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**Tomorrow’s cities in the making: an ethnographic approach**

This paper is based on my research project that inquiries into how planning processes aiming at sustainable urban development (SUD) are practiced in the sphere of a city administration. First, I introduce the framing of SUD projects managed by the city administration in Bordeaux which I ethnographically attend to. Second, I discuss why an ethnographic approach contributes to a planning theory exploring ways to address social injustices and governance practices.

In 2010, the French government launched the initiative “EcoCité” to stimulate a sustainable transformation of urban planning. Through this initiative 700 million euro has been distributed across the country to planning projects that fulfill a set of requirements along the lines of sustainable development in economic, environmental and social terms, and that stimulate economic growth and population increase. 19 urban areas, of which Bordeaux in coalition with neighbor municipalities is one, has received financial support and use the label “EcoCité”. The budget ended in 2014 and has during 2015 been followed up by a similar initiative termed “La ville de demain” (the city of tomorrow). The name of the latest investment clearly states what is at stake with sustainable development; the city of tomorrow.

My research is driven by the following question: how are planning practices organised today, in order to achieve the envisioned city of tomorrow? To operationalise the question I attend to the city administration in Bordeaux where visions of the future city can be discerned in policy documents (from the mentioned national level, as well as international agendas and local planning documents), technologies, planners’ activities, juridical decisions, architectures, among other things that planning practice involves. Actor network theory, described by Law (1992: 379) as an approach that “treats social relations, including power and organisations, as network effects”, allows me to consider how these elements of social, technical, political and material kind are brought together in the everyday work in the city administration. I focus on the intermingling of these elements which partake in processes organised to make sustainable development ‘happen’. Rather than suggesting what SUD *is* through considerations of what it is supposed to bring about, I ethnographically inquire into the implementation of SUD by telling empirical stories of how it is practiced today, similar to what Mol (2002) terms ‘praxiography’. This methodological intervention intends to, in Farías’ words (2011: 370), “opening up black-boxed arrangements and ways in which actors, things or processes are made present and made absent”. I understand the making of Bordeaux a sustainable city a black-boxed arrangement not in the sense of it being necessarily a ‘hidden’ process, but one which no formal version tells the whole story about.

So, how does an ethnographic approach contributes to planning theory that seeks ways to rethink approaches on current urban issues? Planning is a practice arguably inherent with ideas invested in how cities are to function and residents to live in the future. However, the narration of urban development as ‘sustainable’ conceals more than it reveals. If interventions that are justified by the goal of bringing about a sustainable future “bring about more than they seek to achieve” (Mol 2002: 175), what other effects do they have? I suggest that an ethnographic approach is useful in order to elucidate consequences that practices abstractly narrated as about sustainability for ‘tomorrow’ may have in the present. Describing ‘how’ these consequences are produced as effects through planning processes contributes with knowledge about the side of the coin opposite to the one where we see urban residents mobilising to protest development projects supposedly carried out for the ‘good cause’ of a sustainable future. Fassin (2013: 676) argues that “ethnography matters” because of its capacity to communicate a sense of “being there” which can popularise knowledge. At best, he writes, popularising means politicising the issue at stake by bringing about empirical knowledge to a broader public. This resonates with what Lefebvre aimed at with ‘the right to the city’, namely the “right of access to participation” in the making of the city (Farías 2011: 371). Following on that, I suggest that knowledge about planning processes produced through an ethnographic engagement have the potential to address issues of participatory politics and contribute to the endeavour to make cities more equal.

Farías (2011: 366) rightly points out that analyses of cities are “actively involved in the performative production of the city”. Through my ethnographic account I do contribute to the vast body of work about what SUD, and the city, *is*. Doing this, I wish to engage in a discussion about the implications an ethnographic approach might have within planning theory as a tool to improve the processes that make the city of tomorrow.

**References**

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