Culture? And Planning?

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Interest in the role of culture in planning has been growing gradually over several decades. One might argue it was always there, given the centrality of debates about civic rights and democratic participation, public interest and governance that acknowledge differences. The term itself has been rumbling around the literature for some time, appearing in the 'collaborative planning' debates (e.g. Yiftachel 1998), and in comparative planning studies (Sanyal 2005) and more recently through the emergence of postcolonial approaches to planning (Porter 2010, Watson 2003). Yet what is clear from these debates is that the term 'culture' is being used quite inconsistently, with a range of very different meanings, some incompatible. At the same time, debates in planning bear little resemblance to critical discussions about culture in other disciplines, including sociology, anthropology and human and cultural geography to name a few. It was this apparent disconnect between planning and other fields that prompted me to write *Culture and Planning*, to start to bridge the gap between planning studies and studies of culture.

In '*Culture and Planning*', (Abram 2011) I laid out different traditions of thought about culture, showing how they are reflected in composite terms and adjectives such as 'multicultural', 'cross-cultural', 'cultivated', and so forth. With a better understanding of the history and trajectories of the concept of culture, it seemed that planners might be better positioned to understand and analyse its usage and be more conscious of how they could use it themselves. Culture is not an innocent term, and its use tells us as much about the speaker's position and political outlook as it does about the world around us. Unfortunately, the term is often prey to the intellectual trap of using a colloquial word for analytical purposes, a trap into which many well-meaning planning initiatives have stumbled (such as imagining that the 'views' of ethnic minority 'communities' can be represented by a single spokesperson in a 'consultation'). The key problem is the tendency to see Culture as a thing, or a set of attributes, something concrete that can be measured, compared and manipulated. This itself derives from a strong European tradition of externalising culture as an object, and treating 'it' as an objective fact (see Othengrafen and Reimer 2013).

Instead, in *Culture and Planning*, I proposed a reflective approach that asked what using the term 'Culture' does. What are the effects of invoking 'culture', what can we learn from the way it is invoked about the speaker's (or author's) understanding of the world? Prompted by the philosophy of performativity, we can trace the circulation of the term and see what it conjures in practice. This method makes the limitations of the term quite explicit, while revealing the blind spots in the planning lexicon, such as those I outlined in the book: the absence of bodies in planning, the use of an unreflected imagined 'public' as the discipline's object, questions of temporality and the narrow definitions of rationality often relied on, and so forth. It also helps to move discussions on from the inevitably fruitless search for a unifying definition for a multi-layered, unstable and fuzzy term. This very fuzziness makes for problems in planning theory, whose method is most often to coin or define a term, use it and move on. Yet with an idea as complex, messy and unpredictable as 'culture', this often lets us down.

Yet we have a wealth of resources to help address these difficult questions. Classic groundbreaking works such as Robertson's 'People and the State' (1984) or Peattie's (1987) critiques of urban development (perhaps better known in the USA), or Reade's (1987) sociological critique of planning are sadly rarely cited in planning debates, yet they contain

the intellectual armour to approach not only the notion of culture itself, but the lessons from studies of culture that could be applied in planning. In this regard, a number of anthropologists have been producing a series of close ethnographic studies of planning in practice that should be of interest to planning theorists and practitioners. While planning theorists have indeed conducted ethnographic studies of planning in the sociological tradition (i.e. following Whyte 1943), they most commonly take the perspective of planners or planning offices (e.g. Forester 1989, 1999). In contrast, an increasing library of ethnographic studies of planning has emerged that takes a more independently situated view (Weszkalnys 2010, Boholm 2000, Baxstrom 2008, Caldeira and Holston 2004). Where non-planners write about planning, it is revealing to note how often such work appears outside the planning journals, a problem that is common across many disciplines that are reluctant to embrace approaches that are not conventional in their area, and we may well need to ask some questions about editorial practices that produce this situation (e.g. Hyler 2013, Abram 2014).

In much of the work cited above, the aim has precisely not been to intervene in attempts to define 'culture', but to bring the insights of anthropological debate to nuance planning discussions (as did *Culture and Planning*). As Peattie pointed out in 1990, planning studies and practice have much to gain from a joint exploration between planning and anthropology of particular topics (she suggested the 'informal sector' and the anthropological approach to problem definition). Indeed, it is particularly productive to see how insights from anthropology can inform planning. Beyond asking how people can be heard in planning consultations, for example, it helps to ask about the temporal horizons that frame debates about the future, since the discrepancies in conceptual frameworks often determine the progress of plans in practice (see Abram and Weszkalnys 2013). Before asking what trust means between citizens and state, we need to ask why we consider people in terms of citizenship and what that implies. It is not enough to assume that citizens can be educated into becoming subjects of planning (Inch 2015). If we now speculate that people have lost faith in politics, what is it that people think politics is, should, and could be? Where does that leave the idea, the practice and the potential of planning? For instance, if we are to understand why people in the United Kingdom who live in locations that have received intensive funding schemes from the European Union now vote against its institutions, we clearly need to examine how regional redistribution has been perceived by its intended recipients and not assume that they can or should understand it in the same way that planners do. To do this, we need an ethnographic, people-near approach that does not begin with a set of assumptions about what people may or may not think, nor categorise them a priori according only to class or economic status. A radically non-ethnocentric approach, informed by critical literature about kinship, subjectivities, religion, beliefs, and social relations from friendship to patron-client or honour, frees us from predefined explanations and offers ~~properly~~ new evidence and the potential for new explanations. Forde's work on off-gridders in rural Wales (2015) is an example of the contribution that anthropologists can make to planning by destabilising the assumptions that planners always work in the public interest, for example, as is Weszkalnys's work on adolescents claiming space in Berlin (2010).

Among the areas that anthropologists have highlighted has been boundary blurring. While planners may be concerned with securing investment for local development, residents may be more worried about the politics of corporate investment, seeing plans not as proposals for land-use but as tools of the capitalist elites, blurring local, national and international politics, and refusing to separate building structures from ownership claims. In *Rationalities of Planning* (2002), Jon Murdoch and I sought to demonstrate how arguments over housing numbers concealed deep-rooted discrepancies over visions of rural life, domestic futures, and generational justice. Similarly, arguments over factory expansion can have roots in identity

politics and banal nationalism (Abram 2004). Hence the fallout of planning disputes can be a contribution to general disillusion with representative democracy, or scepticism to the high ideals espoused by planners. Planners work in a polity that is divided, unjust, class-ridden, complex and often unpredictable, yet planning studies often seem to suggest that planners could resolve complex issues by being better planners, rather than seeing the limitations to their role and the need to engage in broader political debates about the realm of planning itself.

Given this context, it is clear that concerns with culture go far beyond the question of comparing 'world-views' or ways of doing things (formerly known as 'customs'). *Culture and Planning* aimed to reflect back on planning the assumptions embedded in its central debates. It argued that planners and planning theorists tend to use the term 'culture' as a catch-all category for misfits, either arguments, conflicts, assumptions or challenges that do not follow the limited rationalities of planning. Inspired by literatures on magical thinking (Geschiere 2003, Favret Saada 1980, Evans-Pritchard 1937) I argued that current debates on planning's cultures serve to maintain this central plank of planning approaches, allowing complex, messy or challenging issues to be safely hived off into 'culture', when what might be required is a much more comprehensive rethinking of planning as a modus operandi (e.g. Porter 2010). I was once told by a colleague that the point of planning theory is to improve planning. But to my mind, planning theory should make a more just society, and that means taking the focus away from the planners themselves and paying at least as much attention to understanding the world that planners engage with, to ensure that they understand what it is like for others to meet (engage in?) planning practices (Abram 2007). This involves seeing planning's assumptions from a critical position 'outside' planning. *Culture and planning* was written to appeal outside academia as well as to colleagues, but its light hearted tone should not disguise its serious challenge to planners' understanding of the wickedly problematic concept of culture.

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