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Anna Geppert is Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the University Paris-Sorbonne, France. Her research interests are strategic spatial planning, comparative planning studies and European spatial planning. Former Secretary General of AESOP, she remains involved in fostering quality of planning education in Europe.

1. Present Status of Planning

France lives with a paradox. On one hand, planning values benefit from a high status. Quality of space, whether aesthetic, social, or environmental, is considered important. There is an overall consensus to accept public intervention and legal constraints for planning purposes. At the same time, the figure of the planner and the extent of his role are regularly questioned. For instance, introducing more "flexibility" and "simplicity" into planning regulations is a recurring debate. The status of planners has decayed over the last 30 years.

Until the 1970s, planning was a prestigious activity, performed by the powerful central administration in order to lead French society into modernity and progress. Since the 1980s, the planning system is decentralized and multi-actor. Today, planning power rests with the local and regional governments. Public participation has developed, advisory bodies reflecting civil society have been established, and a nebula of NGOs lobby for planning activities. The private sector is a partner for planning endeavors and brings in profitability logic. As a result, although administrative bodies of all territorial levels have inherited quite strong powers, they make little use of them and prefer consensual solutions.

Planning activities have splintered among the various policy fields. Housing, urban regeneration, and economic development clusters have developed separate bodies and agendas. As a result, planning is being challenged by other policy fields and sector approaches.

In society, the figure of the planner has been criticized for being technocratic and authoritarian. Planners have evolved to become mediators, but their status has also weakened. Paradoxically, self-confident star architects have a better image. For instance, in 2008, the French government organized a consultation about the future of the capital region (*Grand Paris*): All 10 teams invited to contribute were led by famous architects.

2. Dominant Themes and Media Coverage

Sustainability has colonized planning discourse. The concept remains fuzzy, lacking a precise definition. Under its umbrella, various themes pop up, such as climate change, energetic performance, sustainable neighborhoods, etc. Today, "smart cities" are fashionable. The European rhetoric invokes smart economy, mobility, living, environment, governance, and people. However, investments go to ITC and greenwashing. The urban and spatial dimension is lost.

Spatial issues are addressed in planning circles. Reduction of land consumption has become a key objective for statutory planning documents through a series of reforms (2000, 2003, 2010, 2014). Compact cities bring back an interest in high-rise constructions and for urban infilling in peripheral areas, for instance, discussing the concept of Bimby (build in my backyard). These issues seldom reach the media – unless they generate conflict. For instance, in 2014, a media campaign lead to the rejection of the construction of a skyscraper (*Tour Triangle*) by the Municipal Council of Paris. Other timely issues, such as environmental planning and retail planning, are of even less interest to the media and the public.

National media convey echoes of flagship projects and planning conflicts. The *Grand Paris* illustrates the first type. After the vision competition of 2008, the government initiated a major public transport project (*Grand Paris Express*) and a cluster policy for the surroundings of the future stations. Although the realization has been slowed down by the financial crisis, projects are still covered by the media. Planning conflicts tend to become more numerous and eventually are radicalized. Emblematic cases, resulting in land occupation by anti-capitalist groups, are broadly reported: the airport Notre-Dame des Landes in the vicinity of Nantes, the Sivens Dam close to Toulouse, and the Roybon Center Parcs village in the region of Grenoble. To sensitize citizens to planning issues, local governments collaborate with local media and develop institutional communication (press, websites).

3. Theory vs. Practice

The relationship between theory and practice has reversed. Until the 1970s, planning practice was grounded in planning theory. Since the 1980s, pragmatic approaches prevail. When invited to contribute to practice, academics are expected to deliver expertise and practical works, but there is little interest in theoretical issues.

As a result, French planning research has developed towards practical issues rather than theory. For instance, planning theory is under-represented and France has no planning journal that would meet academic criteria. The theoretical background is shared with other disciplines, geography, economy, etc., and academic journals from such disciplines also host planning papers. English literature doesn't play a major role. On the international level, much academic interaction occurs inside the French-speaking world (Switzerland, Belgium, Quebec, Africa …). Contrariwise, French scholars are not very active in English-speaking arenas.

4. Addressing and Reducing Disparities

Reducing disparities between Paris and other cities and regions was the reason for establishing planning in France. According to Andreas Faludi, it has been the model for the regional policy of the European Union. However, since the devolution of planning power in 1982, the national government has disengaged from regional planning. The last national debate about regional disparities goes back

to 2005, when DATAR published a plea for polycentric development. The discourse has switched from compensating disparities to enhancing competitiveness.

At the local scale, the reduction of disparities is central. New obligations have been legally imposed on local governments. Municipalities must provide social housing level of at least 25% of the total number of dwellings. Planning documents and local housing programs refer to the reduction of disparities. Nationally, France has developed a specific policy for distressed urban areas (*politique de la ville*), and the expression "territorial equality" has entered the discourse. Locally, urban regeneration projects and new developments are trying to improve social diversity (*mixité sociale*), as well as combine housing and economic activity. There is a high level of awareness about these issues in the planning community.

5. Future Challenges and Education

France has an association of French-speaking planning schools (APERAU) with 20 French schools and 10 schools from other countries. With regard to planning education, APERAU has developed a label, delivered to planning programs that meet its requirements. As a result, planning students are well prepared for their future profession and their integration on the job-market is good.

Usually, planning education starts at the master's degree level. Students come with a bachelor's degree from various disciplines: geography, economy, law, environmental studies, and architecture. They are trained in programs that balance theoretical courses and practical activities. In the course of this education, each planning student has to deliver an individual academic thesis based on research, as well as participate in collective planning workshops on real cases, under contract with planning bodies.

Universities offer study programs, usually in schools of geography and planning. The advantage of such locations is that planning curricula are quite comprehensive and social, economic and environmental issues are not overlooked. Moving planning to schools of architecture is clearly not on the agenda – nor even discussed – in France. The relationship with schools of architecture is tenuous, as the 20 French schools of architecture have a separate regime under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture rather than higher education. Combined with the natural competition between technical and social sciences, this does not foster interaction. However, since the Bologna process, the gap is decreasing and collaboration opportunities do appear.

6. Role of the European Union

European regulation of the planning profession could strengthen the status of planners. In France, the planning profession is not regulated and good employability of planning graduates relies on the good reputation of the planning schools. There is competition with architects, who do well in public procurements, and with engineers, who succeeded in safeguarding an exclusive access to some positions in public administration, in spite of the struggle of planning schools and professionals. However, having a European regulation would mean that planning competences would be well defined. This is a complex issue given the diversity of situations in the 28 Member States. Associations of planning practitioners, such as the European Council of Spatial Planners (ECTP), and the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP), are trying to move forward on this issue.

The European Union has a discourse on cities, referred to as the "urban agenda", which was submitted to open consultation in 2014. It also dedicates important resources to cities through the cohesion policy. The difficulty is the gap between the European discourse and the actual rules of the cohesion policy, more and more colonized by sector objectives supporting the growth of green and smart industries, in the spirit of the EU 2020 strategy.

As the European Union has no planning competence, a joint European Urban Policy would be useful only if it could bridge this gap. This would require a change of priorities for actors of all the levels involved. Is this possible? How? Having no certainty, the author opens the floor to this issue in a roundtable at the forthcoming AESOP Congress (July 2015 in Prague). Please join us!