the AESOP Annual Congress which was spearheaded by a provocative Discussion Paper by the RTPI Deputy Head of Policy and Research (Harris, 2015). This viewpoint is based on my response to two issues raised in the Paper: the interface between research and practice and the value of planning. As regards the first one, the Discussion Paper criticises the planning academics’ research for not focusing on “those issues that are of direct relevance to potential research users in ways which provide practical, actionable evidence …” (Harris, 2015:1). This statement reminds me of a story which although has been told elsewhere (see Davoudi, 2015a) is worth repeating here. The story is about a scene in Hugh Whitemore’s play (1986) which is worth repeating every time academics are asked to demonstrate the practical worth of their research. The scene is a job interview when a civil servant asks a young academic about his research and receives this enthusiastic yet confused answer:

“Hilbert thought there should be a single clearly defined method for deciding whether or not mathematical assertions were provable…. I wanted to show that there can be no one method that will work for all questions… Eventually I conceived the idea of a machine…” (pp 33-34)

The baffled civil servant then asks: “You actually built a machine?” (p.34), to which the young academic replies: “No, no. It was a machine of the imagination” (p.34). The civil servant’s next question is emblematic of the dominant, albeit stereotypical, perception of academics as people who live in their ivory towers and use taxpayers’ money to do ‘blue sky’ research of no use to anyone. He asks:

“What is the point of devising a machine that cannot be built, in order to prove that there are certain mathematical statements that cannot be proved?” “Is there any practical value in all this?” (p.34)
By now you have probably guessed that the play is based on a true story; that the young academic was Alan Turing who was interviewed for the post of the leading cryptanalyst at Bletchley Park; that, he went on to break the German’s Enigma code which influenced the date of Normandy landings, shortened the Second World War, and saved countless lives. And, if that was not enough for the practical relevance of his research, he also built, almost by accident, the first electronic computer (Davoudi, 2015a).

The story is worth repeating because it brilliantly shows the non-linear, unpredictable and contingent nature of both the process and the outcome of research. It shows that, “researchers’ flights of fancy can pay off” (Reisz, 2008: 37) even if they may not have an immediate, practical utility or a quantified economic value. History is full of examples of scientific breakthroughs that have happened as a result of intellectual curiosity and speculative research. They have often come from a desire for knowledge rather than for filling a gap in the market or responding to immediate, practical questions. These examples tell us that academic research should not be judged through the limited lens of instrumentalism; that researchers should not always be expected to be ‘on tap’ to provide the right answer to what is often the wrong question. That, there are other ways of framing the entwined relationship between research and policy (see Davoudi, 2006) or knowledge and action (see Davoudi, 2015b). For example, a conceptual model defines such a relationship as iterative and long term whereby the findings from research creep into policy deliberations and illuminate the landscape within which decisions are made. I am not suggesting that planning academics should stop being concerned about the impact of their research and its relevance to the society. I do, however, suggest that they should resist the instrumental model of policy-research interface and its obsession with quantification. That, they should resist the erosion of respect for learning.

It is true that there is a sense of divergence between planning academy and planning practice which to some extent is a product of the research assessment exercise (RAE). While the RAE has helped improve the quality and international profile of planning research in the UK, one of its adverse side effects has been a shift of emphasis from engagement in planning practice to peer reviewed academic publications (Davoudi, 2015a). In many ways, its 2014 version - the Research Excellence Framework (REF)- which introduced ‘research impact’ was an attempt to correct the pernicious wedges of the RAE. However, in the rush to formalise, quantify and institutionalise impact assessment, REF discounted the conceptual model of research impact. More broadly, the growing fixation on measuring everything, be it the value of planning (which
I will turn to below) or the performance of planning academics, risks changing the very thing that is being measured which in the case of research and scholarship is ultimately the independence of thought and the intellectual rigor (Davoudi, 2015a).

The second point raised in the Discussion Paper is a call to academics to prioritise the type of research that can demonstrate the value of planning. There is, of course, nothing wrong with such a plea. Indeed, there is already a large body of research that shows what ‘good planning’ can achieve in terms of: protecting the environment, adapting to climate change, and enhancing place qualities. It has demonstrated why we need planning and why a Laissez-faire approach leads to ‘dull and shifty opportunism’, to quote Thomas Sharp’s colourful language (1945:116). However, what appears to be in short supply, according to the Paper, is that firstly, the exiting research is not quantitative enough, and secondly, it does not sufficiently deal with the economic value of planning. It is this particular framing of the Paper’s proposed research agenda which is a cause for concern. Because, despite good intentions this framing risks falling into the dominant neoliberal mentality and its over-emphasis on growth and competitiveness; a mentality for which the only value that really matters is economic value, and the only evidence that counts is positivist science.

But, is this what planning is all about? I would argue not. Writing on the Christmas Day 1939, Thomas Sharp in the preface to his book defined the outcome of planning as being ‘a new and better way of life’ (Sharp, 1940). The 1947 Town and Country Act which established the UK planning system defined the purpose of planning as ‘creating an improved environment for citizens’. Today, the RTPI defines the purpose of planning as ‘creating better places’ that are prosperous, fair and sustainable. If the ultimate goal of demonstrating the value of planning is to forge a wider political commitment to planning similar to that which was forged by its ‘founding fathers’, we should insist on the social and environmental values of planning; values that led to the creation of the planning system in the first place. These values still deeply matter to people and places despite the difficulties (and undesirability) of quantifying them in monetary terms.

We all know that planning is under attack and has been for some time at least since the 1970s. But, I do not believe that the reason for this is a lack of evidence for its social and environmental or even economic values. I think planning is under attack because, the political context within which it operates has moved away from the ideals of the post-war welfare state and its social
democratic values. Under the welfare state, planning -and more generally the public sector intervention in the free market- was essential for the creation of ‘better places’; planning was part of the solution, not the problem.

Since the late 1970s these social democratic ideas have been increasingly replaced by neoliberal values and their disdain for planning and indeed any forms of interventions in the free market. Criticising the post-war Keynesian economics, Fredrich Hayek, the architect of neoliberalism, promoted his theory of ‘spontaneous order’ which he argued would emerge from the interaction of self- serving individuals who rationally utilise the price systems to adjust their plans. Therefore, he called for the reform of all social institutions, including planning, in accordance with the self-organising dynamics of the market (Davoudi, 2016). In the context of today’s housing problems, this implies, getting rid of the remaining social housing and the regulatory burdens, letting the self-organising dynamics of the housing market sort out the affordable housing crisis, and demanding a speed-up process of planning. It is this philosophy which has underpinned the reforms of the planning system since the 1980s.

The blaming of planning for everything that has ever gone wrong with the economy is not necessarily founded on ‘solid’ economic research. It is often motivated by the reductionist, yet totalising, neoliberal mentality which vilifies the effectiveness of planning intervention and celebrates not only the efficiency of the market in delivering the good, but also its morality as the guarantor of all freedoms. If we readily and uncritically appropriate the discourses of this rationality and mimic its ways of knowing and measuring values, we risk embedding the rationality itself deeper and deeper in everything we do including our planning research agenda. I am not suggesting to withdraw from the challenge, but rather to question its terms of engagement. In order to mobilise a wider public support for, and political commitment to the planning project we need to reinvigorate the social democratic values upon which the planning system was founded. This means paying more attention not just to values of planning, but the values in planning.

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References


