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# Rethinking the role of the 'fragile experts' in the age of technique.

## Urban planners between specialization and ontological uncertainty

### **Abstract**

What are the attributes assumed by urban planning in the age of technique? How does it change and what is the role of planners today? To what extent is it possible to speak about the 'fragility' of planning's epistemological bases, practices, design as well as cultural ambitions? Starting from these complex questions, the article suggests an exploration of the planners' role(s) suspended between the limits of an increasingly specialized model of knowledge production and dissemination, on the one hand, and the need to combine this paradigm with the multiple challenges imposed by the complexity of contemporary urban scenarios, on the other. In the face of this tension, accentuated by the conditions of ontological uncertainty of today's knowledge panorama, planners are called to recognize the fragility of (their) expert knowledge as well as the (inescapable) existence of forms of 'asymmetrical relationality'. This would be the first step in the process of rethinking about the function and scope of planners in the face of the challenges posed by the immediate future – and among these, the contrast to scholarly isolation, as a tendency towards the isolation of knowledge from practices (and of 'experts' from society).

### **Keywords**

planning, urban theory, tools & techniques

## 1 | The fragile expert. The role of planners between specialization and ontological uncertainty

The article proposes a critical exploration of the role of planners as ‘experts’ whose actions, since the origins of the discipline, have been always linked (and legitimized) by the use of technique. Reflecting today on the meaning that technique has assumed within decision-making, economic and social processes (Donolo, 2014) is urgent – or, at least, desirable. In fact, if it is true that the role of planners was born and strengthened in the decades between the XIX and XX centuries – shaped by the positivist philosophy and firmly anchored to the model of *technocratic planning*, through which it was believed to definitively ‘solve’ the (numerous) problems of the early industrial city (Howe, 1912, Ford, 1913) – today it appears necessary to re-examine the connection between knowledge production and increasing specialization, on the one hand, and the emergence of uncertainty as an inescapable condition of the contemporary panorama (Bauman, 1999), on the other. The combination of these two phenomena marks a certain discontinuity with respect to the conception of the planners advocated by the theorists of *comprehensive planning*, which has permeated a significant part of the thought (and practices) of the last century – albeit with results that have raised many perplexities. In fact, since the 1960s, the positivist paradigm has been the subject of radical criticisms destined to profoundly mark the (new) conception of urban planning, especially on the epistemological side. These are the years of Jane Jacobs, Paul Davidoff and Reyner Banham, the first ‘critical voices’ to distance themselves from the procedural, normative, epistemological ‘rigidity’ of the *technocratic planning* (Pacchi, 2018). The new connection between epistemology and the political dimension (Ibidem) claimed, notably, by Paul Davidoff (Davidoff, 1965) represented an upsetting turning point, and gave rise to a plural debate enriched by influential voices such as Giancarlo De Carlo and Henri Lefebvre. In the following decades there was certainly no lack of significant contributions: both the *collaborative planning* (Fischer, Forester, 1993; Healey, 1997, 2003) as well as the ‘post-Euclidean’ vision theorized by Friedmann (Friedmann, 1987, 1993) – limiting the perimeter to a couple of perspectives that have been so prominent in the recent academic debate – are firmly placed within a post-positivist conception. The figure of the planner, therefore, no longer approached – or more correctly, no longer ‘comparable’ – to the idea of infallibility of the expert knowledge, abandoned the role of the technician-scientist invoked, for example, by George B. Ford (exemplary, to in this regard, is the definition of the city as a «laboratory»), took on – starting, precisely, from the 1960s and gradually over the following decades – the characteristics of the ‘fragile’ expert. To understand what this fragility consists of and in what terms it affects the actions of today’s planners, it is first necessary to dwell on the phenomenon of academic specialization (Montedoro, Pasqui, 2020): this is, in fact, the crucial element linking the role of the ‘fragile experts’ (including planners) to the contemporary scenario – that is, the undisputed domination of technique (Galimberti, 1999; Anders, 2003; Pulcini, 2014; Severino, 2006). Investigating the causes, and above all the effects, of specialization is

the first step in thinking about the conditions of epistemological fragility and ontological uncertainty (Pasqui, 2022) within which today's planners are called to operate. It is that 'radical uncertainty' to structurally condition the field of spatial planning. In fact, as Chiffi and Chiodo (2020) observe, uncertainty permeates and characterizes contemporary urban space due to its complexity: not only, therefore, it seems difficult to be able to accurately identify the (potential) scenarios linked to the development of cities (Ibidem: 10) but it is equally difficult to predict the impact of planning decisions. Faced with the awareness of the limits (and challenges) that complexity imposes on the action of planners, the above concept of fragility gradually acquires clearer contours. From a vague ontological dilemma, it is enriched with meaning and substance: fragility then becomes a 'concrete' dimension of action, an attribute of the role of the contemporary planners. As such it fully deserves to be studied and deeply understood – starting from its intersection with the problem of specialization.

### **1.1 | Specialization as paradigm of the age of technique: knowledge fragmentation and the challenge of complexity**

How, then, does disciplinary, academic, professional specialization closely relate to the action of planners? For what reasons does this phenomenon deserve to be studied in relation to the role of planners in the contemporary panorama? What hints can an exploration of the link between the process of specialization of knowledge, on the one hand, and the fragility of the figure of the planners (as 'experts'), on the other, offer? The following paragraph, through a first exposition of the introduced themes, tries to put forward some hypotheses. The element from which to draw a first consideration concerns the specialization as a paradigm of the functioning – so to say – of technique. This is a reflection that cannot ignore two (necessary) premises. The first concerns the distinction between the terms 'technique' and 'techniques'. Technique, as Martin Heidegger already pointed out in the aftermath of the Second World War (Heidegger, 1954), has long since gone beyond the boundaries of mere 'technology' to become a project of domination over nature – and therefore, no longer an instrument in the hands of the mankind; rather, a form of (absolute) rationality to which every sphere of social, economic and political reality is subjected. A true *post-human* scenario, in the sense that mankind itself appears 'obsolete' – taking up the argument of Gunter Anders (Anders, 2003) – compared to the machines it created. In this sense, technique can be understood as that set of systems, services and 'conditions' that has now risen to «shape of the world», to use the expression dear to Umberto Galimberti (Galimberti, 1999). With the term 'techniques', instead, it is possible to designate those 'tools' or set of 'operating procedures' used in the various specialist-scientific fields. In any case, the 'techniques' (as well as the 'technologies') are not in themselves neutral nor should they be reduced – as has often happened and still occurs – to a purely instrumental conception. In the field of spatial planning, zoning is a striking case of technique – understood as a 'tool' – the use of which can (easily) be bent for instrumental purposes. It is a kind of distortion generated by the

belief that the zoning technique was conceived, and subsequently used, to achieve a pre-determined goal, as underlined by Gaeta, commenting on the skeptical positions of Franco Mancuso and Luigi Piccinato regarding a better use of this technical tool: «Both authors make the objectives and effects of zoning coincide according to a paradigm of rational behavior that submits action to the predominance of knowing: behind every action there is always the conscious intention - declared, hidden or disguised – of a rational subject who knows what he wants from the beginning. The fallacy of this thought can be reacted by exonerating the technical instrument from the responsibilities attributable to political users. This reaction is consistent in recognizing the wide variety of effects of zoning – positive and negative from conflicting points of view – and the genuine reform efforts of so many of its pioneers. Drawing borders is not in itself a technique of segregation or emancipation. A better use of the tool is [therefore] possible because many uses are possible (and historically proven)» (Gaeta, 2018: 72).

Secondly, it should be noted that by now technique – in the sense mentioned above, that is *techne* (Galimberti, 1999) – no longer coincides with the concept of ‘technological progress’ of a positivist matrix. On a closer inspection, it is the concept of progress itself that risks to be misleading: in the age of technique what matters is the mere development, that is, the (unlimited) strengthening of the technique itself.

In the light of these preliminary observations, it is possible to dwell, more in detail, on specialization as a cornerstone of the rationality at the basis of what Emanuele Severino calls the *scientific-technological apparatus*, or more simply «Apparatus» (Severino, 1992, 2006). Here, a succinct but exhaustive definition, especially in relation to the centrality of the scientific specialization: «The scientific-technological apparatus is not constituted only by scientific conceptuality and the tools of technology, but also by the system of social conditions that make the relationship between science and technique possible. Science and technique could not function for a single moment, if they were not found within a highly developed economic, legal, political, bureaucratic, scholastic, urban, health system concentrated in the rich states of the north of the planet. On the other hand, the type of rationality that governs this system is the same that acts in science and technique [...] It is about the rationality that is expressed in the specialization and in the experimental attitude (i.e. open to possible denials of experience), and which leads to the hypothetical laws of the individual specialized fields. The scientific-technological apparatus [...] is [therefore] the integration of science and technique to that system of conditions that make their functioning possible» (Severino, 2006: 71). These words, so precise, suggest some significant reflections. Planners – as ‘experts’ and due to the true nature of the subject they deal with – experience a conflict determined by the contrast «between the demand for specialization and expendable skills, and the need to confirm the cultural and social value of the practice [...]» (Montedoro, Pasqui, 2020: 68). In other words, we can perhaps speak of a centripetal boost (specialization) which is virtually countered by a centrifugal motion (transdisciplinary culture, understood as a *contamination of knowl-*

edge and a challenge to integration, capable of recognizing complexity). In this perspective, planners are placed in that group of professionals called to deal with complex problems – or, more properly, to take up the challenge of complexity (Ceruti 2018). This means acting (i.e. making decisions) in conditions of fragmentation of knowledge – precisely, in the light of the specialized organization of knowledge, typical of modernity (Ceruti, 2018: 94-95) – and of multiplicity of factors, interactions and actors on the other hand. In this sense, planners pay for an ‘antinomic condition’: as technical figures – therefore ‘experts’ - they represent the epitome of the scientific-technological apparatus (Severino, 2006), fully sharing the logic of disciplinary, academic and professional specialization. At the same time, however, planners are faced with complex and rapidly changing realities – ending up under, so to say, the pressure of the specialist knowledge model, and the «logic of isolation [of knowledge]» (Ibidem: 41) that derives from it. This tension between specialization (of knowledge) and intrinsic plurality (of practices) produces a discrepancy, an inevitable gap between theory and practice (Alexander, 2010; Wachs, 2016; Avarello, 2017) that distinguishes and accompanies spatial planning since its origins. The role of planners, therefore, appears weakened by this dyscrasia – however accentuated by numerous (or, rather, innumerable?) attempts of disciplinary re-foundation (Palermo, 2004, 2009, 2022).

## **2 | The (intrinsic) fragility of technique. Fallibility and «asymmetric relationality»**

Planners, therefore, as exponents of «a disciplinary field that is structured close to practices and contexts» (Gabellini, 2017: 137), a practical knowledge studded with uncertainties and unknowns, marked by the «“natural” coexistence of different positions» (Ibidem: 138) and moreover oriented (or perhaps forced) to dialogue with adjacent knowledge such as architecture and engineering – privileged areas of comparison, historically more connoted and, above all, ‘socially recognized’. Planners therefore, in addition to the aforementioned short circuit between specialization and its (intrinsic) limits, pay for other contradictions – starting from the very name that the discipline assumes according to the periods, academic or institutional contexts, and practices (Tosi, 2017). Faced with such ‘confusion’ (Gabellini, 2017: 138), what emerges is an inevitably plural profile – professional, research – ‘suspended’ between fields of knowledge that are sometimes distant, and above all ‘ontologically fragile’, a fragility possibly attributable:

1. to the concept of *expert fallibility*, determined by the recognition of the ‘limitedness’ of technical knowledge – and the consequent need to ‘justify’ every decision (Mazza, 2004), within an argumentative conception of the planning processes (Fischer, Forester, 1993; Schon, 1984);
2. to the «dynamics of production and reproduction of power relations» marked by the emergence of forms of «asymmetrical relationality» (Caselli, 2020: 27-28) – a complex phenomenon that lends itself to various problematizations but which, in the context of planning, cannot fail to refer to the risks of *misinformation* and *communicative distortion* inherent

in the communicative dimension (Forester, 1980, 1982, 1989).

Considering these examples of 'technical fragility', to what extent does the fragmentation of knowledge and practices impact on the role of planners as actors within policy and decision-making processes? To answer this question, it is useful to dwell more in detail on the aforementioned 'forms of fragility' of technique – exploring the consequences of the (increasing) specialization of knowledge.

As regards the fallibility of expert knowledge, it would be worth to reflect on the (crucial) element of 'justification': in the planning process understood as a «social conversation» (Mazza, 2004: 168), in fact, experts are forced to recognize the (irrepressible) share of uncertainty at the basis of technical knowledge (and therefore of the *politics of the plan*). Recognizing the limitation of knowledge implies the need to justify choices and decisions; but this justification can only be partial (Ibidem: 39) – that is, an expression of (a) party. In this sense, planners (inter)act in relation to a plurality of subjects, of «publics» (Crosta, 2003a) that distinguish the interactivity of the plan process as a «strategic construct» (Crosta, 2003a, 2003b) – which is 'finalized' (Crosta, 2003b: 10) and, precisely, based on the *inter-action/trans-action* between actors and therefore by its very nature 'interactive' (Ibidem). In this perspective, the mechanism of specialization acts as a multiplier, so to say, of the inherent fragility of the argumentative dimension. In fact, where consensus is built (at least hypothetically) on the basis of interactions between 'experts' and 'non-experts', the fragmentation of skills combined with the resulting 'fluidity' of roles inevitably leads to a weakening of the voice of the planners – submerged and weakened by the cacophony of their respective 'sectorialisms'.

On the other hand, entrenching oneself behind specialist positions is typical of the logic of expertise – which feeds (also) on the aforementioned asymmetry: that is, «the relationship of unequal knowledge and power between experts and their interlocutors» (Caselli, 2020: 27). At the basis of the functioning of this structure of power there is the link between cognition and normativity: «the experts, their specific knowledge and the devices they shape are [...] to be understood in this light: not mere observers or executors of tasks objectively necessary in a given social reality, but producers of that same social reality in which they in turn are immersed and by which they are conditioned» (Ibidem). This tension between «description» and «prescription», cognition and normativity appears – in the field of spatial planning – particularly linked to the question of specialization, if it is true that «the reaffirmation and strengthening of asymmetry will lead to forms of production, diffusion and application of knowledge marked by elitist closure and professional monopoly [...]» (Ibidem: 28). In this regard, it is interesting to focus on the risks that this 'specialist regression' would entail in terms of planning processes and, more concretely, on the interaction between actors. In fact, it is perhaps legitimate to ask: to what extent does asymmetric relationality affect possible dynamics of communicative distortion or manipulation of information pertaining to the communicative dimension (Forester, 1980, 1982, 1989)? A satisfactory answer would be found in the logic un-

derlying the concept of expertise: asymmetry implies a (structural) inequality between experts and non-experts in terms of power and knowledge. This arrangement contributes to the creation of 'opaque spaces' in which the communicative action – structured around the 'experts' and their interlocutors – can be altered. In this sense, the asymmetrical relationality brings with it an intrinsic fragility of the planners' actions.

At this point, it is a question of understanding to what extent specialization (with its 'legacy' in terms of fragility, as just illustrated) intersects with an emerging epi-phenomenon: the so-called *scholarly isolation*. As a 'collateral manifestation' with respect to the (widespread) phenomenon of specialization, scholarly isolation allows us to deepen some implications linked, above all, to the impact of the logic of isolation (of expertise) on the role played by technical universities in producing not only skills but also 'culture' (Montedoro, Pasqui, 2020).

### **3 | Problematizing scholarly isolation: a mere regression to 'self-referentiality'?**

The term *scholarly isolation* is used in Anglo-American literature to indicate an (presumed) isolation of the Academia from the world of practices – and, in particular, of professional practices (Wachs, 2016). However, this is an interpretation that is useful to only (partially) frame the phenomenon, which is actually more complex and multifaceted. In fact, in addition to the mere concept of 'moving away from practices' – which in itself means little or nothing, without empirical verification – scholarly isolation can be better understood in relation to the phenomena discussed here such as specialization (especially in the academic field) and asymmetric relationality.

In the case of urban planning, this 'retreating' into specialist logics is exacerbated by the poor 'social recognition' of the role of planners. This is especially true in the Italian context, in which the actual inability of planners to influence – with their positions – the public debate is increasingly accompanied by the general discredit of the discipline (Benevolo, 2012; Palermo, 2022). On the other hand, it is difficult to establish whether this situation of total atony of the planners – sanctioned by the marginality of urban planning issues with respect to public discourse – is a contributing cause or a simple consequence of the delegitimization of roles (and of expert knowledge in general). In the field of urban planning, in fact, the perception of mistrust towards 'the Knowledge' finds other reasons. For example, the hesitation of planners in the face of the epochal challenges that the pandemic has accelerated: from the ecological transition (to be 'substantiated') to social (and spatial) justice, planners are called upon to assume precise political and cultural responsibilities. More so that if a social recognition of the role has so far been lacking, perhaps it is also due to a certain 'self-absolving' propensity cultivated in the illusion of being able (always) to divide technique from politics, theory from practice, and (design) culture from skills. Thus, net of the acknowledgment of the (objective) difficulty of planners in rethinking their role, scholarly isolation assumes the vague contours – all to be explored – of a tendency towards (*self*)isolation of the University (and of the world

that revolves around it) from the production of culture, abandoned in favor of (hyper-specialized) «practical knowledge» (Montedoro, Pasqui, 2020: 27). This regression to self-referentiality, in fact, finds corroboration both in the specialized drift as well as in the ‘excluding’ sectoral logics expressed by asymmetrical relationality. In the light of these considerations, the premises for future research developments are outlined. Indeed, the possibility of conceptualizing scholarly isolation and further exploring its implications – also on an empirical level – would represent a challenging, engaging research perspective.

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