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The Role of Planning in ‘Anti-Democratic’ Times

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Abstract

This thematic issue seeks to bring the urgent questions raised by the current “anti-democratic turn in history” into conversation with the ambivalent nature of planning practices. What role can planning assume when society moves in a more authoritarian direction, and what responsibilities do academics bear?

Keywords

academics; anti-democratic; authoritarian; critical; planning; pluralism

We opened the call for this thematic issue in 2023. At that time, both Freedom House (2021) and International IDEA (2022) had published reports warning of a global decline in democracy—and, even more alarmingly, that we were on the verge of entering an “anti-democratic turn in history.” In response to these developments, we began to explore the shifting landscape, raising questions about the connections between anti-democratic attacks, white supremacy, and silence (Grange, 2023) and the growing urban precarity (Listerborn, 2023). Since then, the situation appears to have deteriorated further. In its most recent report, Freedom House (2024, p. 1) emphasizes that “pluralism is under attack” and highlights a sharp decline in overall freedom. Similarly, International IDEA (2024) concludes that we are now living in an era of radical uncertainty. These developments raise critical questions about the role of planning in increasingly anti-democratic times, as well as about the responsibilities of intellectuals. What role can planning assume when society moves in a more authoritarian direction? Can it be anything other than an extension of the state? And what responsibilities do we, as academics, bear in a context where pluralism is under siege and critical perspectives are being eroded within universities?

This thematic issue seeks to bring the urgent questions raised by the current “anti-democratic turn in history” into conversation with the ambivalent nature of planning practices. While planning is often valued

for its capacity to support democratic processes and promote equitable resource distribution, it can also serve as a mechanism for deepening inequalities (Fainstein, 2009) and even enabling authoritarianism (Fearn & Davoudi, 2022). Although neoliberal planning has in many respects been characterized as undemocratic (Taşan-Kok & Baeten, 2011), we are now witnessing a growing prevalence of explicitly authoritarian planning strategies—particularly in connection with environmental extraction and large-scale infrastructural investments by global actors (Fernandes, 2022). This trend is especially pronounced in regions commonly referred to as the Global South, making it increasingly relevant to speak of “modern-colonial geographies” (Duer & Vegliò, 2019). Practices such as land-grabbing and settler colonialism are not new; they are rooted in longstanding colonial histories. However, the current scale, intensity, and brutality of such practices—combined with a striking lack of political accountability—underscore the urgency of renewed critical engagement.

The Israel–Palestine conflict has increasingly affected the core of democratic institutions—universities not least—where it has played out in tensions between students, university leadership, and national governments. In 2024, pro-Palestinian student protests spread rapidly across the globe, notably in the United States. The students’ demands to university administrations included the termination of all collaborations with Israeli academic institutions, public condemnation of Israel’s ongoing invasion of Gaza, and the provision of educational support for Palestinian students. At several universities, faculty members and researchers expressed solidarity with these demands (e.g., WASSAP, 2024).

There were, however, numerous reports of confrontations between riot police and demonstrators on university campuses, with thousands of students either detained or prevented from exercising their right to protest. At Chalmers University of Technology in Gothenburg, Sweden, for instance, the administration decided to ban any political manifestation on campus. The university leadership justified this decision as a necessary response to the escalating violence in the Middle East and the polarization the conflict was seen to risk provoking. Similar measures in other contexts prompted the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to affirm that students have a legitimate right to freedom of expression. Pro-Palestinian protests also took place in countries such as Argentina, Japan, and across Europe—including France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Finland, and Sweden. Subsequent assessments concluded that student rights had been violated on multiple occasions (UN, 2024).

In the U.S., conflicts over the boundaries of permissible speech within academia have been ongoing for several years. University presidents at some of the country’s most prestigious institutions have either been pressured to resign or have voluntarily stepped down in the face of mounting controversy. Perspectives related to trans, queer, and racial justice have increasingly been subject to censorship.

Since the U.S. presidential election in November 2024, which saw Donald Trump re-elected, a series of political decisions have been made that reinforce Freedom House’s conclusion that pluralism is under attack. All government programs related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have been dismantled, and associated staff have had their contracts terminated. Leaders of pro-Palestinian student movements have been detained and either deported or threatened with expulsion. The Trump administration has also made colonial claims of a highly controversial and provocative nature, directed at both Greenland and the Gaza Strip. In addition, several universities have been explicitly targeted, accused of being “liberal bastions” promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. In response, federal funding to these institutions has been cut. Pluralism is, without doubt, under direct threat—and so too is the autonomy of the university sector.

With this thematic issue, we aim to highlight how the ongoing “anti-democratic turn”—within which planning is deeply embedded—restricts freedom of expression and curtails democratic participation in relation to key democratic institutions. Ana Pajvančić-Cizelj focuses on the case of Novi Sad and the erosion of democracy in Serbia, describing an “autocratisation-driven” urban transformation. Her analysis identifies a shift from neoliberal, economically motivated exploitation toward a model rooted in political domination. Democratic backsliding in planning is also addressed in the Hungarian context by Lea Kőszeghy, Bálint Hilbert, and Adrienne Csizmady, who examine the consequences of integrated urban planning after 2010, marked by a significant decline in local autonomy. Luana Xavier Pinto Coelho and Lorena Melgaço contribute a postcolonial perspective on precarious settlement upgrading in Brazil, tracing the links between the country’s authoritarian planning history and the logic of racial capitalism. Together, these contributions illustrate both enduring and emerging power structures that reinforce anti-democratic tendencies within planning practices.

Issues of colonial legacies, Western self-perceptions, and discourses around the “authoritarian other” are addressed in the commentary to this thematic issue, authored by Myrto Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou, Adriana de La Peña, Laleh Foroughanfar, Jennie Gustafsson, Lorena Melgaço, and Chiara Valli. The authors explore the dissonant discourses that emerged when the city of Malmö, Sweden, hosted the Eurovision Song Contest in May 2024—where the official slogan “*United by Music*” starkly contrasted with the grassroots campaign “*Malmö Against Genocide*.” The city’s massive securitization, carried out in a distinctly authoritarian fashion, disproportionately targeted the pro-Palestinian solidarity movement in certain neighbourhoods.

Emil Pull and Jørn Cruickshank, drawing on a case from Kristiansand, Norway, highlight a different kind of democratic constraint—one rooted in what they define as post-political and spatially blind planning tendencies. They argue for the need to develop a more spatially attuned understanding of urban life, practice, and development. Tanja Winkler, in turn, explores alternative democratic pathways by introducing the concept of “*democracy otherwise*.” Her contribution looks beyond conventional forms of local activism to consider alternative democratic planning practices. Although no simple solutions are offered, these contributions provide important insights that can inspire planners to learn from the diverse democratic experiences found across the Global South. This, in turn, requires a willingness to *unlearn* taken-for-granted assumptions and to challenge the rigid dualism between the Global North and South.

Already three decades ago, Stuart Hall (1993, p. 361) emphasized that the ability “to live with difference” would be “the coming question of the twenty-first century.” We can only conclude that his prediction has proven accurate. The capacity to live with difference appears to be in as steep a decline as democracy itself. With this thematic issue, we aim to draw attention to the urgent need to critically examine both the role of planning and the responsibility we, as academics, bear in times of anti-democratic attacks. We conclude that the need for open, free, and autonomous universities—where political dialogue and pluralism are not only welcomed but actively fostered—has never been more pressing. In parallel, there is an urgent need to discuss the role that planning will play in the future reconstruction of Ukraine and Palestine. How can we ensure that, when that day comes, planning will be harnessed to support democratic processes and the equitable distribution of resources, rather than serving as yet another tool to perpetuate inequalities? Among the many institutions that will need to be restored or rebuilt in these countries, the university sector stands out. If these institutions are to become truly free and autonomous, we as academics must be at the forefront, demonstrating the crucial role that intellectuals can play in defending pluralism in the face of growing threats. This thematic issue offers a series of insightful articles, each contributing in different ways to this essential dialogue.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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