Fieldwork

Dilemmas in a General Theory of Fieldwork

By Pietro Calogero

Abstract

Rittel and Webber's article "Dilemmas in a general theory of planning" serves as a valuable guide today as Western planners increasingly study and work in the global South. In addition to the complex processes within each city and urban regime, and the challenge of studying and trying to understand those processes, there is the "wicked" ethical problem of the Western planners own role and commitments within cities set off as different. For instance, how does the Western planner reconcile a desire to learn and listen with Western planning's strong normative opposition to segregation?

This is an essay about urban segregation and the ethics of fieldwork research. Affiliation with an American academic institution carries an inextricable taint of imperialism while abroad, which can manifest as both suspicion and unjustified prestige—especially the occupied city of Kabul. Acknowledging this taint as part of the medium through which we do research helps as a constant critical prod; it also reminds us that there is no such thing as 'principled disengagement' when American geopolitical interests have already compromised the sovereignty of planning agencies across the planet. But the engagement gets even more troubling if the process of research facilitates a local policy you find ethically objectionable, such as ethnic urban segregation.

In an extraordinarily cogent argument about the ethical intractabilities of planning, Rittel and Webber's (1973) *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning* argued that planning problems are the kinds of "wicked" policy problems that cannot be solved solely by empirical logic or technical means. They are the kind of problems where the problem-formulation itself involves questions of equitable representation: Who gets to say what is a 'problem'? How do they get to articulate it? The range of solutions are delimited by the way the problem is initially described, so having an initial say is a vital aspect in the ethics of plan deliberation. Rittel and Webber were responding to a rising skepticism about the legitimacy of 'the System' when they first presented their paper in 1969. Their concern was primarily domestic; but their arguments take on an interesting new dimension when applied to the majority world, where most urbanization is going on today.

I do not suggest that Rittel and Webber's arguments can be applied universally in a simple way. Rather, I argue that the extension of American imperial influence is rendering some previously *external* problems increasingly *internal* to the ethical scope of American planners. In 1969 racial minorities within American cities needed to be recognized and included, especially in deliberations about policies that directly impacted their communities. In 2009, peoples across the world need to be recognized and included in American policy decisions that directly affect their cities. 'Respecting the sovereignty' of other peoples is an admirable ideal, but this phrase is usually invoked cynically as a tactic of impunity, in which the United States conveniently ignores the direct role it plays in shaping urbanization in ostensibly sovereign countries.

Kabul is a paradigmatic case of a city developing under conditions of compromised sovereignty. My research on how Kabul is being planned is in response to Jennifer Robinson's (2002) call to extend urban theories of the West to the South and of the South to the West, in "Global and world cities: a view from off the map.[1] The radical asymmetry of this exchange extends well beyond uneven regimes of knowledge-production Robinson describes. We *do* need to understand how the majority world is urbanizing, and I believe that studying how they are being *planned* is an effective way of recognizing agency within processes of urbanization. But as researchers our own role cannot be ignored, both because we are intensely observed in 'the field', and because we cannot disengage our domestic ethical answerability to issues such as ethnic urban segregation.

In my effort to learn how Kabul is being planned, I volunteered in the office of the Technical Deputy Mayor, Hassan Abdullahi. I helped his team strategize the management of extremely rapid urban growth at the southwestern edge of the city, an area called the Desert of Barchi. Barchi was a general in the Mongol army who used this semi-arid plain as a staging-ground for besieging Kabul in the thirteenth century. The name evokes past struggles, but its Mongol association is also a coded way of saying that this is an area of Kabul where Hazara live. The Hazara are one of the ethnic groups of Afghanistan who (sometimes) look East Asian and (usually) are Shi'ite, unlike other Afghan groups who are (mostly) Sunni. The qualifications in parentheses mark the tension between the fuzzy, complex way that difference manifests on the ground in Kabul, compared to the categorical generalizations used by people outside the region to describe Afghans. Until the civil war of 1992-1996, aggregate ethnicities such as 'Hazara,' 'Uzbek,' 'Tajik,' and 'Pashtun' usually were not primary markers of identitarian difference among Afghans. Those distinctions existed, but Afghans identified more with specific locations: a province, a specific valley, even a single village. More than any other Afghan city, Kabul was the place where Afghans from all of these particular locations encountered each other. In this spatially and socially dissected country, Kabul has been the site where a collective Afghan identity is negotiated and experienced; a space of publicness.

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[1] I use 'Western' and 'global South' as non-paired terms to remind us that the relationship between colonizing/dominating countries and postcolonial/dominated countries is not a simple dialectic, not a complementary pair, not a totalizing model.

That cosmopolitanism was shattered by the civil war that erupted within Kabul itself in 1992. Only a month after taking power, the factions that had overthrown the Soviet-backed regime started fighting with each other for control of the capital. Civilian massacres were committed by each faction, and as overall security collapsed, both combatants and civilians began to rely more on ethnic affiliation for protection. Fifteen years later both the perpetrators and victims of these atrocities are trying to figure out how to live together in the city of Kabul.

I was unaware of how this struggle for coexistence was being played out within the government itself. Instead I was concerned that Karzai's reformed Ministry of Urban Development was deadlocked with the local City government of Kabul over which agency would gain the authority to plan Kabul. The national Ministry wanted to do community-based planning and neighborhood upgrading within the existing city, as well as privately-developed districts on the urban perimeter. The City wanted to clear and rebuild the informal areas into a proper Modernist city—a synthesis of prior Soviet training and contemporary exposure to the spectacular modernity of Dubai.

By 2007 more than seventy per cent of Kabul was informal development. The City's plan to clear and rebuild it seemed infeasible. But by maintaining that 'out-of-plan' development was illegal, the City blocked any sense of security for the several million recent returnees who were trying to gain some purchase in the social resource networks of the capital. The City also blocked the under-funded Ministry, which only managed to start a few pilot upgrading projects by 2007. Relations between these two agencies were already tense when I worked in the Ministry in 2003, and had worsened by 2007 when I was doing my fieldwork. Worst of all, in the five years that these two agencies had been deadlocked, Kabul had grown by half again in area—almost all of which was informal development.

Cutting across this deadlock was the work of Hassan Abdullahi. Unlike either the Ministry or his own City staff, he was trying to plan the rapidly-developing southwestern urban fringe of Kabul by stitching recent irregular development together with future, regularly-planned development beyond it. Abdullahi challenged his City planner-engineers to relax their standards, such as reducing the minimum street width from sixteen meters to new designs for four- and seven-meter streets to fit in an area where most of the streets were about two meters wide. These smaller designs could accommodate cars and be fit into the existing irregular urban fabric with a minimum of demolition. Abdullahi's intention was to do this quickly, without community consultation; but the formal investment in "fitted" streets would also implicitly recognize the surrounding irregular development as permanent. I was very interested in this emergent planning process, and as a doctoral researcher from Berkeley, Abdullahi welcomed the prestige I lent to his project by working for him.

Several weeks later a number of Afghans complained bitterly to me that I was favoring Hazaras in my work with Abdullahi. I was aware that most of the residents of southwestern Kabul were Hazara; and I was reminded that Abdullahi's east-Asian features mark him as distinctively Hazara among Afghans. This also explained why he (presumably a Shi'ite) had studied urban planning in Tehran. But I only recognized the urban clientelism of Abdullahi's planning when I was told that he was appointed Technical Deputy Mayor by the Second Vice President of Afghanistan, Abdul Karim Khalili.

In a form of ethic quota politics, the current Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has a Pashtun President (Hamid Karzai), a Tajik First Vice President (Zia Massoud), and a Hazara Second Vice President (Khalili). Karzai has been criticized for focusing too much on Afghanistan as a whole, and not favoring Pashtuns in general or his tribe in particular. In contrast, Khalili has been more explicit about representing Hazara interests. Abdullahi (who is also Khalili's nephew) has expressed this on an urban scale, proposing that the southwestern Desert of Barchi and adjacent districts become 'a place for Hazaras'—a place to feel safe in a capital where unaccounted past atrocities haunt everyone as a lingering threat of retributive violence.

In contrast to the Ministry and the City, locked into their respective idealistic positions about the 'right' way to plan Kabul, Abdullahi is engaged in the politics of ethnic clientelism that demands a higher degree of social bargaining, even if that bargain is implicit. Despite promises of local elections in 2006, Hamid Karzai still appoints the mayors of Kabul (and apparently the vice presidents appoint the vice mayors) as this new national regime struggles to dominate a much older, entrenched City regime. Under other circumstances this might be a unifying process, but in Kabul the violent ethnic factionalism of the last fifteen years undermines any tendency toward a coherence of ideologies and practices at the national and local levels of government. Rather, Abdullahi is catering to his particular urban constituency.

These politics of urban planning are extremely important to research and describe. Western scholars know disturbingly little about how most cities in the world are developing, let alone how they are being planned. But at what ethical cost do we gain this knowledge? The Hazara may be a protected minority at the moment, and the move toward ethnic enclaving appears voluntary, albeit out of fear. But the politics of Afghanistan have been notoriously unpredictable for the past thirty years; an instability to which the United States contributed heavily. By working for Abdullahi, I abetted a process of ethnic separation which, depending upon a very uncertain political future, will either remain voluntary or become a process of exclusionary segregation.

In terms of extending planning theory, the planning of southwestern Kabul raises more disturbing questions. Are there conditions in which urban segregation is socially beneficial? At a certain scale, for a certain length of time, could it reduce conditions of violence by partially isolating factions from each other? The general ethic among English-speaking planners from Australia to India to Canada is towards integration and cosmopolitanism, and unequivocally against both segregation and privileged enclaving. Perhaps Afghans teach us that even this core planning ethic needs to be reconsidered in a more nuanced light.

Forty years ago Rittel and Webber argued for why urban planning could no longer be pursued by scientific means towards a singular goal of ‘rational efficiency’. Sadly, part of their argument was that many of the technical goals of planning had been achieved: “The streets have been paved, and roads now connect all places; houses shelter virtually everyone; the dread diseases are virtually gone; clean water is piped into virtually every building; sanitary sewers carry wastes from them; schools and hospitals serve virtually every district.” Perhaps it is clearer now that these achievements are both gained and lost through politics, both at home and abroad. Yet their core argument is increasingly relevant: the need to recognize planning as a moral project, and to recognize a wider plurality of voices in the planning process. What was true of an implicitly American planning theory in 1969 is echoed today in an attempt to extend planning theory to a transnational framework. The challenge for planning theorists is to listen to and learn from an urbanizing world; this demands an ethic of accountability in the politics of knowledge-production. And as Rittel and Webber pointed out, there is no such thing as a disinterested position in this effort.

References

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