SCARCITY THINKING AND PLANNING THEORIES

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Planning contemporary cities requires new capacities of dealing with a great complexity of unexpected problems which have been challenging the established professional practices and creating an intense theoretical debate among academics.

Obviously, this is not a new issue for planning theory and practice. In fact, since the mid-fifties of the twentieth century, a lot has been written with reference to the inefficacy and the impacts of the so-called 'rational-comprehensive' models of planning. In the Anglo-Saxon context, for instance, many planning theorists – for the most belonging to the field of political science and public policy analysis – have been arguing the limitations of such a decision-making approach for a long period of time.

Among the huge amount of contributions, Lindblom (1959) and Altshuler (1965) have brilliantly pointed out the inadequacy of and the dissatisfaction with this dominant paradigm, focusing on the gap between goals and outcomes of planning policies [1]. For Lindblom such an approach, far from being concretely practiced, represents indeed only an ideal and abstract formalisation.

Planning processes – according to them – are dominated by persistent conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty concerning problems, goals and means which basically undermine the intellectual capacity of computing and dealing with them[2] . Likewise, it has become extremely difficult for experts to take into account and assess the whole range of policy alternatives.

The supposed political and technical ability of defining uniquely and unitarily the public interest is hence upset. As a consequence, the so-defined public actors are not isolated and are not the only ones entitled to take part in a decision-making process: arenas are therefore densely crowded of many actors both public and private, both formally legitimised and not. An abundance of groups of citizens protesting against projects and top-down decisions is in fact almost always part of these arenas, playing an important 'pressure role' in accelerating or curbing the whole process.

1 This gap has been deeply analysed by scholars belonging to the 'implementation research' field, such as Pressman and Wildavsky (1973). According to them, planners have generally been focusing more on the phase of plans preparation rather than that of plans implementation, considering plans abstract procedures easily transferable into other contexts.

2 For a general discussion on cognitive and informative uncertainty, unsuccessful planning experiences and the limitations of forecasting techniques see for instance Hall (1981), Friend and Jessop (1969), Flyvbjerg et al. (2003). It is worth noting that for other scholars such as Hirschman (1967), this cognitive ignorance has a positive role. In fact, if planners knew all the variables, relevant factors, difficulties and complications in advance, they would not be able to start any project (principle of the 'hiding hand').

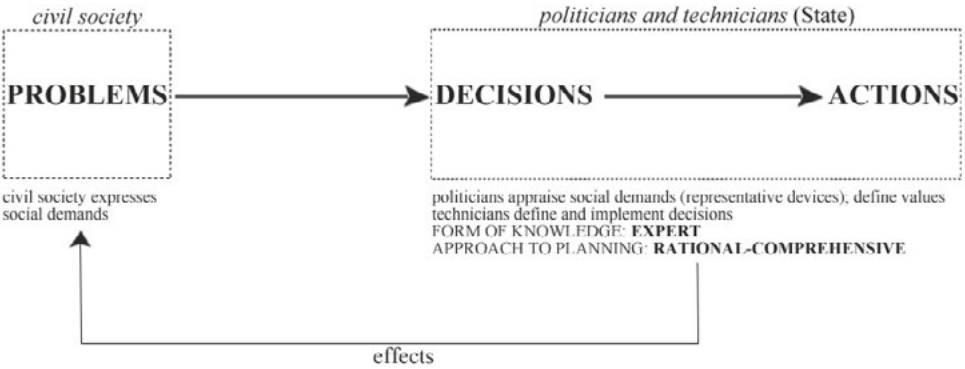

Figure 7-1 This figure represents an ideal problem-solving decision-making perspective. Source: Matteo Basso.

Yet it is useful to underline that in spite of this strong and passionate criticism, the rational-comprehensive paradigm has continued to be adopted in many fields of public policy over the years (Dalton 1986). For instance, evidences of such a persistence are recognizable in technical decisions supposed to give solution to social problems without first consulting the persons concerned, or in controversial cases of grand plans and projects implementation which regularly take place in most of our cities.

Among the many explanations, one is from my point of view the most appropriate in clearing up such a persistent situation: the difficulty – both among technicians and politicians – in abandoning a powerful approach which has been absolutely relevant in the foundation and legitimisation of the pillars of the modern urban planning profession (Sandercock 1998; Allmendinger 2001).

We are now living in overall conditions of scarcity and uncertainty that permeate any intervention on the built environment. These circumstances are therefore bringing to light again a general criticism of the established approaches to planning [3]: in particular, these are implying – I would through these notes briefly argue – a significant redefinition of the role and position of planners within the planning processes.

In fact, since cities are characterized by dynamics and social demands raised by many different

populations (which are then transferred into different land-use patterns), urban policies [4] must pursue at the same time different conflicting goals. First – which is the set of goals more easily recognizable in the built environment – they produce physical outcomes in terms of new buildings and infrastructures construction, buildings refurbishment and public spaces amelioration. Secondly, they deal with social justice issues, as for instance the provision of affordable housing, public services and local initiatives aimed at taking care of specific vulnerable social groups.

3 This criticism has become today more relevant due also to the current economic, political and social crisis, which is probably creating a new 'demand' of different and more effective kinds of regulation. It is yet useful to underline that planning theory has traditionally focused more on issues of uncertainty than those of scarcity.

4 I am referring here to the definition given by Crosta (1990) who defines urban policies 'a) as the set of public activities, b) regarding (physical) territorial transformations, c) put in practice both by public actors and private [...]' (p. 260 – the translation is mine). Urban policies are hence deliberate transformations of the physical and functional organization of cities and territories.

Finally, they have to achieve local development objectives as well as the preservation of the overall environmental qualities.

As it is obvious, these goals are not automatically shared due to a floating condition of mismatch between values, point of views, interests, ideas and expectations recognizable in planning policies (Campbell 1996). Therefore, since trade-offs are not easily reducible, an interactive and conflicting dimension characterizes the whole urban policy-making process (Banfield and Wilson 1963) which in the end requires a shift of the role and the perspective of planners from that of 'solutions design' to that of 'problems investigation'.

The full comprehension of the socio-economic dynamics affecting contemporary cities and territories is therefore absolutely relevant in order to improve both the theory and the practice of urban and regional planning. As planners we must in fact be aware – from an epistemological point of view – of the origin, the nature, the limitations and validity of different kinds of human knowledge, in order to design better policies and to cope with multiple publics (Lindblom and Cohen 1979).

FROM PROBLEM-SOLVING TO PROBLEM-SETTING

Conditions of scarcity, uncertainty and complexity require therefore that planners work more deeply on the comprehension of problems rather than on solutions definition. To this end the plurality of actors in policy arenas represents an undoubtedly concrete and strategic resource in order to improve the knowledge of problems. According in fact to Schön (1978), '[...] the essential difficulties in social policy have more to do with problem setting than with problem solving, more to do with ways in which we frame the purposes to be achieved than with the selection of optimal means for achieving them' (p. 255); hence, '[...] it has become clear that we ought no longer to avoid the problem of setting the problem' (p. 262).

Since scarcity is a social construct and does not represent a given and objective situation, experts are requested to abandon the presumption of knowing in advance the whole range of its dimensions thanks to their supposed expertise. Planners must first of all understand the different representations of what is really missing, what is wrong and what ought to be done in specific contexts through a process of continuous inquiry into the stories and the cognitive frames of the many actors who actually live and use that environment [5]. A process of social involvement, hence, where technicians and politicians work with and within local communities instead of for, in order to make sense of the reality and better set the problems. This operation has obviously become absolutely relevant in our contemporary cities, where 'we need to acknowledge the many ways of knowing that exist in culturally diverse populations, and to discern which are most useful and in what circumstances' (Sandercock 1998, p. 5).

I tried to represent this change of perspective through two different schemes [6], in order to explain more clearly the concept.

Scheme A (see Figure 7-1) represents the linear problem-solving perspective, where the separation and the boundaries – in terms of competences and responsibilities – between the sphere of society and that of the State (performed by politicians and technicians) are easily identifiable,

5 For reference on the concept of cognitive frames see Schön and Rein (1994).

6 I got the ideas of this kind of representation from the schemes proposed by Friend and Jessop (1969), chapter 5 and Crosta (1998), chapter 1. The first scheme represents actually the traditional policy-making process: manifestation of social demands, agenda-setting, policy formulation and implementation.

with a consequent unidirectional and top-down dialogue between the two [7]. Civil society appears therefore as a passive subject who expresses social demands and dissatisfactions with an existing situation (such as scarcity of public services, interventions or conflicts regulation) and is then served and regulated by the government. On the other hand, the State acts both as a provider of services and a regulator of social practices through an interactive process between politicians and technicians in the definition of which problems at stake are to be solved [8]. In particular, politicians are supposed to be able to understand and appraise the troublesome situations and to define a priority of values through the traditional devices of representative democracy. Technicians are then requested to formulate, asses and implement technical and rational responses in accordance with the political direction and thanks to scientific techniques such as Multi-Criteria Analysis or Cost-Benefit Analysis (technical rationality). The civil society is eventually the recipient – both in a positive and in a negative way – of this specific process.

In this model of policy choice, planners search therefore for desired solutions to given social problems, which are generally considered to be completely knowable and static. The planners position within the process is hence one of separation from the rest of the society due to the greater expert knowledge that as technicians they are believed to possess

On the contrary, scheme 2 (see Figure 7-2) is a graphic representation of the problem-setting perspective which offers an immediate comprehension of the circular and intertwined process inherent in such a model.

Since problems and scarcity circumstances are not given but are constructed by human beings, a cooperation between civil society, politicians and technicians appears as the essential instrument in order to get a more realistic and pluralistic interpretation of the ambiguous and complex situations. A multiplicity of point of views about what is really missing makes it indeed '[...] dramatically apparent that we are dealing not with 'reality' but with various ways of making sense of a reality' (Schön 1978, p. 267). Hence, '[...] the design process is a social process: problem setting represents the outcome of the interaction between the actors, with their alternative, multiple and unstable definition' (Fareri 2009, p. 212 – the translation is mine).

Then, the absence of a clear separation between the sphere of society and that of the State – and the participatory devices introduced in order to reduce the distances between them – allows the different actors to explore both the problems and the choice of the decision, as well as its implementation. In an interactive and multidirectional cycle, the whole policy process aims therefore at better and continuously (re)defining the problems at stake, with feedbacks, improvisation, collective reflection, learning-by-doing and reframing processes gained through the practice (Schön 1983; Schön and Rein 1994). The stage of problems definition is hence relaunched during the whole process and a strict separation between formulation and implementation is definitely overcome. As indeed Crosta (1998) accurately asserts, there is no separation between knowledge and project, since '[...] the relation between decision and action is not much an antecedence/consequentiality relation (= first decide, then act), but a coming-

7 In spite of '[...] a continuing interchange of information and influence across the interface between them' (Friend and Jessop 1969, p. 102). This linear procedure requires obviously a clear separation between policy-makers and policy-takers.

8 Politicians and technicians are here believed to be able to deliberately choose the right and appropriate response to a specific situation. In particular, technicians produce an amount of expert knowledge regarding social problems that politicians then 'use'. In order for this expert advice to be really rational, technicians have yet to be neutral and separated by politicians. Conditions of scarcity refer also to the refusal, by politicians, to deal with specific social demands (political scarcity).

and-going relation, between decisions and actions. The 'stage' of decision and the 'stage' of action continually interpenetrate, are intertwined' (p. 20 – the translation is mine).

Furthermore, the State acts here more as an enabler than a provider: it creates the opportunities to involve and improve the capacities of communities to act in order to solve problems rather than simply offering them its own solutions (that is giving people the opportunity to become policy-makers as well). Planners are hence requested to be able to get this involvement started and are expected to gain more experience in fields such as mediation, negotiation, collaboration, social interaction management and participatory processes design [9]. In general terms, planners turn out to be a sort of social researchers – together with other practitioners belonging to different disciplinary orientations – committed at first in observing social contexts, listening to different voices and point of views and interacting with inhabitants. In particular, 'the reflective planner participates in these societal conversations; and in doing so, he or she helps to construct the problem to be solved' (Sandercock 1998, p. 64). According in fact to Gelli (2002), 'this requires that the researcher continually and personally reconsider himself, above all in his consolidated role of 'expert', by accepting a condition of cognitive uncertainty open to surprises and contradictions and especially to the contribution of other forms of knowledge which are not purely 'technical', 'scientific', 'professional'' (p. 3 – the translation is mine).

Monitoring and assessment devices are eventually useful to identify the manifestation of unintended consequences and events – which are perceived as problems as well – and to correct the decisions.

DIFFERENT KINDS OF USABLE KNOWLEDGE

Compared to the first one, scheme 2 introduces a clear specification and combination of three different types of knowledge all equally usable in the solution of social problems (Lindblom and Cohen 1979), as 'knowledge of various kinds, treated in different ways, are used in the formulation and implementation of urban and regional policies' (Crosta 1998, p. 15 – the translation is mine).

In a problem-setting perspective, in fact, beyond the knowledge explicitly possessed by experts – derived from professional training and practice –, the one which arises from civil society assumes a central role in exploring both the situations which public policies are intended to change and the local potentialities that should be to this specific end enhanced.

Ordinary knowledge – as discussed above – is the form of knowledge which planners can discover and activate through participatory processes and qualitative techniques such as everyday practices observation, listening and talking, as well as intuition and imagination [10]. It is a grounded knowledge which characterizes and differentiates specific contexts and results from local common sense, know-how, culture, practical wisdom and settled social capital, defined as savoirscitoyens by Yves Sintomer (quoted in Cellamare 2011, p. 205). It represents hence a fundamental resource for planning under conditions of scarcity and uncertainty, since it offers the opportunity to understand which local resources can be better used in the definition of more sustainable solutions to social demands.

There is finally another important form of knowledge that can enrich the whole policy-making process. It is called 'interactive' since it raises from the interaction between many actors

9 Their objective is not simply to produce a legal 'product' (documents called plans or projects), as to design and manage a political 'process' of interaction with people.

10 In addition to the traditional statistical approaches. Moreover, qualitative approaches are important in order to comprehend symbolic and emotional dimensions which should not be ignored.

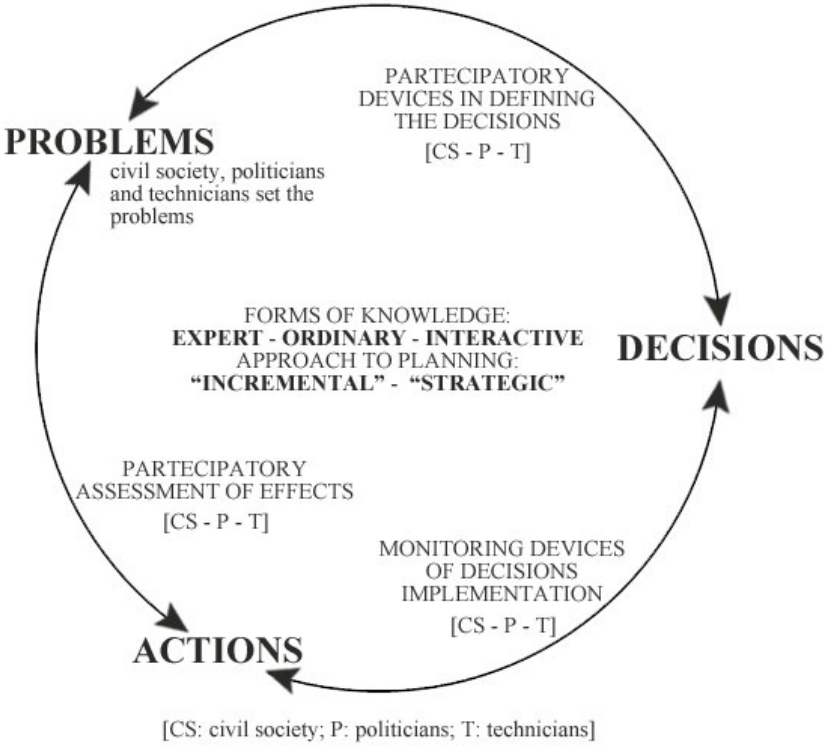

Figure 7-2 This figure represents a possible problem-setting decision-making perspective. Source: Matteo Basso.

(both experts and ordinary) during the concrete policy implementation: according again to Crosta (1998), '[...] the most useful form of knowledge for the action is created during the action, by the same actors who are involved (not, hence, by 'external' operators). I call this form of knowledge 'interactive': since it is produced by interacting actors, but above all since it is produced during the same course of action (and hence produced at the very moment in which it is used)' (p. 15 – the translation is mine).

At this point, it is worth noting that citizen involvement does not represent a pure democratic ideal. In fact, it assumes a concrete 'usable' orientation each time it allows local authorities to trust local communities (for instance associations) and empower them in the process of maintenance and reproduction of common goods such as public spaces and services. In my opinion, this interactive knowledge is therefore the most important in conditions of scarcity, as it permits – through a process of 'trial and error' and of social interaction – the creative and collective exploration of innovative alternative ways of reaching the goals that local authorities cannot easily achieve [11]. According in fact again to Schön (1978), working on problem-setting '[...] has to do with

11 In particular in the current condition of shortage of financial resources which local authorities must daily address.

generativity. It is nothing less than the question of how we come to see things in new ways' (p. 255). This – I would suggest – means exactly the capacity of setting problems and solutions in a more creative way, since 'the social production of 'citizens knowledge' [...] is already a process and a creative and design action in itself' (Cellamare 2011, p. 214 – the translation is mine).

To conclude, the new role of planners as 'process designers' '[...] is hence appropriate for the mobilization, during the decisional process, of a field of knowledge as broad as possible – scientific, ordinary, interactive' (Fareri 2009, p. 223 – the translation is mine).

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of these short notes was to suggest a possible reflection regarding role, competence and position of planners within planning processes that seek to cope with conditions of scarcity and uncertainty.

It has been argued, for instance, that planners are requested to abandon the conventional role of 'solutions designer' for one that could be described as 'problems investigator'. New skills are hence expected, such as the capacity of designing and supervising participatory processes, the ability of facilitating and listening to different point of views, as well of negotiating and observing local contexts in depth.

As technicians, planners shift therefore from the situation of pure neutrality (with respect to politics) and separation (with respect to the society), which makes them external actors in a problem-solving perspective, to that of full immersion in the contexts where certain situations are perceived – from many different actors – as being problematic.

The consequence of such an approach is then reflected on their specific position: planners are in the situation they propose to solve, are within the communities and collaborate hence both with politicians and ordinary people in processes which are designed to shorten the distances and to be multidirectional.

This of course does not mean that planners completely lose their role and relevance as experts. On the contrary, it is expected that they gain more experience in the translation of different languages (the technical one and the language 'possessed' by citizens) in order to give a real and concrete project orientation to the different forms of knowledge above discussed [12].

Coping whit scarcity means yet revising forms and contents of traditional planning instruments, since piecemeal, symbolic and incremental approaches – against a so-called 'mega-projects' tradition – are often preferred in order to explore and test the local resources that can be activated in addressing social problems (as suggested in scheme 2) [13].

Obviously, this is not to say that planning is today completely useless but that planning practices must shift from the ordinary elaboration of land-use plans and zoning ordinances to the definition of long term flexible visions, aimed at coordinating and managing different projects, evaluating the interrelations of their outcomes, introducing feedbacks and goals reframing (this is what I call 'trial and error' processes).

To conclude, new approaches require an overall change in the technical culture which characterizes planning practices, especially in the procedure of elaboration and implementation of plans within local authorities. Such practices must recognize and valorise the potentiality of

12 For instance, planners have to find the optimum spatial conditions in order to place the solutions which are proposed by communities.

13 Through the implementation of small, verifiable and demonstrative actions aimed at improving the existing situation. This refers obviously to the method of 'successive limited comparisons' discussed by Lindblom (1959).

local know-how and transfer it into ordinary plans or projects. According to Healey (2010), this is needed in order to give a concrete 'planning orientation' to the creative practices put spontaneously in place by different people to address the problems of our cities.

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