

Traveling Planning Ideas as Myths

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In the debate on planning as a trans-national enterprise (Healey and Upton, 2010; Roy and Ong, 2011), scholars usually turn to a basic interpretive scheme of transfer/diffusion of planning ideas, partly borrowed from knowledge and policy transfer approaches (Stone, 2004), to understand how good planning experiences travel from one place to another, mobilizing complex assemblages of actors, norms, technologies, policies and practices. In particular, this scheme acknowledges an “origin” (contextualization) and a “destination” of the travel (re-contextualization), with a thick “trajectory” in between (de-contextualization).

This paper questions such a scheme, assuming de-contextualization as a highly problematic practice, theoretically tricky and, most importantly, rich of political implications (Vettoreto, 2009; McCann and Ward, 2010).

In such a critical perspective, planning ideas cannot be considered as unproblematic, dis-embedded knowledge travelling worldwide. I here maintain that they work as myths.

To do so, the paper first problematizes the issue of origin, contesting the somehow objectifying perspective of origin narratives of planning ideas. For that purpose it provides discussion mostly inspired by Foucault’s lesson on origin and genealogy (Foucault, 1977; 1980). Secondly, it proposes to envisage the origin narrative as a mythological tale (Barthes, 1991), a trope that planners use and refresh each and every time an idea is put into play in a specific context. An example taken from a planning case in the Middle East, involving international experts, will illustrate the practical implications of such an approach.

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