

## Postpolitical correctness?

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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?*<sup>2</sup> Three strands framed the discussion of the state of politics in planning in the symposium, organised by Jonathan Metzger, Philip Allmendinger, and Stijn Oosterlynck, who did a great job to promote discussions on the topic. Presented as the postpolitical theory, the displacement of politics, and the agonistic theory, these three strands were introduced as dealing with how to think about planning and politics 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's (1973, p. 132) claim that 'Planning is politics'. 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 at 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)

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. This essay is a reflection on this point and a

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call for a bit of caution in the effort to rescue a more substantial sense of politics and political practices, as this simplification may too easily lend itself to be seen as two sides (only). In the light of this, 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?

The many paper presentations, too many to give proper mentioning of 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 planning practices '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 postpolitics work, Richard Ek and Mekonnen Tesfahuney elaborated the relation between values and planning as war by other means, Juan Velasquez explicated the role of women in the radicalization of democracy in Venezuelan Social Battle Rooms, 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 notion of the postpolitical 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. Now, I want to make it perfectly clear that I do not want to throw out the baby with the bath water.

Rather, if anything it is an effort of hyperbolic thinking.<sup>3</sup> The intuition and aspiring work in post-foundational theory – a more inclusive label, stressed by Oosterlynck during the symposium, to be used instead of something along the lines of ‘the post-political turn’ – is much needed. What follows is a comment revolving around hesitation and responsibility concerning the academic dynamics of coinage – of notions as hard (hitting) currency in knowledge practices.<sup>4</sup>

## Re-sonating postpolitical diagnosis

Postpolitics 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 dominant characterisations ran in the symposium to describe contemporary ‘apolitical’ politics.

The diagnosis gains strength from a resonance among ‘ordinary people’ – or rather ‘ordinary voters’. In Sweden, the phenomenon of contempt of politicians (*politikerförakt*) was a big worry for the legitimacy of the idea of a democratic state during the 1990s and was influential in commissioning a large-scale public enquiry, simply called *The Commission on Democracy* (SOU, 2000), which among other things had the task of studying the low rate of voting and suggest measures to increase the citizens’ participation in and enthusiasm for the democratic system. Recently, the biggest party in the right-conservative-neoliberal alliance in Sweden, *Moderaterna*, simply hijacked the Social Democrat traditional add-on of ‘the workers’ party’ and is now claiming to be ‘the workers’ party for our times’<sup>5</sup>; thereby perhaps also articulating a common sentiment of a substantive lack in the conventional distinction between left

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<sup>3</sup> This is Harman’s (2009, p. 120) figure of thought to replace ‘critique’ in philosophy, a device which is intended not to debunk but to be generous and to ‘save the baby’.

<sup>4</sup> If not drawing directly on the literature, this is a comment in agony rather than antagonism (Pløger, 2004), a disagreement not in irreconcilable contradiction but diverging in a shared concern (Stengers, 2010), and perhaps even an interference in the theoretical issue of planning politics (Law, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> While writing this essay, the party also found itself in an ignominious situation as it was caught claiming to have had a key role in the development of labour unions and women’s suffrage in Sweden.

and right in Swedish parliamentary debate. Similarly, Mike Raco's paper presentation at the symposium was introduced by a reflection on that most 'people on the streets' interviewed for the study recognized and agreed to the the postpolitical diagnosis.

Although it is no news as a characterization of politics. The postpolitical diagnosis can be seen, to keep with the bathing-baby-metaphor, as the latest incarnation of the critique of *democracy deficits* and *agenda setting* in political theory. This tradition, simplified, holds that democratic deficits occur when politics are displaced out of an arrangement of democratic procedures. This happens when an issue or a public affair 'evades the mechanisms of democratic legitimacy and accountability that may be in place in a given site' (Marres, 2005, p. 5; see also Beck, 1992; Habermas, 2001; Held, 1999). In this literature, the typical situations are transnational environmental politics and one might add technoscientific practices described by science and technology studies (STS) as frequently resulting in such displacements as well (for instance, by the now common approach that science and technology is politics by other means (Latour, 1988; Winner, 1980)). In the agenda setting-literature, politics is simply understood as 'a set of strategies for the displacement of issues' since the main point of politics is to control what is allowed to be an issue and hence the organization of choice and balance of power in a political community (Marres, 2005, p. 26; see also Schattschneider, 1960; Hecl, 1978; Lukes, 1974).

Further resonances, to continue this detour over spheres of interest for planning studies, are in the field of political ecology. Here, the diagnosis has much in common with the many times commented problem of framing people as 'rational resource users' in 'participatory' community based management. Although these kinds of programmes are intended to increase democracy and offer development opportunities, they often seem to have quite the opposite effect, as these modes of governing cannot acknowledge messy practices which are making up the everyday of human life (Saunders, 2011; cf. Law, 2004). In the recently established 'big science' programme of Earth System Governance, the old issue of the 'usefulness of participation' in environmental governance is stated in the equally old terms of trade-offs between efficiency and accountability (Dombrowski, 2010; Biermann et al., 2009).

The list of resonances in different academic disciplines and fields, not to mention practices, could no doubt be made much longer. If we return to planning studies, we may sense that the notion of postpolitics is on the verge of becoming a ge-

neric shorthand for our understanding of much urban and regional planning, in the sense that there is not much room allowed for divergent or radically different things to happen. Particularly salient is perhaps reflection on and sometimes disillusionment with participation, communicative, and deliberative procedures in planning studies, with a ‘not as easy as we thought’ sense to it (cf. Fainstein, 2000; Hillier, 2003; Cooke and Kothari, 2001), which when characterized simply as a failure of democracy, and not primarily projects from which we can learn, is easy to label as postpolitical (cf. Oosterlynck and Swyngedouw, 2010). For instance, Allmendinger and Haughton’s (2010, p. 808) discussion on how to characterize spatial planning in the UK highlights the (disappointing) feature of neoliberal postpolitical consensus which seems to take the place of a (former hopeful) ‘forum for meaningful debate over radically different alternative visions of development futures’.

The antidote, as far as I understand the symposium discussions, is to take care of and nurture the rare and fragile proper political irruptions which are ascribed the potential to destabilise (at least for a while) postpolitics (cf. Swyngedouw, 2009).

## **Binarism**

Ironically, one can wonder whether the genre of postpolitical diagnosis is itself at risk of attracting a postpolitical 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 postpolitically.

To repeat, my concern is not the diagnosis of postpolitics per se. It is about the risks inherent in the vocabulary, which might, due to academic dynamics in debate and writing most of us are familiar with, take us far from the clarifying insights of post-foundational theory. 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 the concept ‘neoliberal’ and its derivatives. Many seemed to

feel – for good or for bad – and it was variously articulated that there was no escaping that version of the world in whichever particular setting was up for critical enquiry. 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 aspires to be a fix-point (to use Gunnar Olsson’s register from the symposium, see also Olsson (2009)). In terms of vocabulary, what about killing darlings when something becomes too easy to say? Gunder, a bit out of context but in my view related to the academic dynamics alluded to here, recently wrote in this journal that:

Our ideological slogans and labels, our sublime objects of ideology, channel and stifle our thinking along predictable rigid paths in a manner that largely precludes innovation and change. (Gunder, 2010, p. 207)

Hence, if we are not cautious, the postpolitical correctness means following a rule, a sorting principle, rather than using the insights as something to provoke thinking; in Deleuzian terms (via Stengers, 2010), it becomes a device for ‘*la droite*’ rather than ‘*la gauche*’!

Many times, if not most, it is possible to kindly acknowledge terminology or vocabularies but still ignore ‘the game’, so to speak. The postpolitical diagnosis may be a bit different, as it draws on not only ‘categorisation’ but seems wide open to a very Modern mechanism of setting up clearly ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sides of a subject matter. Dualities such as these, according to much STS thought and other thinkers such as Deleuze, tend to freeze thinking rather than open it up (see e.g. Woolgar, 2002, on the critique against conceptual binaries in the social sciences). In human geography, the critique against dualisms many times converge around 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. (Cloke and Johnston, 2005, p. 12).

Like Bartleby, who unto his master's command says 'I would 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 postpolitical/proper political grinder?<sup>6</sup> 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 postpolitical correctness: in the worst case, articulations which prefer not to use the vocabulary of postpolitics 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).

## Dare to fail

A problem with the academic dynamic is that as one particular notion or binary grows, i.e. is seen to be an effective explanatory category, by way of harvesting particular cases for the general to make a synthesis and a general diagnosis, it many times runs the danger of losing something else, perhaps what Stengers (2010) called 'minority techniques' and 'ecologies of practice', which are destroyed when translated into terms such as 'stakeholders' and 'empowerment'? Many might hasten to 'monorationalize' (Davy, 2008) by using a notion and miss the oddities and strange fits in what they want to discuss. Massey seems to argue that this academic dynamic has much to do with the lack of 'time to think' and 'the tyranny of the immediate' (Massey, 2002).

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6 Although the intention of this essay is not to find scapegoats for the 'binary split', such kind of 'justice' is precisely beside the main point made here, the two-sidedness is quite remarkable in Swynge-douw's recent work on the topic (e.g. Swynge-douw, 2009, 2011). Furthermore, Isin (2005), for instance, explicates the difference between 'politics' and 'political' as the impossibility to see the political without studying politics. However, e.g. Dikeç (2005) clearly argues against reading Rancière as developing a binary opposition. Still, there is a historicity here, in that somewhere diffuse, sometime slowly, of the career of the 'postpolitical problem', it has been chopped up and attached to 'fake' and 'genuine', 'bad' and 'good' sides of democracy.

The ‘taking care of and nurturing the rare and fragile proper political irruptions’, in Swyngedouw’s proposition at least, always has to do with equality (cf. Swyngedouw, 2009, 2011) However, from another point of view, that of emerging publics for instance, a political irruption need not necessarily be about equality. Equality might be a matter of concern, but it is not strictly necessary for, say, a public to emerge and contend formal politics. In this view following Marres (2010), publicisation, the emergence of a public to deal with an affair, an issue, a politically charged problem, may be a lot more visible if we do not restrict our gaze to measure democracy only by proceduralist standards. It *may* happen that the ‘proper political’ irruptions, although fragile as many becoming things (ecologies, new ideas, art, humans, what-have-you), are not that rare at all. It *may* happen that there is nothing but a ‘false’ problem similar to the ‘problem’ of the relations between nature and culture (cf. Braun, 2004): instead of unintentionally (?) supporting ‘postpolitics’ by acknowledging its ‘dead hand over democracy’ one might focus on the practices of heterogeneous publics, which require more, not less, displacement of issues.

The democratic deficit *may*, frankly, be a mirage constituted by political science and other ‘utilitarian’ proceduralist versions of what e.g. planning practice is. Quite the contrary to the sense in much of postpolitical talk, Marres (2010) conveys a sense that publics emerge everywhere at all times and (of course) it is hard work of having them make a difference (and I frankly do not think all of them should – yes, should – succeed, particularly brown ones). Thus, from this point of view, much commentary on postpolitical conditions amount to wondering something akin to ‘why hard work is so hard’. It might be a question of style or attitude, but it seems a bit odd to mount the high grounds of postpolitical critique on procedural shortcomings (which is not particularly news to the ‘workshop floor’ in planning practice nor in Western thinking on rhetorics and the art of persuasion) and at the same time be indignant that the ‘democracy machine’ fails to deliver, instead of directing all energies towards helping the multitude of ways in which the machine can be problematized – in theory and in practice?

Academic dynamics may also hit in a personal way. To reconnect to the poor baby in the now lukewarm bath; when we develop notions, concepts, and theoretical tools, or texts in general, for me at least they seem like babies we try to allow to explore the world, learn how to heed of bullies, and how no to be kidnapped, etc. This is at the same time something of a collective socialization of them. If we want this

particular baby to grow and be all it can be, it might be fruitful to fend off the risk of postpolitical correctness, a situation in which there is just the true exegesis of words and not much empirical problems left in the discussion. I have seen, sadly, most of the time in leftist groupings in various European countries, activists and radical researchers become terribly anxious, insecure, and too entrenched to act because of what I saw as a fear of not thinking and talking the true way (this perhaps common observation is also corroborated by personal communication with people both active now and ‘back then’ just after ’68 ; it is yet an instance of *le droit* rather than *la gauche* in effect). It never seemed very ‘productive’ neither in terms of understanding nor even changing the world.

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 postpolitical correctness? This is perhaps what Eric Swyngedouw meant – or could mean? – in the comment on the summation of the symposium 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 postpolitics?

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