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What's the future for planning in a time of democratic retreat, white supremacy and silence

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ABSTRACT
It has been argued that we are witnessing an 'antidemocratic turn' in history, with an increase in ideologies of white supremacy and a disregard for the fundamental principles of democracy. Antidemocratic attacks are often directed, through hate and threats, towards politicians, researchers, and non-governmental organisations that engage in democratic aspects of societal development, such as critical and spatial investigations of racial discrimination, gender inequalities and human rights. The above is troubling news for a profession that often sees itself as a facilitator of democratic futures. This article shows how growing self-censorship is having real implications for planning. It is stated that the planning profession must ask itself what futures, and for whom, it is contributing to. It is argued that, as planners, we need to acknowledge that antidemocratic attacks from white supremacists stem from a colonial relationship which continues to produce violence, as well as deep inequalities around the world. It is furthermore argued that if the planning profession wants to contribute to democratic futures, it urgently needs to scrutinize how its own practices are imbued with racial capitalism. If not, the future of critical planning theory and practice comes into question.

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Attacks on democratic institutions are now spreading so fast that, according to Freedom House (2021), there is reason to describe the current era as representing an 'antidemocratic turn' in history. This should perhaps come as no surprise, as we over a few decades have witnessed, in Europe and elsewhere, increasing support for far-right and ethnonationalist parties. Many of these draw on ideologies of white supremacy and have a disregard for the fundamental principles of democracy, such as a respect for the rights of all people regardless of race, gender, religious beliefs, etc. In a recent report from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), it is stated that in as much as half of the world's democracies, democracy is currently in retreat. A similarly negative trend is visible among the world's non-democracies; half

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of them are becoming significantly more repressive (International IDEA 2022). These are worrying times, not only because life is becoming harder for many people, but also because critique is being silenced.

This is indeed troubling news, especially for a profession that likes to think of itself as a facilitator of democratic futures. These attacks are often directed, through hate and threats, towards politicians, professionals, researchers, and non-governmental organizations that engage in democratic aspects of societal development, including critical and spatial investigations of racial discrimination, women's rights, and socio-economic inequalities. Consequently, these attacks are having a direct impact on critical planning theory and practice.

Sweden might serve as an illuminating example. In the latest national election, which took place in September 2022, the Sweden Democrats, an ethno-nationalist political party with roots in neo-nazi organizations (Mattsson 2022), became the second largest party after the Social Democrats. It was the largest party among a group of four parties on the right flank with whom it formed a coalition to gain a majority. Prior to the election, it was revealed that the Sweden Democrats had given economic support to anonymous accounts on social platforms which spread hate and threats towards other political parties, governmental agencies, and politicians (Söderin 2022). A survey conducted by the Association of Swedish Municipalities and Regions (SKR 2022), confirms that an increasing amount of hate and threats is currently directed towards politicians. Not surprisingly, women are identified as being especially targeted by these threats. Politicians, who in the survey reported that they had received hate and threats, stated that, as a direct consequence, they now avoid engaging with specific political questions, hesitate to take specific political actions, and even consider leaving certain political roles. What we are witnessing is an alarming and growing self-censorship among politicians, one which obviously has direct implications for planners and the futures we as professionals can contribute to.

An example of how antidemocratic attacks are currently having concrete effects on planning can be taken from a research project I recently conducted on accommodation for migrants in the city of Gothenburg, Sweden (Grange 2022). In the research, I interviewed two local politicians concerning their role in a contested political process to get building permits for 1000 temporary accommodation units for refugees. Many xenophobic views from neighbours were aired at the information meetings convened by the city, and at some meetings, far-right extremists with flags participated. The municipality was greatly surprised by the fierce opposition they met. Moreover, during the interviews, it became apparent that both politicians, who at the time of the building permit process had been the chairs of the city's building committee and its property management committee, had been repeatedly threatened. One of them faced such severe threats that he had to employ a bodyguard for a period. The other received both verbal and written death threats. The latter reflected on how such threats ultimately risk leading to self-censorship among politicians:

> 'Part of it is the fear of pushing the issue. I have never experienced as many threats or been faced with such unpleasant situations as during these meetings we arranged. But there have also been people mailing me death threats and letters containing powder. All kinds of things. It's never been like that before. This is something that hits you in a way that is not comparable to anything else. Then one can understand if politicians back off' (from an interview with the author on 17th April 2020).

Both politicians had worked hard to push the project through, but eventually had to stop it. Of the 1,000 planned units for migrants, only 57 were built. The official reason for ending the project was the high economic costs involved, but it is clear from the quote above that the hate and threats leveled at these politicians took their toll. Both chairs left politics soon after the project had ended.

Similar tendencies have been reported for both researchers and for representatives from non-profit organizations. In a report on hate and threats against researchers and teachers within the Swedish university sector, it is underlined how, although exposure to hate and threats may appear within all subject fields, it is the most common within social sciences and humanities (Nationella sekretariatet för genusstuder et al 2022). Once again, women are found to be targeted more often than men. The report finds that researchers who have been exposed to threats report that they are now much more likely to avoid engaging in certain questions, choose to remain silent when certain topics are discussed, or even consider leaving the academic sector. As in the previous cases, the report concludes that consequences from this development can be seen in academic self-censorship, with such silencing having effects on the topics that get researched and on the extent to which researchers choose to engage in societal debate. Similarly, within non-profit organizations, threats are reported to be especially prevalent within work connected to human rights, socio-economic vulnerability, ethnicity, and women's rights. Consequently, some organizations now avoid pushing certain questions for fear of facing threats and hate (Volontärsbyrån 2021).

The above examples are all from Sweden, but, based on the statements from Freedom House and the International IDEA, there is reason to believe that similar antidemocratic attacks take place elsewhere in Europe. Hate and threats are voiced in order to silence others, and when they succeed, they have real implications. As a European planner, one might be inclined to ask how democracy so suddenly lost its attraction as a path towards a better future. Perhaps, however, this was a moment which had to come, one in which the planning profession is forced to ask itself what futures, and for whom, it is contributing to. What planner within Europe today is not painfully aware of the privileges we are maintaining for ourselves in the western world, and which we continue to protect through our Eurocentric viewpoint? We must acknowledge that the antidemocratic attacks from white supremacists and other far-right nationalist that we see today stem from a colonial relationship which continues to produce violence and deep inequalities all over the world (Mbembe 1992). We must accept that the futures we as planners contribute to are based on flows of racial capitalism and thus on the upholding of the city as a 'postcolony', as Roy et al. (2020) so succinctly framed it. It is time to recognize that the way we, as planners, have applied democracy has contributed to great prospects for some but uneven development, inequality, and exploitation for others.

The colonial relationship has, without doubt, survived colonialism. It is, as Maldonado-Torres (2007, 23) argues,

> maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and everyday.

The examples could be multiplied. Antidemocratic attacks from white supremacists are just the tip of the iceberg. Planning itself is imbued with questions of how white entitlement is connected to property, and thus to racial capitalism (Harris 1993; Roy 2021; Taylor 2019). Indeed, it has been argued that 'urbanism is colonialism', as cartographic imagination continues to be foundational for land management practices (Bélanger 2020, 122).

For some decades now, planners have been taught to identify as neutral executers of political decisions. My conclusion, from having conducted interviews with planners in several countries, is that power has moved upwards in all organizations, and that political decisions are taken long before the tasks arrive at the planner's table (Grange 2013; 2014; 2017). At least in the Swedish system, the acting space for independent professional views has been severely delimited. Meanwhile, planning seems to have become a silenced profession, with planners even accepting having to work at a distance from personal and professional values (Grange 2017; Inch 2009). There seems to be a trend of planning associations increasingly viewing themselves as apolitical organizations, such as in the case of the AESOP conference 2018, when the association turned down a declaration in support of Turkish planners (Roy 2021). Silent professional bodies, however, will not contribute to new and more democratic futures. Without the support of professional bodies with clear messages about what a democratic future must entail, ones which are ready to take the fight where needed, there is little reason for individual planners to question their limited role.

I keep my fingers crossed though that professional bodies are willing to support planners and show that, as a profession, we still have something important to say about democratic futures. Such support would require the profession to step away from a belief in its own neutrality in order to move forward. What we need now is a planning profession that is at the forefront of critical discussions on the effects of the antidemocratic turn and what must be put in place for democracy to work. We also need professional bodies that are willing to critically reflect on fact that both the planning profession and its curricula are predominantly white (Ahsan et al. 2020; Brand 2018; Winkler 2018). In short, to enable democratic futures we need a profession that reflects the diversity of society, and planning curricula that can provide planners with a capacity to counteract antidemocratic attacks.

As outlined above, these are challenging times. Critical questions connected to human rights, women's rights, and racial, sexual and religious discrimination are being silenced. This can never be accepted. It is my firm belief that in this moment in time, we must stand united against antidemocratic threats. As a profession, we as planners need to acknowledge that we have contributed to plans that have not delivered desirable futures for all and start our journey towards new and alternative paths to a more democratic future. If not, I wonder, what future will there be for critical planning theory and practice?

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