Making planning theory real

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Abstract

This article argues that contemporary planning theory is underpinned by an anti-realist ontology that has eroded its capacity to engage meaningfully with the materiality of space. The article draws on the experience of the author as a planner in a large city in the global South to illustrate the limits of planning theory. It argues that the 'southwards turn' in planning theory has expanded the reach of planning theory but that more is needed. The article then considers the possibility that a new body of philosophical thought known as 'speculative realism' may provide an antidote to this anti-realism and support sustained engagement with the objects of planning's concern.

Keywords

Anti-realism, global south, materiality, ontology, planning, speculative realism

Introduction

Over the past two decades or so, leading planning theorists have called for a renewed engagement with the materiality of the city. Beauregard (1990) lamented 'the general drift from the city as the core object' as 'theorists delved more and more into abstract processes isolated from social condition' (p. 211); Yiftachel (2006) wrote of contemporary planning serving to 'disengage the field's centre of gravity from its core task of understanding and critiquing the impact of urban policies, as a platform for transformative intervention' (p. 212) while Roy (2009a) referred to 'a vast swath of planning theory that is simply not concerned with space as materiality' (p. 9).

These are powerful voices, and their entreaties resonate with the concerns of many academic and practicing planners, but planning theories have, with a few important exceptions, failed to respond in any consequential way. Fainstein's (2005) study, for example, was a serious attempt to develop a substantive model of a 'just city', while Beauregard's (2012) study – entitled 'Planning and Things' – is a self-conscious attempt to place physical materiality once again at the centre of planning. A recent stream of work positioned from a vantage point in the global South may offer the prospect of a

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more direct engagement with 'urban realities', but this work is in a formative stage and is still concerned mainly with distancing itself from 'theories from the North'.

In this article, I argue that planning theory has been shaped by an anti-realist ontology, which has largely replaced a focus on *epistemology* (ways to produce knowledge about the world) with a concern for *hermeneutics* (ways of constructing and interpreting meaning), and that planning theory will struggle to engage meaningfully with the urban condition unless there is an ontological shift. I begin by reflecting on the impasse in planning theory, referring to the introspection within the field itself and to my personal experience as a planner in a state bureaucracy. I do give serious consideration to the possibility that 'the southwards turn' in planning may break the impasse but conclude that this will be difficult to achieve within the current frame of anti-realist ontology. More hopefully, however, I explore the possibility that a new body of philosophical thought known as 'speculative realism' may provide intellectual support for renewed theoretical engagement in planning theory with the materiality of space. Speculative realism is an umbrella term for the work of a diverse group of young (mainly Anglo-French) philosophers who have been working to reinvent realism 'while side-stepping the dogmatic pitfalls of the positivist, Marxist and utilitarian traditions' (Saldanha, 2009: 309).

There is an unusual urgency in the work of speculative realists. Bryant et al. (2011) put it like this,

> In the face of the looming ecological catastrophe, and the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world (including into our own bodies), it is not clear that the anti-realist position is equipped to face up to these developments. The danger is that the dominant anti-realist strain of continental philosophy has not only reached a point of decreasing returns, but that it now actively limits the capacity of philosophy in our time. (p. 3)

Reid-Bowen (2011) paraphrases this a little differently: 'The focus on the human-world correlate – consciousness, discourse, language, power, text, and so on – now seems singularly inappropriate for wrestling with the problems at hand' (p. 48). The argument in this article is not to return to crude or naïve realism, or to abandon the attention in planning theory to the 'human-word correlate', but rather to draw on the idea of speculative realism to find a better balance between the epistemological and hermeneutical tasks of planning theory, and the material and symbolic dimensions of space.

Anti-realist ontology

Contemporary anti-realism is historically rooted in the work of the 18th-century philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who set the terms for 20th-century philosophy by arguing that reality is structured by human cognition and cannot be accessed independently of human thought. Since the late 1960s, anti-realism in the social sciences has taken a radical turn with 'physical realities' being understood 'ultimately from the perspective of history, power and meaning' (Saldanha, 2009: 307). Anti-realism came to dominate thinking in the social sciences but was never entirely hegemonic, with Roy Bhaskar's critical realism, for example, engaging at the interface between the social and natural sciences and Andrew Sayer applying critical realism to debates on locality and space (e.g. Bhaskar, 1998; Sayer, 2000). The natural sciences have not been unmoved by the critique of

realism but have remained, by and large, wedded to realist ontology. Planning theory has been overwhelmingly shaped by these trends in the social sciences, with almost every post-realist philosopher being invoked by planning theorists. It is admittedly a diverse mix, and there is a continuum between 'hard' and 'soft' anti-realism, but there is, nevertheless, a common orientation in planning theory away from realism, which transcends divides such as that which exists between 'communicative action' and 'post-structuralist critique' (Yiftachel, 1999).

The anti-realist tendency initially provoked anxiety among planning theorists (e.g. Beauregard, 1989, 1990), but, by the late 1990s, it was hardly contested. Allmendinger (2002: 87) wrote of the 'post-positivist' erosion of the idea that planning deals with material reality. He explained post-positivist positions as being those that 'emphasize … contextualizing theories and disciplines within their larger historical and social contexts; normative criteria for deciding between competing theories; the ubiquity of variance in explanations and theories; and, an understanding of individuals as self-interpreting and autonomous subjects'. In the intellectual environment of this time, it would have been intellectually foolhardy to have offered a 'realist' interpretation of planning thought. Brassier (2011), for example, advised that 'the rationalist imperative to explain phenomena by penetrating to the reality beyond appearances [would have been] diagnosed as the symptom of an implicitly theological metaphysical reductionism' (p. 51).

The use(lessness) of planning theory

This anti-realism may underlie the persisting disquiet about the purpose of planning theory. Binder (2012) has observed recently that 'planning theory's utility 'for addressing "real" planning practice remains moot' (p. 1). This unease with planning theory goes back a number of years with Sanyal (2002), for example, provoking a flurry of responses by asking whether we should take the trouble to produce planning theory in the light of a social survey, which revealed that very few planning practitioners considered planning theory to be of any use.

A number of writers have challenged the expectation that planning theory can be a sort of cook's book for planning practitioners. Alexander (2003, 2010) suggested that the disappointment with planning theory comes from a mistaken view that planning is science or applied technology in which knowledge may be transferred to practice through a simple translation process. He argued that planning is a social practice that is informed by theory in ways that are complex, diffuse and indirect but that do eventually improve the judgment and reflexive capacities of planners.

Flyvbjerg (2001) went further than most in rejecting an observable relationship between theory and practice when he wrote that the role of theory is 'not to be constructive in the proactive manner … The goal is to problematize planning by exposing dubious social, political and administrative processes' (p. 291).

Flyvbjerg (2004) provided a more proactive role for planning theory by proposing guidelines for a *phronetic* planning research that would not necessarily provide planners with direct answers but would expand the capacities of planners to make practical judgements. He wrote that

> A central task of phronetic planning research is to provide concrete examples and detailed narratives of the ways in which power and values work in planning and with what consequences to whom, and to suggest how relations of power and values could be changed to work with other consequences. (p. 283)

The legitimacy question remains: Whether planning theory is about helping us know what to do, or provoking our conscience so that we do not do what we should not, the worth of the planning theory project arguably rests on its ability to enhance planning practice in the 'real world', and it is here that planning theory still struggles to make the connections. There is no evidence yet, for example, of a corpus of phronetic planning research large and compelling enough to provide meaningful support to planning practitioners, and the extent to which contemporary planning theory is diffusing meaningfully into practice is difficult to judge.

Experiential reflection on the value of planning theory

After an extended period in a University department, where one of my jobs was the teaching of planning theory, I spent around 3.5 years as head of the planning department in the City of Johannesburg, South Africa.

In the context of the global South, Johannesburg is not unusual for the enormity of its challenges – it is smaller than the megacities of Latin America and Asia and better resourced than most cities in Africa – but it is nevertheless a tough environment within which to operate. The levels of poverty, inequality, unemployment, environmental decay, crime and social conflict are high in international terms, and the city also suffers the spatial legacy of decades of apartheid rule and of an era of car-oriented sprawl. Towards the end of my time in the city administration, the effects of the global financial crisis were taking their toll, and the city was preparing to host a mega event, the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

In response to these challenges, I required all the intellectual and emotional resources I could muster. I was familiar with writing in planning theory, but the question I confront now is whether this knowledge made any difference to my practice as a planner. This is a tough question, especially in light of Alexander's account of the filtering of planning theory into practice. The shaping of consciousness is a complex matter, and it is not easy – perhaps impossible – to disentangle the various influences. The conscience and judgment of a planner are shaped by a myriad of factors. In my case, planning theory was one of these, although not necessarily the dominant. Planning theory made my job more difficult, serving the purpose Flyvbjerg (2001) referred to. In retrospect, some of the discomfort I had with the effects of bureaucratic actions on ordinary people was informed by a reading of critical planning theory, and that some of my frustration with having to plan within the constrained context of budget cycles, performance management systems and political instruction was provoked by an earlier reading of texts on participatory and collaborative planning approaches. Planning theory may have honed my conscience and improved my capacity to deliberate in a complex environment, but it did not provide me with guidance, or even an orientation, on substantive matters.

It is arguably sufficient for planning theory to shape conscience, consciousness and reflexive capacity – but I am compelled to speculate on what the difference would have been if I had accessed a body of planning theory addressing pressing material concerns

such as ecological change, economic vulnerability, crime and urban violence and urban spatial transformation.

Before concluding on this matter, however, I must explore the possibility that the very recent 'southwards turn' in theorizing may be addressing this gap, and bringing planning theory into a closer engagement with 'planning realities'.

The 'southwards turn' in planning theory

One of the most important developments in planning theory over the past half-decade or so has been a partial shift to intellectual vantage points in the global South (or South-East as Yiftachel puts it). Watson (2002, 2003) pointed to the inadequacy of a body of planning theory produced almost exclusively in the global North, and by mid-decade, a handful of planning theorists were proactively and self-consciously taking the 'southwards turn' (e.g. Miraftab, 2009; Roy, 2009a, 2009b; Watson, 2009, 2012; Yiftachel, 2006, 2009), while other theorists were expanding the reach of their work in planning theory to comparative studies in planning internationally (e.g. Healey and Upton, 2010; Sanyal, 2005).

Significant claims were made for a positioning from the South. Yiftachel (2006) argued that this geographical re-positioning would 'avoid the pitfalls of false, domineering universalism; reject the postmodernist retreat from substance and values, yet offer meaningful generalizations to guide and inspire students, scholars and practitioners' (p. 212). Miraftab (2009) wrote that this 'scholarship aims at decolonizing the planning imagination by taking a fresh look at subaltern cities to understand them by their own rules of the game and values rather than by planning prescriptions and fantasies of the West' (p. 45).

The 'southwards turn' has been framed by its reaction to the perceived shortcomings of theory from the North but also by a theoretical disposition that rejects state intent in favour of 'transgressive politics' and 'insurgency'. For Purcell (2009), for example, the state is fundamentally an instrument of 'neo-liberalization', and the primary goal of progressive planning practice must therefore be to destabilize its strategies of the state by developing 'counter-hegemonic practices'. A number of writers link the informality that is prevalent in the South with insurgent practices (Miraftab, 2009; Purcell, 2009; Roy, 2009a, 2009b). Miraftab (2009) wrote that 'perhaps the deep informality of third world cities is not their failure … but a triumphant sign of their success in resisting Western models of planning and urban development' (p. 45).

The vital contribution of this literature is in revealing the role played by ordinary citizens in shaping their lives in ways that are positive but sometimes counter to the intentions of the state. It also exposes the repressive possibilities that are inherent in the strategies and actions of all governments. Does it, however, provide an adequate basis for guiding planning in the global South?

The aptness of the direction taken by planning theory in the South depends on the perspective of the state and of the outcomes of insurgent citizenship. If the state is a slave to a neo-liberal agenda, then we can confidently build a planning theory around insurgent citizenship. What, however, if state intent and action is driven by a complex mix of agendas and what if some insurgent practices are socially damaging and undemocratic?

My experience in Johannesburg was of a local state struggling to mediate between the demands of its primary political constituency, the mainly black urban poor, and of its main source of revenue, the mainly white middle class. Rather than pursuing a coherent neo-liberal agenda, the local state was involved in an agonistic response to diverse pressures and interests, which led, at times, to repressive outcomes but also at times provided real space for programmes and actions that directly addressed the concerns of the urban poor. My experience was also of enormous complexity within the local state with constant friction and variability as elected and appointed officials, with a range of orientations and interests, and responding to changing pressures from within and without the city administration, sought to influence policy directions, budget allocations and programme implementation. This was recognized by Watson (2012):

> Important here is an understanding of urban regimes as neither coherent nor monolithic: pubic professionals and politicians involved in urban development processes also have agency, many be part of broader actor coalitions, or work within a fragmented and possibly contradictory policy environments. (p. 15)

My experience was also of a mix of empowering and exploitative insurgent practices. There are many examples of local practices that have resisted repressive elements of state action, but there are also examples of insurgent practices that were profoundly undemocratic and socially destructive. The most extreme case of the latter in my experience was the outbreak of xenophobic violence in May 2008, which began in Alexandra, Johannesburg, and then spread nationwide. The attacks were a form of insurgent practice in a context of local poverty and unemployment but have severely undermined the social fabric of many communities.

There are many other less dramatic examples such as everyday vigilante activity in informal settlement, which Meth (2010) refers to in her case-study of an informal part of Durban, South Africa. She warns of the possibilities for repression that are inherent in insurgent practices, and argues that oppositional practices cannot be assumed to be liberating or democratic. To be fair, there are indications that theorists of citizen insurgency do recognize the possible pitfalls of their work. Miraftab (2009) accepts that we should not 'naively celebrate any and all disruptive actions' (p. 43). Roy (2009b) is more direct, acknowledging that 'insurgence does not necessarily create a just city' (p. 84). What is still missing, however, is a conscious rebalancing of the literature to respond to the complexity of contexts where humanity and cruelty occur across the state-citizenry divide. Watson (2012) does, however, provide an account of how ideas of insurgent citizenship and insurgent planning arrived in planning theory, illustrating the diffuseness of these concepts.

Having said this, there are the germs of theory that respond to real complexity. I wish, for example, that I was aware of Yiftachel (2009) when I worked in the city administration. Yiftachel writes of spaces of the city that are neither formally constructed nor entirely outside the reach of the formal economy. It is a framework that moves beyond the binary of the formal and the informal and that resonates strongly with the Johannesburg experience:

> These partially incorporated people, localities and activities, are part of a growing urban informality, termed here 'gray space' – positioned between the 'whiteness' of legality/approval/safety and the 'blackness' of eviction/destruction/death. They are neither integrated nor eliminated, forming pseudo-permanent margins of today's urban regions. (p. 89)

I wish also that I had read the study by Roy (2009b), which presented informality as being 'also associated with wealth and power' (p. 82).

These contributions move away from the tendency of theorizing from the South to respond to 'northern theory' by establishing new binaries such as neo-liberal government versus insurgent citizenries. Watson (2012) provides a circumspect account of recent theorising that edges us towards a more complex engagement with 'the stubborn realities of global south-east cities'. In doing so, she brings theories from the South a little closer to the intricacies of real experience in planning. Drawing on Yiftachel and Roy, she refers to the grey spaces surrounding informality, rather than positing the informal against the formal; calls for a detailed ethnography of the state in addition to the ethnographies of insurgent citizenship; writes of state-citizen engagement and co-production rather than presenting the state and citizenry in a necessarily antagonistic relationship and draws planning theory towards the 'real experiences' of individual in cities in the South, especially in terms of crime and urban violence.

Roy (2008), one of the initiators of the 'southwards turn', expressed her ambivalence about theories from the South when she wrote, 'I am not convinced that this location in the global South can always and necessarily lead us to a critical theory and radical praxis of planning' (p. 930). I must also conclude tentatively with regard to the southwards turn. It has arguably brought planning theory closer to the materiality of space, and of everyday life, as theorists in the South have had to confront material threats and vulnerabilities on a scale generally not experienced in the North. 'Southern theory' is, however, not immune to the generalizations, stereotyping and universalizing tendencies its proponents accuse 'northern theory' of, and it is also fragmented by the epistemological divisions of planning theory more broadly.

At the one extreme, 'southern theory' is associated with a 'crude realism', which offers dogmatic and universalized judgements on conditions in the South. At the other extreme, 'southern theory' has been so cautious of universalizing that it has avoided judgements about the nature of reality, focussing instead on interpreting the diverse rationalities that give rise to different conceptions of reality. Southern theory is still in need of ontological mediation that allow it to engage persuasively with 'southern reality' while avoiding these extremities.

Ultimately, however, we need to move beyond the North–South binary in planning theory. The idea of 'southern theory' may serve a purpose in rebalancing an acute spatial inequality in the production of knowledge, and in directing planning theory more forcefully towards certain realities, but the value of geographically defined theorising will diminish. Hopefully, the binary will gradually mutate into a more intricate understanding of the geography of thought that recognizes the complex mosaic within the so-called North and South, and also the permeability and interconnection across these categories.

Theory *in* planning

At best, planning theory – including from the South – stirred my consciousness and shaped an orientation in my work as one of a number of influences. Perhaps it had fulfilled the implicit criteria set by Alexander, for example, or had played the provocative role envisaged by Flyvbjerg (2001). The question remains, however, whether planning theory could not be engaging more substantively with concerns that are shared across contexts. Or, is planning so contextually specific that substantive theory is impossible or, at least, inadvisable?

The discomfort with universalist prescriptions in planning theory has, arguably, led to an avoidance of theory that offers guidance that transcends specific contexts. Fortunately, however, very recent work has attempted to mediate the universal and the particular and offers a modest corrective to earlier responses to dangers of universalism.

Healey (2012) offers the concept of a 'continually evolving contingent universal'. While ideas may arise in particular places, and be initially shaped by the context of those places, they are continually circulating and adapting, and are continually being tested through the deliberation of a global community of inquirers. By understanding the travel trajectories of ideas, we are able to move beyond the purely contingent.

Watson (2012) also responds to this tension by reiterating the importance of case-studies that address the particularity of context but also by calling for more comparative work, which allows us to draw conclusions across contexts. This is the learning process that allows us to draw relevant insights from past experiences in multiple places for the problem at hand. It refers back to Flyvbjerg (2004) and the idea of phronetic planning research.

While working in the city of Johannesburg, I drew constantly on ideas about planning and development that were circulating globally. There were visitors from other parts of the world, international study tours and the advantages provided by the Internet. Some of the more influential ideas for planning in Johannesburg in the early and mid-2000s included bus rapid transit developed initially in Brazil and Columbia, approaches to informal settlement upgrading from Brazil, growth management and transit-oriented development approaches from North America and sustainability strategies from Europe. In retrospect, I am struck by the fact that the specific field of planning theory offered very little substantive guidance in dealing with these and other material matters. While I did not expect the cook book answers from planning theory, I found almost no critical commentary on the ideas and approaches emerging from these various regions of the world and very few of the sort of illustrative case-studies that Flyvbjerg (2004) or Watson (2012) have called for. To use the terminology introduced in Faludi (1973), there was very little theory in planning.

Planning theory's apparent avoidance of substantive theory would not have mattered much if theorising in other fields – urban studies, urban sociology and urban economics, for example – offered helpful insights for planning practice. My experience from Johannesburg, however, suggests that theory in planning is scarce across the board. In the case of Johannesburg, there is, in fact, a surprisingly large academic literature that offers a diversity of insights into urban life and processes. However, even with this literature, I struggled to find meaningful connections between theorising and my practice as a planner. There were two broad strands to the literature both of which may have had a

debilitating effect on a planner, myself included, working within the local state. There was a literature that typecast city government as neo-liberal, focussing mainly on showing how state actions perpetuate patterns of inequality (e.g. Murray, 2008). It ignored the multiple imperatives that inform state strategy and action, and the agency of politicians and officials working with state administration. There was also a literature drawing on post-colonial theory and cultural studies, which focuses mainly on the symbolic dimensions of the city, and which characterizes the city almost exclusively in terms of 'indeterminacy, provisionality and the contingent' (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2004: 349), largely ignoring the extent to which the city is shaped by a physical structure and by the structures of power and economic materiality (see Watts, 2005, for a critique of this work). In this literature, the planner is the offending modernist attempting to impose a rational order on the landscape that is ultimately elusive, begging the question of what the consequence would be for ordinary citizens in a context of rapid urban growth and material deprivation if planning practitioners succumbed to the inference that planning is impossible, undesirable or both.

The literature on Johannesburg I refer to is not intended to guide planning practice, quite the contrary. There is, of course, no obligation on these writers to be helpful to a planner working in the state bureaucracy. They are not planning theorists and bear no responsibility for state-directed interventions in the production of material objects. The problem rests with planning theorists who are situated within a practice-oriented field but struggle to relate their work to the concreteness of practice, and who remain unresolved on the question of how to pitch planning ideas against the extremes of universality and particularity.

There were instances that I outline below as illustrative cases where academic writing did provide an intellectual resource for me in developing and arguing a case for policy reform in the city administration, although the support from scholarly writing was always secondary to the persuasive power of direct exposure to alternative experience. First, there was the vexing question of city policy on informal settlements. Johannesburg has around 180 separate informal settlements accommodating roughly one-quarter of its 4 million–strong population. Post-Apartheid policy towards informal settlement has been generally ambivalent and has evolved fitfully, creating confusion but also providing space for local interpretation on approach. Over time, there has been an ongoing tussle between agencies of government concerned with eradicating informal settlements by removing residents to state-provided greenfields housing and those supporting an incremental process of in situ regularization and upgrading. Underlying the difference is a view on the nature of reality. The former see informal settlements as places of shame and degradation, while the latter acknowledge the advantages offered by informal residence, including affordable access to land and household flexibility. As a planner in the city, I took a position on the nature of reality, which linked largely with the latter position. Planning theory had little, if anything, to offer in the policy deliberation (although, as indicated, in subsequent years, Roy, Yiftachel and others have offered valuable provocations on informality). There was, however, intellectual support from writers outside the realm of planning theory, which provided support in making an argument to the city administration for new approaches to the regularization and upgrading of informal settlements (e.g. Charlton, 2006; Huchzermeyer, 2004). However, it was a private visit to

Brazil that was instrumental in shaping my understanding of possible state response to informality, and it was an official study tour to Brazil that proved decisive in shifting the attitudes of officials and politicians in the city.

The other key shift in planning policy during the time I was in the city administration was the increased emphasis given to public transport, and to linking land management to new investment in transport infrastructure. In this case, there was a substantive literature – not in planning theory but in related fields – that makes a compelling argument for urban densification and transit-oriented development. It is a literature that offers a view on the nature of reality, in this instance, strongly informed by environmental science supported in the Johannesburg case by a South African literature that has argued the case for densification and urban integration as a response to the spatial legacies of Apartheid (Dewar, 2000; Todes, 2000). We had the intellectual and practical resources to make a strong case for revised city policy in Johannesburg, but, again, it was the powerful illustrative example of cities such as Curitiba in Brazil and Bogota in Colombia that made the greatest impression on city officials and politicians.

There were many areas, however, where there was no obvious guidance from scholarly work and where I, and my colleagues in the city administration, had to rely only on our practical and moral judgement as we navigated what was, often, treacherous terrain. The extent to which this 'judgement' was shaped by the reading of planning theory is moot. The inner city of Johannesburg, in particular, was a bitterly contested battleground. Positions were polarized, and the academic writing that simplistically caste the city administration as the villain, and as anti-poor, obscured the extreme complexities and moral ambiguities of the setting. What was missing was a reasonably accessible *corpus* of literature, local or international, that revealed a degree of empathy for a planner in state structures confronting the moral and practical dilemmas of a context such as this.

Speculating on the real

How do we reunite 'theory *of*' and 'theory *in*' planning and reconnect planning theory with the 'real world'? A starting point may be to draw on the vestiges of realism that are still present in planning theory, and on the work of those who have tried to connect across the divide between realist and anti-realist philosophies. Yiftachel (2006) referred to the material and discursive dimensions of planning as being 'intimately linked as they ceaselessly constitute one other' (p. 213), while Hillier (2005) talked of bridging the 'abyss between transcendence and immanence' (p. 272). Roy (2011) turned to Lefebvre for assistance in 'materializing an urban modernity': for avoiding the presumptions that matter is purely a mental construct or that the mind is simply a response to the material reality.

Can we do more in shifting the ontological base of planning theory? It is here, I argue that the current interest in 'speculative realism' may be of use. Speculative realists followed on from Bhaskar's critical realism and derived early inspiration from a handful of continental philosophers who have attempted to bridge the divide between the social and natural sciences. Saldanha (2009) referred, for example, to 'Guattari's activist flirtations with cognitive science, biosemiotics, chaos theory and chemistry' (p. 308). The

immediate inspiration for this renewed strand of realist thought was, however, Quentin Meillassoux's (2008) *After Finitude*, which attempted to transcend post-Kantian anti-realism by arguing for 'a mathematical absolute capable of making sense of scientific claims of a time prior to humanity' (Bryant et al., 2011: 8). In April 2007, a grouping of young philosophers – including Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Ian Hamilton-Grant, Graham Harman and Manuel de Landa – came together at a workshop in Goldsmith College, London, where 'speculative realism' was used as an umbrella term for a diversity of approaches that share a common concern with speculating on the nature of reality beyond human cognition.

The diversity of this group soon became apparent – Meillassoux spoke of 'speculative materialism', Harman of 'object-oriented philosophy', Grant of 'transcendental materialism' and Brassier of 'methodological naturalism' (Bryant et al., 2011). The philosophical debates among the proponents of speculative realism were intense but generally obscure to an audience not trained in philosophy (Brassier, 2011; Grant, 2011; Harman, 2011; Reid-Bowen, 2011). While the original grouping of speculative realists may have fragmented or even unravelled by 2011, their work has given birth to a movement that has taken on a vibrant life of its own. The popular debates around speculative realism are vigorous and are happening in Internet blogs and in open-access journals, informed also by open-access books, such as Bryant et al. (2011). Saldanha (2009) argues that 'after the postmodern forays into the infinite sumptuousness of representation in the 1980s and 1990s, there seems to be a general impetus towards philosophical realism again … fuelled by a newly found enthusiasm for exchanges between sciences and humanities' (p. 309). Bryant et al. (2011) wrote that

> by contrast with the repetitive continental focus on texts, discourse, social practices and human finitude, the new breed of thinker is turning once more to reality itself … all of them, in one way or another, have begun speculating once more about the nature of reality independent of thought and of humanity more generally. (p. 3)

For Brassier (2011), with the rise of speculative realism, there is a 'new alliance between post-Kantian rationalism and post-Darwinism naturalism' (pp. 50, 64) that attempts to 'adjudicate the relationship between conceptual thought and non-conceptual reality'.

The approach is speculative as it makes no claim that its epistemologies will access truths in any certain sense: 'we are not making dogmatic statements predicated on claims of absolute certainty or "apodicity", but rather are proposing tentative formulations subject to further clarification, revision, and even falsification' (Bryant, 2011: 263). Speculative realism, says Bryant (2011), proceeds on the basis of 'hypotheses, not foundational certainties' (p. 264). The precise meaning of 'speculation' is the subject of some debate. For Harman and Brassier, for example, the speculation is about the 'factuality' of objects, while, for Meillassoux, the speculation is about 'the possibility that [objects] might always be otherwise' (Hallward, 2011: 131). Either way, the purpose of speculative reason is to introduce the 'possibility of a future for audacious and original philosophical thought as a discourse on the nature of reality …' (Brassier et al., 2007: 308).

The 'realism' in this approach is not a return to naïve positivism or a rejection of the power of consciousness, language and history in shaping our sense of reality. Brassier (2011) writes,

> To reject correlationism and reassert the primacy of the epistemological-metaphysics nexus is not to revert to a reactionary philosophical Puritanism, insisting that philosophy remain uncontaminated by politics and history. It is simply to point out that, while they are certainly socially and politically nested, the problems of metaphysics and epistemology nonetheless possess a relative autonomy and remain conceptually irreducible – just as the problems of mathematics and physics retain their relative autonomy despite always being implicated within a given socio-historical conjuncture. (p. 54)

Speculative realism may be a 'soft' realism, but it is an attempt at 'think[ing] a reality beyond our thinking' (Grant, 2011: 41). Given Kant's uncontested insight that our sense of realism is mediated by the structure of the human mind, an approach that claims to approach a 'reality beyond our thinking' requires a careful philosophical defence. The various strands of speculative realism offer different arguments in defence. For illustrative purposes, I draw on the arguments set out by Brassier (2011). Brassier (2011) defends realist ontology by arguing that 'thought is not guaranteed access to being … the real itself is not to be confused with the concepts through which we know it' (p. 47). Put differently, Brassier distinguishes between the 'reality of the concept' and the 'reality of the object'. For the purposes of argument, Brassier uses **Saturn** (the word in bold) to refer to the sense of the word 'Saturn'. He writes,

> It might be objected that we need **Saturn** to say what Saturn is; that we cannot refer to Saturn or assert that it is without **Saturn**. But this is false: the first humans who pointed to Saturn did not need to know and were doubtlessly mistaken about what it is: but they did not need to know in order to point to it. To deny this is to imply that Saturn's existence – that it is – is a function of what it is – that Saturn is indissociable from **Saturn** (or whatever else people have believed Saturn to be). (Brassier, 2011: 62)

Harman (2011) also rejects the idea that reality is only that which is tangibly accessible to human beings, arguing that 'reality always exceeds any attempt to grasp it' (p. 38). In other words, the differences between objects cannot be understood as conceptual differences going all the way down.

Even if we accept the arguments of Brassier and Harman, we are still faced with the epistemological dilemma of how we can have cognitive access to realities beyond our cognition. Speculative realists address this partly by claiming that they are being speculative but also by arguing that the factuality of an objects does have some force in shaping how objects are described. Harman (2011) explained that while anti-realists see objects as the product of phenomenality, speculative realists view phenomenality itself as a partial product of the actual nature of the material world. Speculative realists are not suggesting that truth can be accessed outside of the contingencies of language, but they do argue that the epistemological quest should not be abandoned as factuality does eventually rebound on meaning.

We are thus not inescapably deluded by the ways in which our consciousness is produced as our explanations of the world do have some grounding in the materiality of this

world. Furthermore, says Bryant et al. (2011), as progress is made in the fields of neuroscience and cognitive science, we will gain a better understanding of our consciousness, and we will be able to reflect more deeply on the relationship between cognition and reality.

What might all this mean for planning theory? It does not necessarily offer a platform for developing a new theory of planning, and this may not be desirable. What it may do, however, is provide theorists who take the materiality of space seriously an ontological defence against the radical anti-realism that still holds considerable sway over planning theory. It may offer hope for a rebalancing of planning theory that will allow us to give serious attention to: hermeneutics and epistemology, the discursive and the material and the symbolic and the real.

The utility of speculative realism – or any other strand of thought that offers a return to the study of reality-in-itself – must ultimately be judged in terms of whether it helps planners engage more effectively with the material conditions that planning must respond to. Will it help us, for example, to address the ecological crisis, a topic that is still surprisingly absent in work of planning theorists? It is too early to conclude definitively on this. In popular philosophical debates, on blogs and Internet journals, there is at least a sense that speculative realism has 'ecological sympathies', and anticipation that these sympathies will expand into a full-blown engagement with the nature of the ecological crisis, in both its scientific and social dimensions (Ivakhiv, 2009). It could do the same for planning theory.

Speculative realism may assist in another way. It may bring together the open-ended experimentalism of the pragmatic tradition in planning tradition with the discipline of empiricism. It does not shy away from the metaphysical question, 'what is real', and the epistemological question, 'how do we know what is real', but neither does it claim the certainty of knowledge.

It directs epistemology towards a better understanding of the real world, avoiding the wilder fantasies of post-positivism. However, with its appreciation of the fallibility of knowledge, it sustains the space for imagination and speculation, for the 'audacious thought' that Brassier et al. (2007) refer to. If we take our cue from Hallward (2011), for example, speculative realism in planning may be about the possibility that cities, for example, 'might always be otherwise' (p. 131).

Healey (2012) talks of the *idea of planning* as being about 'a normative orientation and a tradition of debate, honed by a continual interaction between situated practice experiences and theoretical development' (p. 200). This is a compelling view on planning deeply rooted in pragmatist and communicative traditions. What it misses, however, is the interaction between the communicative, normative and experiential dimensions of planning, on the one hand, and the materiality to which planning must respond, on the other. It correctly emphasizes the role of debate within a community of inquiry in shaping the ideas that inform planning but does not give the same attention to the extent to which reality-in-itself – for example, ecological crisis – is also shaping the evolution of planning. As we continually rethink planning theories in the urgent context of great material threats almost across the globe, we may find a productive synthesis between the pragmatic traditions in planning and a renewed strand of realism in contemporary philosophy.

Conclusion

Speculative realism is a new development in a long but often marginalized tradition that has attempted to navigate between the extremes of crude realism, on the one hand, and an anti-realism that denies any correlation between representation and reality, on the other. It may offer planning theorists, who are concerned with responding to urgent realities of the world, an ontological defence for their work, without a return to pre-Kantian naivety. It allows us to ask questions about the nature of reality and to take substantive positions while accepting that what we are doing is speculative and therefore always revisable.

It is not as though planning theorists should necessarily engage with the complexity of philosophical debate within and around the idea of speculative realism. Neither should speculative realism provide the foundation for a 'new theory of planning'. Rather, planning theorists might use speculative realism as an intellectual resource. We can take heart from the willingness of credible contemporary philosophers to engage again with 'the real', and we may also draw constructively on the 'speculative' element. By acknowledging that our realism is speculative, we avoid the epistemological dilemmas of realist ontology.

This article has acknowledged the partial turns towards realism in recent planning theory. *Phronetic* research, for example, provides concrete case-studies, although more attention must be given to interpreting accumulated case-based research for planners who may not have the time to engage with the details of the narratives. Specific and idiosyncratic narratives should be brought into dialogue with 'universalizing' insights such as may come from the natural sciences in relation to climate change, for example.

The 'southwards turn' has also restored a sense of realism to planning, although sometimes in an overly dogmatic and generalizing way. Notions of speculative realism may help us engage confidently and pragmatically with the pressing 'realities' of the material world, while still retaining a sense of epistemological humility.

Returning to the case of Johannesburg, the 'will to plan' was, arguably, eroded by an increasingly dominant body of scholarly work, which was anti-realist and generally contemptuous of attempts to order space. If I had benefitted from the ontological defence provided by speculative realism, I may have been more confident in my attempts to link intellectual support to an engagement with the materiality of the city. I may have argued the case for policy reform more effectively while remaining open to the speculative question: 'What if things were otherwise?'

Bryant et al. (2011) asks, 'can we turn once more to reality itself?' (p. 3). In the aftermath of decades of determinedly anti-realist theorizing, including in the field of planning theory, there are hopeful signs that this turn is underway. Speculative realism may assist. It is a brave new area of philosophy. It is still untested, and much of the energy of its proponents is currently taken up in a tussle with each other, but it does, however, point to the serious possibility of a contemporary ontological defence of (a non-naïve) realism that may make it easier for planning theorists to make the 'real world connection'.

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