

European Union narratives in city-regional planning: an attempt to legitimize soft planning scales?

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Planning practice today is increasingly dealing with new planning scales that have emerged outside the formalized, statutory planning system. These “soft spaces” (Haughton & Allmendinger, 2007) are based on functional areas rather than administrative entities and cut across municipal, regional and national boundaries if needed. Through their fuzziness, they are able to address the real geographies of challenges and problems, and through their inherent flexibility, they offer an alternative to the rigidity, bureaucracy and inflexibility of the traditional sphere of planning.

However, the democratic legitimacy of soft spaces and soft planning remains contested (Faludi, 2015). Due to the lack of a legal and institutional framework, accountability of politicians as well as inclusive and fair modes of participation in the planning process cannot be ensured. Moreover, the ambiguous relationship between statutory, hard planning and informal, soft planning poses a serious problem if planners end up in an impossible choice between legitimate rigidity and illegitimate flexibility (Mäntysalo, 2013). While statutory planning is based on formal authority and legal rights, informal approaches derive their legitimacy from considerably different sources, typically relying on processes rather than legal acts. This is often manifested as “storytelling”, aiming to produce legitimacy through metaphors, common understanding and persuasion (Hajer, 2006; Healey, 2007; Throgmorton, 1996).

The idea of language and argumentation as essential elements in planning and policy-making is not entirely new. In *The Argumentative Turn* (1993), Fischer and Forester highlight how language used in public policy is not mere means of transmitting a message. Instead, language profoundly shapes planning and policy-analysis: “The institutionally disciplined rhetorics of policy and planning influence problem selection as well as problem analysis, organizational identity as well as administrative strategy,

and public access as well as public understanding” (p. 2). Throgmorton (1996) describes planning itself as “persuasive and constitutive storytelling about the future” (p. 217), ascribing planners the role of authors. Hajer (1993) introduces the concept of discourse coalitions, understood as groups of actors who share an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories which is used to give political framing and social meaning to a phenomenon. The political success of a discourse coalition depends on “its ability to imbed its own linguistic categories in the very structure of the methodologies and practices that shape and guide everyday policy deliberations” (Fischer & Forester, 1993, p. 9).

Based on these theoretical concepts, this paper investigates the use of narratives to constitute soft spaces and legitimize soft planning. It takes a closer look at the informal planning scale of the city-region in three European countries and studies how narratives introduced by the European Union are embedded into city-regional planning policies. Although the EU holds no formal competence in the field of spatial planning, planning in different countries seems to be at least indirectly affected by their EU membership – not least through the planning discourse at EU level. Building on Hajer’s concept, this paper argues that the EU can be understood as discourse coalition: it has developed (and constantly reformulates) sets of ideas, objectives and linguistic expressions that it shares with its member states, trying to embed these discourses and practices into domestic policies. This ensures that ideologies and concepts promoted by the EU arrive on the ground, at national, regional and ultimately local level.

Narratives and rhetorics, however, are not only used in a top-down direction. National and sub-national actors refer to these narratives and thus utilize them to justify their programs, plans and actions. This is especially crucial for actors outside the formal planning system, as new planning scales are not able to derive their legitimacy from traditional democratic mechanisms.

Existing studies have investigated the relation between European and national planning discourse and have identified its crucial role for European integration and territorial governance (see e.g. Böhme, 2002; Cotella & Janin, 2010; Waterhout, 2008). Moio et al. (2013) address the complex entanglement of national and European

narratives and their contribution to reshape the political geography of Europe. They understand “European space-making [...] as a process whereby different scales are narrated and performed (including negotiation and contestation) in various geographical and institutional contexts” (Moisio et al., 2013, p. 744) and identify the need for further research, dealing with the integration of European discourses into national contexts and their use as arguments in political contestations.

City-regions serve as interesting example to illustrate the emergence of soft spaces, the struggle for recognition and the ambiguity that arises when fuzzy planning scales take over tasks of strategy-, policy- and decision-making. Planners as well as politicians have become aware of the manifold ways in which cities and their hinterlands are functionally connected. This has triggered the need for plans and development concepts that reflect these interdependencies and deal with the challenges and potentials of city-regions as a whole. Despite the undoubted need for these plans, most countries show no ambition to formalize the city-regional level as statutory planning scale.

This paper therefore brings the legitimacy of city-regions into focus and sheds light on the role of European Union narratives in the legitimation process. It thus contributes to a better understanding of the relation between European and sub-national planning as well as the legitimization of soft planning scales.

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