

Interpreting urban planning: hermeneutics, practice and theory

Barry Goodchild

Sheffield Hallam University

b.j.goodchild@shu.ac.uk

Hermeneutics was once dismissed by Fainstein (2000, 456) as a 'thicket', by implication an impenetrable jungle of ideas that is worth avoiding. The origins of hermeneutics in textual analysis is, moreover, distant from the concerns of planning and practice.

It is not necessary, however, to go far into the thicket of hermeneutics to recognise that, at the most general level, planning theory is an exercise in interpretation. This paper is about the logic of theory, about the relationship between theory and practice and about the methodology of theory making. Theory is a device to make sense of the world and invariably involves relatively abstract ideas. However, abstract ideas and statements of those ideas can take many different forms. An interpretative, hermeneutic approach provides a means of understanding and organising the subject matter and also a means of breaking down barriers between positivist and non-positivist approaches, whilst also permitting the material 'turn' of recent theorising, as for example expounded by Rydin (2014).

Planning theory may be clarified as 'a store of knowledge' (Healey 1997, 6-7: Pallagst (2012, 37-72)- a collection of items of knowledge whose components are relevant in different circumstances, but that is nevertheless unfinished and whose impact on practice is confined to making practitioners more aware of practice and its consequences. Hermeneutics as the philosophy of interpretation is central to this task. Hermeneutics assumes that a tradition of ideas and theory is necessary from the outset to define a framework and express the values of the writer or analyst, albeit a framework that may be modified as analysis proceeds. Hermeneutics works within a circle of understanding and is a result distinct from both grounded theory and

phenomenology, both of which assume in different ways that theory is an output of analysis.

A conventional distinction is between single and double hermeneutics (Giddens 1984). Single hermeneutics is about the interpretation of raw data such as texts or aspects of social practice or statistical trends or the experience of an observer in a landscape. Single hermeneutics therefore incorporates the interpretation of social facts, on the assumption that these do not speak for themselves. 'Double hermeneutics', the interpretation of interpreting subjects, is the study and interpretation of transcripts, qualitative and quantitative survey responses using a combination of the respondents' views and other evidence. Double hermeneutics therefore enriches the analysis of any phenomenon, relating these to the motives and understandings of individuals and institutional actors and, in doing so, identifying contextual factors of which the actors may not be aware. The principle of double hermeneutics may, moreover, be applied directly to planning and planning theory. Plans and planning involves the creative interpretation of places and their future. Planning theory is understanding the logic of plans and planning through their interpretation and application in practice.

The single/ double distinction does not, however, exhaust the various levels of analysis. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2008) also identify triple and quadruple hermeneutics. Triple hermeneutics is about the workings of power and the hidden processes whose apparent uncovering Ricoeur (2004) calls the hermeneutics of suspicion. Quadruple hermeneutics deals with issues of fragmentation and the challenge of deconstruction. Double, triple and quadruple levels of analysis transform hermeneutics from its original concern with texts and literature to a method of social research. They allow the context as well as the text to be considered.

Exposition, clarification and the use of the hermeneutic method has value implications that, true to the hermeneutic method, require explicit recognition. Acceptance of hermeneutics as a set of broad analytical assumptions involves an acceptance of the merits of debate and discussion. In addition, acceptance of hermeneutics in the context of planning theory involves an acceptance of the value of planning, as opposed to a neoliberal acceptance of the market and competition as

necessarily the best basis for policy. Acceptance of the value of planning is an assumption that has to be recognised at the outset, but also justified as analysis proceeds.

At the same time, hermeneutics as a method of research, and not just of philosophical enquiry, is about planning in context. Both planning and the market appear as historical and social products, so implying a rejection of any assumption of markets as the ‘natural’ order of economic activity, as is the neoliberal assumption. As an extension, treating planning and the market as historical and social products means that these should not be treated merely at the level of ideas as an antagonistic dichotomy. Planning and markets interact with one another.

References

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