

Autopoiesis and the Possibility For Planning

Angelique Chettiparamb
School of City and Regional Planning
Cardiff University
United Kingdom

The Presentation

- Views planning as a social activity - must be situated within current understandings of the social world

I will

- Describe the theoretical crises in planning
- Will provide a brief overview of the concept of autopoiesis
- Discuss the way in which autopoiesis addresses the crises
- Discuss the possibility for planning within this view
- Also identify the equivalent domain within planning that autopoiesis contributes to.

Crises in Planning Theory

- Planning theory is caught within a dilemma between post modern thought and positivism.
 - If Planning is concerned with leading society through contingent circumstances in a direction it would not otherwise adopt, then
 - Complexity of contingency cannot be abandoned
 - Yet, belief in the potential for a realisable future is needed
 - Cannot believe in both –
 - Belief in the particular rejects determinism
 - Belief in determinism rejects current understandings of nature of society and the potency of agent action.

Crises in Planning Theory

- Post –structuralism
 - Contingent manifestations of power are traced
 - Side steps the worst forms of determinism
 - Analysis of discourses, epistemes, and conditions of possibility provide methodological access
 - Critical and explanatory accounts are produced
 - Starts becoming problematic if these are to be converted to generalisable tools, techniques and methods – concerns for planning
 - Because, even when explanation is generalisable, the mechanism identified remains contingent.
 - A discourse of social science of planning/governance results
 - Theory for planning must be generalisable for application

Autopoiesis

- Originated in biology (Maturana and Varela)
 - Search for what it is to be alive
 - A systems capacity to *reproduce itself* solely from its parts – ‘autopoiesis’
- Adapted into social science by Niklas Luhmann in his now classical book *Social Systems*
 - Base of adaptation—generalisation and re-constitution
 - Level of analysis is the social
- Extremely complex piece of work
 - Detailed definitions for system, elements, relations, conditioning, complexity, differentiation... (what describes a system)
 - Detailed definitions for communication, meaning, actions, structure, etc..... (what a system engages in – the dynamics)

Autopoiesis

- A system is defined by making a distinction and marking one side of it
- Social systems are essentially self referential
- The autopoietic element is communication
- Social system is internal differentiated into functional systems, each of which is self referential using its own code with its own mode of autopoiesis.
- Outside influences act as a trigger on this essentially self referential process
- Hence results are indeterministic
- Distinction between individuals and society

Autopoiesis

- Whatever is observed is perceived by an observer within a process of self-reference
- Hence reality might exist but cannot be accessed outside of the process of self-reference
- Denies epistemological access to an ontology
- Now termed as ‘radical constructivism’

Contribution of Autopoiesis

- Unlike first generation systems theory (physics) – tie is not to structure or equilibrium
- Unlike second generation systems theory (evolution) – tie is not to system maintenance
- Ontological tie is to process of self-reference – process as opposed to structure, becoming as opposed to being
- Like pragmatism/deconstruction, autopoiesis insists upon contingent relative knowledge, but
 - unlike pragmatism, it recognises a need for a consistent epistemology
 - unlike deconstruction, (suspicion of utilitarian thought), it places an emphasis on mechanisms

Autopoiesis and Planning

- Luhmann's view – as an activity within society
 - Planning orients itself to system (social) complexity
 - Planning must make a model of society oriented towards the future to deal with it
 - No system can completely describe itself – must leave things out
 - The model is then re-introduced into society
 - The process of self-description can be thus observed
 - As reduction is involved it is inherently problematic
 - This observation can be anticipated -A situation of double contingency
 - Hence cannot have fixed foundations, must work through contingent circumstances through consensus.

Planning cannot escape reduction

Planning cannot escape consensus and contingency

Autopoiesis and Planning

- Political steering
 - Systems can change only self referentially
 - Political system is just one sub system in society
 - It cannot transcend itself
 - Can only steer itself based on code of power/no power
 - Result may have tremendous impact on society
 - But this is not steering, because what eventually occurs depend upon the self-referential process of other systems

Autopoiesis and Planning

- Tries to save some possibility for steering
 - Impossible to abandon the notion of planning
 - Steering is defined as a reduction/construction of difference from a desired path
 - Induces an asymmetry – eg : equalizing of education
 - Asymmetries are principles forced upon steering emanating from a process of observation by society

Possibility for steering salvaged by admitting possibility for **asymmetries and linking it to social criticism**

Autopoiesis and Planning

- First order Observation: Distinctions and selections made **within** the activity of planning
- Second order observation: Distinctions and selections made **of** the activity of planning
- The possibility for planning arises only when second constrains the first.
- For planning of society, which systems must engage in first and second order activities?

Autopoiesis and Planning

- First order activity – Society
- Second order activity – Society
- What then is the role for Planners?
- Many gaps
 - Through what mechanisms will second order activity guide first order activity?
 - Through what mechanisms will results of the first order activity ‘travel’ to the second order level?
 - What mechanisms can be employed to achieve consensual temporal, contingent, situatedness of first order activity?
 - What mechanisms will integrate ‘scale’ implications?
 - What mechanisms will channel first order activity into ‘functional sub systems’?

Autopoiesis and Planning

- Focus on mechanisms, focus on process
- Away from a Planner centred view to a planning centred view
- Expertise in planning the act of planning
- Second order Planning
- Links diversity and variety to order
- Steers contingency towards future that is contingent and recursively evolving



Thank You

ChettiparambA@cf.ac.uk