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Anticipations: on the state of the planning imagination

Andy Inch

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Amidst disturbing talk of walls being built between the United States of America and Mexico during last November's Presidential Election, many important facts were overlooked. As a case in point, whilst the eyes of the world have been directed towards the 'problems' generated by the relocation of industry in one direction and waves of migration coming the other way, it seems many more manufacturing jobs have been lost in the United States in recent years due to automation and technological change than trade. A 2015 study, for example, estimates that between 2006 and 2013 up to 88% of factory jobs lost were a result of technology-driven 'productivity gains' rather than trade competition (Hicks and Devaraj, 2015). And all available predictions suggest these trends will further intensify in the coming years, affecting ever more workers without necessarily leading to the creation of replacement jobs in other sectors.

That this piece of information has failed to gain much political traction is testament to the power of populist discourses in mobilizing discontent against the forces of globalization, its perceived 'elite' architects in government, and the foreign 'others' it is allowing to steal the prosperity of 'ordinary', hard working families'. Willfully manipulated or otherwise, the all too human capacity to misrecognize socio-economic transformations stands undiminished. However, it is not my intention here to add another commentary on the rights, alt-rights and wrongs of recent political developments, or their profound significance for planning theory and practice (which were admirably considered in the editorial to the previous issue of this journal, see Campbell, 2016). Instead I would like to briefly consider some of the implications of automation and emerging technology since it seems we are now routinely hearing bold assertions about a coming wave of profoundly 'disruptive' economic change: from driverless cars to pizza delivery by drone what recently seemed like sci-fi fantasy now seems to be coming to a city near you, and soon.

As I'm sure is happening elsewhere, the direct and indirect implications of such technological changes are already becoming apparent in my home city. On the 10th of October last year taxi drivers from across Portugal held an unofficial strike where they effectively blocked one of the main arteries here in Lisbon, including access to the airport. The demonstration was in protest against the emergence of unregulated competition from online transport networks like Uber. Several cars were attacked in scenes that inevitably made headlines on the television news.

A month later, the taxi drivers were busy again. This time ferrying more than fifty-three thousand attendees to and from the "Websummit", a global 'tech' industry event that had been lured to the city for the first time amidst much fanfare. Media coverage around the summit reflected predictable hype about the prospects for major technological change, not least the potential for the host city to take advantage of a new wave of economic opportunity by stimulating start-ups and attracting footloose investors whose love of surfing extends from the web all the way to the beach. Amidst characteristic celebration of all things innovative and disruptive, it seems there was also some, limited acknowledgement that coming waves of technological change and automation will likely give rise to major ethical and political challenges (e.g. McElvoy, 2016). In this regard, when set against the techno-futurism of the Websummit and breathless predictions that automated vehicles may soon render all human drivers jobless, the spat between the licensed monopoly of Lisbon's taxi-drivers and their new-economy competition looks like an opening skirmish in what might well be a long-running and bitter set of battles, giving rise to new waves of luddism.

Thinking through such developments raises important questions about our understanding of the ways our worlds are being remade, and our capacity to anticipate and steer the course of our collective societal futures. If one key task is to think about how we come to recognise (or misrecognise) the forces that are shaping change, another involves our capacity to imagine alternative possibilities.

In this regard it is notable that 2016 also saw the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's 'Utopia'. Debate continues as to whether More's intention was purely satirical, sending up an imagined 'no-place', or a more hopeful expression of

eu-topia, a ‘good place’. As a result utopia has always been a janus-faced concept, every ideal society is to some extent mirrored by its dystopian other half. For Sargent (2006) it remains a dangerous but also an essential idea: whilst the desire for a better life can all too often be captured by ideologues and ideologies promoting the interests of the few, only alternative utopias can challenge such distortions.

In its libertarian celebration of innovation and disruption, techno-utopianism converges powerfully with the prevailing utopia of the free-market and its veneration of creative destruction. Yet each has also given rise to much darker visions of the future. Indeed, it seems to be commonly held that we live in dystopian times, marked by a ‘new catastrophism’ (Urry, 2016) our social imagination is haunted by the spectre of a changing climate and a global economic system that has expanded and accelerated out of control. If libertarian utopias have no time for planning, the new catastrophism suggests an urgent need to restore a belief that alternative futures can be purposively shaped.

For its part, the prospect of a technologically enabled, ‘post-work’ future has begun to stimulate the revival of utopian demands for the radical redistribution of socially necessary labour, shortened working hours, and a basic citizens’ income (e.g. Srnicek and Williams, 2015). The relationship between planning and utopianism is of course long-standing and complex. Images of radically transformed societies have often required the radical transformation of cities as much as the people within them. However, contemporary urban visions, be they for smart, resilient or, as the paper by Listerborn in this issue discusses, creative cities, more often stand accused of being ideological distortions, offering little transformative or hopeful potential. The challenge of creating compelling new urban utopias, backed by concrete demands, therefore seems central to revive a progressive planning project in the 21st century. This also requires the cultivation and enhancement of planning’s anticipatory consciousness, the ability to think creatively about the challenges and opportunities that various forms of change may bring. Is it possible that by embracing the possibilities of emerging social and technological change we might find ways to expand the planning imaginary?

Listerborn's paper, based on a programme to build the futuristic sounding yet oddly indefinable '4th Urban Urban Environment' in Malmö, Sweden, emphasizes the scale of the challenge, providing a critical analysis of how global visions for creative cities are being translated into new physical realities that embody neoliberal priorities of entrepreneurialism and inter-urban competition. In doing so such interventions deepen patterns of unequal development rather than promoting social justice.

Aftab Erfan offers a different challenge to the concerns I have outlined above, questioning whether the planning profession already focuses too much attention on the future. In a thoughtful, reflective essay she carefully sets out a role for therapeutic planning - a mode of practice that emphasizes the importance of healing collective traumas in order to find ways of understanding the past and enabling openness to a changing future. This is a form of planning based on patient facilitation, nurturing human relations and working towards deeper inter-personal understandings. I am not sure that requires a rejection of utopianism, but it presents a compelling case to focus attention on how we manage collective processes of change; a welcome corrective to any glib celebration of the creative virtues of disruption.

In her paper, Megan Horst too emphasizes the importance of healing past trauma as a means of dealing with inequities that contribute to food injustice. In beginning to do so, as well as by improving access to land and strengthening markets for local, healthy and culturally relevant food, she argues that municipal planners in Washington State are making steps towards realizing the (utopian sounding) promises of food justice. In other respects, however, planning processes seem stuck - less able to tackle structural challenges that influence access to food systems, or the conditions of workers within them.

Though focused on very different parts of the world, the need for planning ideas to be imported with due care is a connecting thread that links the papers by Sari Puustinen, Raine Mäntysalo, Jonne Hytönen and Karoliina Jarenko and that by Michelle Mycoo. The former explores how ideas of deliberative practice, developed primarily in North America by John Forester and others, may need to be adjusted when travelling to Finland, a context where the role of the state makes institutional rather than inter-personal trust key to much planning activity. Mycoo's paper meanwhile traces an

apparent loss of faith in planning in the Anglophone Caribbean. She attributes this at least partly to the importing of inappropriate planning tools from Britain, the former centre of colonial power in that region. In its place she argues for a new planning framework better suited to prevailing challenges.

Resonating strongly with a recent exchange of comment pieces on the ethical and political challenges facing planners in the West Bank (see Hague 2016 and Allegra, 2016), the other full paper in this issue by Michal Braier and Haim Yacobi explores the paradoxical consequences of processes of neoliberal regulatory restructruring on Jerusalem's ethnocratic planning regime. Whilst liberalization of land-use regulation has enabled the emergence of new markets in speculative real-estate, typically marketed to wealthy international Jewish investors, it has also enabled the formalization of Palestinian dwellings. Ideas, and policies, intended to free markets therefore work simultaneously to both reinforce and undermine ethno-nationalist planning.

The Interface section explores the work involved in building collective capacity to shape the future in challenging circumstances: in this case, through Giusy Pappalardo's 'practice story' of working in the Simeto Valley of Sicily in the face of some intimidating obstacles, not the least the "mafiogenous" socio-cultural system that still exerts huge power over local politics. Giusy's fascinating account of developing community mapping exercises provides rich material for extended reflection on the individual and mutual learning that can develop when planners and academics work with communities through a spirit, and what Jason Corburn identifies in his commentary as a 'technology', of humility.

As one of the editors responsible, I would like to draw particular attention to the four pieces published in the comment and reviews section. One of our key aims for these pages of the journal is to promote lively and topical debate in ways that standard articles, shaped by the vagaries of peer-review, often cannot.

In the first comment piece in this issue Mai Thi Nguyen, Jennifer Evans-Cowley, Leigh Graham, Rosie Tighe, Laura Solitare, and Shannon Van Zandt offer their perspective on the recent closure of the U.S based academic listserv PlaNet and their

decision, following the posting of a sexist joke, to leave and set up an alternative online forum, the Planners 2040 Facebook group. The events surrounding the closure of PlaNet were controversial and the authors seek to strike a conciliatory tone here. However, it is also clear that important issues were at stake. Not least concerns about how the academic planning community can live up to its own frequently stated commitments to values of mutuality and justice. The authors argue that this requires more explicit recognition that the hierarchical structures of the academy offer certain scholars positions of privilege from which to speak whilst silencing others, often minorities and those in less senior or precarious posts. Reading this piece it struck me that there is too little space in academic planning journals devoted to reflection on the kind of discipline we would like to be and whether the behaviour of academics lives up to the ideals we often demand of others in the world of planning practice.

Reflecting on other aspects of the value of academic practice, in her comment Anne Taufen Wessells questions how planning scholars can and do make a difference through their work as educators, a role that is too often considered secondary to the better rewarded activities of research. Drawing on her experience of designing a new Masters Degree in Community Planning at the University of Washington Tacoma, Wessells argues persuasively that scholars should pay more attention to their teaching and its potential role in fostering public reason as a foundation for building stronger civic cultures in the communities universities serve.

Elsewhere, Peter J. Geraghty, draws on his experience as a judge of the Royal Town Planning Institute's new International Planning Award in his comment on the importance of publicly rewarding outstanding planning work. Geraghty argues that, in an era when planning is too often undervalued by government and society, awards can offer a way of reminding ourselves and the world that planning work has value.

Andy Jordan's review of Susan Owens' new book, Knowledge, Policy, and Expertise, meanwhile provides further evidence of the value of just such planning and policy work. The book examines the influential work of the UK Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution from 1970-2011, including the period from 1998-2008 during which Owens served as a member through until its politically motivated closure by government in 2011.

Finally, we are fortunate in this issue to be able to include a series of Klaus Kunzmann's sketches of the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal and a short accompanying text that explains his thirty years of involvement there as both a planner and inveterate recorder of its beauty.

From the multiple, interconnected perspectives of planning and academic practice, the contributions to this issue of the journal highlight different aspects of the challenges involved in putting ideas to work in shaping the future. In their variously critical, healing, reflective, constructive and creative tones I think they all speak to the ongoing work required to build a planning imagination capable of giving new meaning to Patrick Geddes' (1915, vii) century old view that:

> Eutopia, then, lies in the city around us; and it must be planned and realized, here or nowhere, by us as its citizens- each a citizen of both the actual and the ideal city seen increasingly as one.

Andy Inch,
Lisbon, December 2016

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