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Abstract: In this paper, we explore the consequences of a flat ontology for planning theory and practice through the lens of Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT). We present a perspective in which the ontological hierarchies assumed in planning and beyond are left behind, but also one that allows for understanding how hierarchies and binaries can emerge from and within governance and specifically planning. From this perspective, planning is conceptualised as a web of interrelated social-material systems underpinning the coordination of policies and practices affecting spatial organisation. Within this web, different planning perspectives and planning practices co-exist and co-evolve, partly in relation to the wider governance contexts of which they are part. We explore and deepen our understanding of the consequences of flat ontology by focussing on the interrelations between power and knowledge and the varied effects of materiality on planning and governance, as materiality can play roles ranging from latent infrastructure to main triggers of change. We conclude our paper by assessing the consequences for the positionality of planning in society, stressing the need for more reflexive and adaptive forms of planning and governance, and reflecting on what such forms of planning could look like. We argue that despite the abstract nature of discussions on ontology in and of planning, the conceptual shifts that result from thinking in terms of flat ontologies can significantly affect planning practices as it can inspire new ways of observing and organising.

Introduction

Mind – matter, human – animals, global – local, agency – structure, macro – micro. These and many of the other distinctions that constituted our ontological assumptions about reality often imply a certain hierarchy between these concepts. In the social sciences, most explicitly in Actor-Network Theory, practice theory and assemblage theory, these assumptions

were deconstructed, and the idea of flat ontology emerged as a core assumption to inform research and to depart from. In the words of Ash, these approaches aim ‘to avoid hierarchical or binary modes of thought’ (Ash 2020: 1) and as Lamers et al. have it: ‘a flat ontology implies that no distinction is made into different social levels or realms with distinct characteristics, as, for example, suggested by micro- versus macro-analyses and by the agency-structure dualism. (...) Everything happens in the same ‘plenum’ (Lamers et al. 2017: 57).

A flat ontology implies a relational perspective on the nature of objects, subjects, facts, truth claims and so on. A flat ontology acknowledges that knowledge is always situational and enacted in the interaction between knower and known (cf. Maturana, Varela 1987). It assumes that different realities co-exist and that none of these has an a priori basis for a more dominant position than other perspectives (Boelens 2021). Reality is relational and multiple. Everything that is observed as real is always the contingent result of a particular relation in which something is rendered real in relation to something else. So, a flat ontology brings attention to the contingent nature of planning and governance and to the particular role knowledges play in the disciplines and practices of planning.

Yet, although our ontological assumption is ‘flat’, the social-material realities that emerge in different networks of discourses can be binary, hierarchical and discursively essentialised (Bergthaller 2014; Fuchs 2001). A flat ontology is, therefore, not a predictive theory about a certain state of affairs in planning, it is a point of departure that helps to analyse and understand planning practices, approaches, and perspectives and planning theories as relational, co-evolving elements that, in their interplay, can create hierarchies, differences, distinctions, imbalances, and so on, in both the planning discipline and planning practices.

Departing from these preliminary assumptions and in line with the focus of this special issue, we will explore a flat ontology perspective that can be used to re-conceptualise spatial planning on new ontological fundamentals that

set aside the idea that (social) reality is stratified and build upon transcendental hierarchies that pre-exist or form the basis of societies. We will argue and show that the assumption of a flat ontology can contribute to the scientific reflections on planning as well as to the development of more practical ideas about how to plan. To do so, we draw on Evolutionary Governance Theory (Van Assche, Beunen, et al. 2014) and present an evolutionary perspective on planning in which the ontological hierarchies assumed in much of the planning literature are left behind, and that allows for understanding how different relations, including hierarchical ones, can emerge from and within governance and, specifically, planning. In the next section, we introduce the main premises of evolutionary governance theory and its consequences for planning. Then to deepen our evolutionary approach to planning, we reflect on power/knowledge as an important configuration in the evolution of planning and governance and pay particular attention to the role of material dependencies that shape evolving planning processes. We conclude with a number of theoretical and practical insights to reflect on the possibilities and limits of a flat ontology in planning.

An evolutionary perspective on planning

Planning literature has developed a huge diversity of perspectives and approaches and the label planning refers to various practices, policy domains, perspectives and academic disciplines (Gunder et al. 2017; Van Assche et al. 2013). In response to the modernist versions from the 20th century, various schools of thought have brought alternative theories, concepts and approaches (Allmendinger 2017). This evolution of planning theory, often closely connected to theoretical developments in neighbouring disciplines, has brought attention to ongoing discussions about how planning can or should be defined and how the discipline of planning can be distinguished from other disciplines.

Rather than arguing for one final definition of planning, we suggest that the term spatial planning should be used to characterise a myriad of practices and professions and that it involves a variety of academic disciplines. Some of these explicitly carry the label planning, while others go by other names. What unites these professions and disciplines is an interest in the organisation and use of space and an orientated on the practices through which places are planned, designed and developed. At the same

time, each perspective has its own focus, draws on particular theoretical foundations and normative assumptions, and has the tendency to clearly distinguish itself from other perspectives and approaches.

We, therefore, depart from a broad conceptualisation of spatial planning as the coordination of policies and practices regarding the organisation of space (Van Assche, Verschraegen 2008). Planning is nested in governance: the taking of collectively binding decisions in a community by a diversity of actors, inside and outside government, with formal roles and without formal roles. As governance concerns collective, binding decisions, governments and their institutions don't need to play a role in a process to consider it governance. And when they play a role, that role can largely diverge between places and times. Sometimes governments play only a minor role, and sometimes they are the most important actor in the planning system.

Evolutionary Governance theory is a theory to analyse governance and planning processes. It is firmly rooted in post-structuralist thought. It's based on concepts from Luhmanian social systems theory, Foucauldian discourse theory, intuitional economics and Actor-Network Theory. It departs from the premise that all elements, such as actors, institutions, discourses, narratives, subjects, objects, and so on that constitute a governance system are interrelated. These elements define each other and co-evolve over time. The evolution of the relationship between the elements can never be predicted, but a variety of concepts can help us to deepen our understanding of these relationships, such as, for example: power and path inter- and goal-dependencies.

All the elements of a planning or governance system, as well as the relations between these elements and the overall constellation are subject to change. The processes of change are conceptualised as evolutionary, since current configurations are always temporary outcomes of previous processes as well as the basis for new developments. For EGT, as for DeLanda, entities can be individual and real at different scales (DeLanda 2016, 2019). They are the product of relations but cannot be reduced to them. They are, in other words, things that can move and take properties with them. Yet not all properties. While things might not be more or less real than other things, they are real in a different way. A rock can be important as an obstacle for a building project, but the project organisation is just as real. Its set of relations

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makes it possible – maybe less durable than the rock, but a thing, nevertheless. It can move and shed some of its elements and relations, while retaining its identity.

As for Deleuze and DeLanda, elements in EGT acquire an identity through history, and that history never leaves the object. The evolutionary character of governance emphasised in EGT is not an evolution towards optimal adaptation to an environment, but an evolution that keeps going because co-evolving parts keep interacting. That history of co-evolutions is visible in the structure, the functioning, the elements of the governance system, in the way it understands itself, and its possible futures. The governance system produces new objects and subjects which then enter into a relation with others at the same level, and with higher-level entities. Not all of those interactions pertain to the sphere of governance, but in order to have an effect on governance, they will have to relate to the configurations mentioned.

Planning systems are part of governance and can be further defined as a particular configuration of actors and institutions involved in the organisation of space, that are nested in discourses about what and how to plan. Planning systems never operate in a void. They emerge out of previous planning systems or other forms of spatial coordination and are situated in evolving governance contexts. What planning is, how it can function and which effects it can bring forward, will be unique for each governance context. Many countries, for example, have their unique planning system, but each country also has its own specific governance contexts, of which planning is part. This implies that the issues that planning can deal with and the means by which it can do so, largely diverge (Bishwapriya 2012; Sanyal 2005; Watson 2009).

Planning requires perspectives about the world and about what needs to be planned and in what way. These perspectives are discursive structures that also emerge out of previous views on planning and out of evolving governance contexts. They can be based in planning theory, draw on more practical forms of knowledge, or be largely based on certain ideologies (Gunder et al. 2017). Some of these perspectives get institutionalised and embedded in planning law, therewith assigning certain roles and responsibilities to particular actors and specific forms of knowledge and shaping particular organisational structures. Others play a role in often more local and informal practices that are not always explicitly labelled as

planning, or mainly existing in the scientific domain. When planning perspectives are institutionalised, they, for example, define the roles and position of planners and other experts, such as landscape architects, ecologists, real estate managers or legal advisors, can play within a particular governance contexts (Raco, Savini 2019). Yet such roles and positions will change over time and should, therefore, be understood as temporary outcomes of the co-evolution between actors, institutions and discursive dynamics. Planning perspectives reflect a particular understanding of planning as well as a particular way of organising. Each country, city, local community or other context has its unique way of planning and each also has its own governance context in which planning is embedded. Planning and governance are, thus, strongly connected and any attempt to understand planning and to identify possibilities for planning should take into account the governance context as well.

Power/knowledge

A flat ontology brings attention to the relational, emergent and contingent nature of planning and governance (Pottage 1998; Van Assche, Duineveld et al. 2014). As a concept making its way in planning theory, a flat ontology can also be understood as a particular form of knowledge that brings to the fore specific ideas for planning theory and practice that compete with other (older) ideas based on different ontologies. Like all forms of knowledge, flat ontology thinking is subject to the mechanisms of discursive construction, transformation, competition and migration, which Foucault and his followers have unveiled. Understanding the possibilities and effects of flat ontology thinking within the planning discipline and for planning practices thus implies understanding the dynamics of power and knowledge.

Power and knowledge are intimately entwined in any institutionalised form of planning, varying from the definition of planning issues, actors and procedures, to the ways in which policies and plans are interpreted and implemented (Ferguson 1994; Gunder 2010; Scott 1998). Foucault has argued that power is inextricably connected with the structures through which people understand, create, and organise the world as they know it (Foucault 1972, 1994). This interplay between knowledge and action is key to much of the planning literature. It brings attention to the ways

in which forms of understanding and forms of organising are co-evolving, how certain forms of knowledge become institutionalised, marginalise and replace other forms of knowledge, and consequently drive the further evolution of planning and governance (Raco, Savini 2019; Van Assche et al. 2013; Voß, Freeman 2016).

Foucault, furthermore, emphasised the relevance of the micro-level of organisation and emerging social order to understand power dynamics (Foucault 2003). This attention for the micro-level does not necessarily imply a conversion of top-down to bottom-up approaches, but merely the recognition of multiple locations, forms and mechanisms of power (e.g., Foucault 1994, 2007). Knowledge and power can thus be studied at different scales of governing and organising, in top-down, bottom-up and hybrid configurations, or as embodied in tactics and strategy, tightly or loosely coupled to intentionality. Power is a relational force and it can be attributed to people or organisations, to their particular strategies, to institutional configurations, and to social structures through which people make sense of their environment, such as language, knowledge, and stories (Flyvbjerg 1998; Pellizzoni 2011; Sandercock 2003).

Studying power dynamics and analysing the role of experts and expertise is relevant from a scientific perspective, but it also has practical consequences (Feindt, Oels 2005; Hajer, Versteeg 2005; Leipold et al. 2019). The general loss of trust in grand modernist schemes of planning drove the development of alternative understandings of governance processes and novel planning approaches (Acemoglu, Robinson 2012; Scott 1998; Van Assche et al. 2013). Researchers, for example, started to investigate the stories that structure planning policies, planning organisations, attributions of expertise, and versions of normality (Flyvbjerg, Richardson 2002). Such studies help to unravel the contingent nature of planning systems, of the elements and structures that constitute these systems, and they bring attention to the notion that things could have been different and, hence, can be different. Therewith, they help to open up discussions about what is and what should be. The loss of belief in modernist ideals placed emphasis on processes of learning, adaptive governance, and perspectives and interests that were often excluded from planning (Armitage 2010; Brunner 2005; Gunder et al. 2017; Voß, Bornemann 2011). Hence, new perspectives on planning emerged, offering novel insights into what

planning should be and new ideas for how it could be practised.

These novel perspectives also showed that the observations by critical outsiders of the power/knowledge configurations can bring forward alternative perspectives, confront what seems to be the status quo and help to alter the current configuration of power/knowledge that constitutes planning (Flyvbjerg 2002; Fuchs 2001; Watson 2009).

Reflections drawing on a flat ontology can be used to answer questions concerning the inclusion and exclusion of particular forms of knowledge, but also how these different forms of knowledge co-evolve over time and how they, in their dialectical interplay, have shifted the patterns of inclusion and exclusion produced by entanglements of power and knowledge. Discourses on participation often came with acceptance of local knowledges, speaking up of silenced discourses, and shifts in discursive coalitions (Calhoun 2015; Jager et al. 2019; Reed et al. 2018; Stringer et al. 2006). A similar plea could be made drawing on a flat ontology.

Materiality

Since the object of planning is spatial organisation, use and design materiality have never been absent from planning and planning studies. The position and roles of various experts in planning are regularly strongly connected to their particular knowledge about the material world and how to adapt it to societal needs (Raco, Savini 2019). Although these roles have profoundly changed, partly under the influence of earlier critiques of technocratic approaches to planning and governance (Fischer 1990; Pellizzoni 2011; Raco, Savini 2019; Scott 1998), analysing and understanding the material world still plays an important role in planning practices and planning theory.

Within planning and related disciplines, one can find many different conceptualisations and positions of materiality. In disciplines such as physical geography, physics or geology, the focus is on the material world as a knowable and management object, and different disciplines and professions focus on different physical elements and their interrelations. In these disciplines, materiality is often taken for granted as reality, as something that stands in a deterministic relation to something else, as something passive and or mechanistic, as something which can be mapped out and predicted. Furthermore, in modernist planning traditions,

partly under the influence of engineering and modernist architecture, the idea of an ‘essential’ structure in the landscape, a first ordering structure, which has to be discovered, restored, maybe constructed (depending on the perspective and case) crystallised the thinking on materiality and its role for generations (Van Assche et al. 2013).

Whilst these assumptions about materiality still linger on and are intrinsically bound to some parts of planning and related schools and, disciplines, new understandings of and approaches to materiality are emerging. The concept of social-ecological systems has brought attention to the various ways in which social and ‘material’ ecological systems are connected (Folke et al. 2005; Smith, Stirling 2010). Within the social sciences, the Foucauldians (and Foucault himself) often included the role of materiality as part of discourses that, for example, control and contain populations (Foucault 1979). Similarly for the Marxists, for whom materiality, the material conditions under which societies and classes within societies develop, is central to their analysis and societal critiques. Another important school of thinking in which materiality is rethought is Deleuzian materialism, which became quite influential in planning’s neighbouring discipline: cultural geography. In this discipline, Deleuzian-inspired concepts such as new materiality, non-representationalism, embodiment and mobility theories were introduced and developed. These conceptualisations of materiality tried to overcome the social-material dichotomy and are open to the suspending roles materiality plays in shaping the present (Hillier 2008; Schulte 2018; Žižek 2012). Within Luhmannian-inspired systems theories, the existence of pathways of influence from material and other environments to decision-making has always been present, as the theory starts with the division between social systems and their environment, and the environment includes other social systems and the material world (Luhmann 1989, 1995). Last but not least, within Actor-Network Theory, materiality is central. It is not seen as something external to the social and passive. In this theory, humans and non-humans and their agency are constituted in networks. Materiality, just like humans, is seen as an actant in ‘social’ processes such as planning (Latour 1996; Rydin 2010).

In Evolutionary Governance Theory, concepts and ideas from the previously mentioned disciplines and schools which explicitly (re-) conceptualised the relations between the social

and materiality are nested and reinterpreted into a general framework that starts from the notion of a flat ontology. This framework can help us to analyse and understand the role of materiality in planning processes.

The framework is based on two related assumptions on materiality. The first is a move away from the idea that the world is composed of fixed objects or subjects that exists as eternally defined unities. A flat ontology implies that objects, subjects, things, or substances don’t exist as units beyond the relations in which they are shaped. Objects and subjects emerge or are constituted in discourses. Following this way of thinking, there is no object of planning a-priori to planning. Planning processes or systems ‘create’ the objects they aim to understand and mould. If planners talk about scales, places, regions and so on, they are the result of a particular ordering or discourse, a particular way of observing, a particular way of relating to the world. Before something is delineated as an object (or subject, or thing) within a network or discourse, there is only matter or materiality. Materiality plays a role in the formations of objects and subjects, yet which role it will play in making some things more likely to emerge in a particular situation or context cannot be assumed a priori.

The second assumption within EGT is that materiality is both constraining and enabling planning processes, sometimes in very obvious manners and sometimes in opaque and surprising ways (Duineveld et al. 2017). In other words, materiality for EGT (in line with the work of DeLanda and Deleuze) will affect governance through various pathways. In the new materialisms where flat ontology concepts usually feature, materiality is not an essence, as essences are not recognised. Objects and subjects alike emerge, and dissolve. In these processes of emergence, it is often not possible to distinguish the precise influence of materiality, discursivity, and of higher- and lower-level objects separately. What is clear for them is that more than the ideas exists, while materiality does not determine ideas either (Van Assche et al. 2017).

A planning system or process and the related discourses always evolve, and materiality is always present in these processes. To denote the time dimension of the role of materiality in planning proceeds, we introduced the concept of material events (Duineveld et al. 2017). Matter can alter governance, including, planning, in different ways. Some material events can affect governance very gradually, noticed

or unnoticed, others can cause a shock or put a halt to a governance process as we know it. If material events are unnoticed within governance, one could speak of silent events, when material events put an end to things or governance processes, they are deadly events. Some material events are noted by or affect some governance and not others. Sometimes they trigger a response, trigger adaptation of plans or other forms of coordination, and sometimes they don't.

To deepen and nuance our conceptual understanding of material events and their relation to governance and planning, we introduce the concept of dependencies: path dependencies (influences from the past), interdependencies (influences from the interrelation between actors, between institutions, and between actors and institutions), and goal dependencies (influences from visions for the future) (Beunen et al. 2015). Materiality plays a role in each of these dependencies. Each can alter power relations, affect dominant discourses, or the inclusion and exclusion of knowledges, and they can affect both economic and social values, which again can affect configurations of governance. Material dependencies are formed directly and indirectly, through different pathways, and their influence is not always noticed or reflected upon by actors. Sometimes they catch communities by surprise and there is a sudden need to respond, to adapt, to plan and so on.

Seeing materiality as a vibrant force that can alter planning processes allows for reflections on the roles, effects of and relations between the material world and the processes of planning and governance. The analysis and mapping of material dependencies can shed a new light on the pattern of influences that keep a planning system in place, e.g., the rigidities that hamper change, or drive its evolution towards a different model. Mapping material dependencies can increase the awareness of relations with that environment, and the possibilities and limits to alter those relations. It can help to avoid false planning promises in radically changing the world and, at the same time, make visible the material rigidities that can be changed, but thus far were overlooked within a particular community or planning system.

Mapping material dependencies also contributes to the scientific debates within planning and environmental governance studies. Not that it is absent in the literature, but it is still underexplored, especially compared to geography and anthropology. In policy and planning, post-structuralism and other versions

of constructivism took a long time to break through, and modernist, engineering-dominated perspectives on infrastructure and the environment dominated for a long time, over-emphasising the direct influence of materiality on policy (and design). This could account for the difficulty in re-introducing in a more subtle manner the pathways of influence of materiality in the broadest sense on policy, administration, planning.

Rethinking planning

The ontological assumptions within the different planning perspectives hardly play an explicit role in societal debates about planning and, until this special issue, only a minor one in the scientific debates on planning. Within planning and governance, different ontologies co-exist, co-evolve and compete for prominence. This competition is visible both in planning theory and planning practices. The shift from modernist planning to more local and situational forms of planning is also a shift in the dominance of certain ontological perspectives (Gunder et al. 2017). These shifts are partly driven by the theoretical debates and the various critiques that have been put forward in much of the planning literature, but also other factors such as changing societal needs and changing political landscapes play an important role.

In the introduction to this paper and this special issue, it is argued that a flat ontology requires rethinking the way planning is understood and organised (Boelens 2021). This plea, although based on different arguments, seems partly in vogue with earlier critiques of modernist versions of planning theory and some of the ideas put forward in the literature about communitive and participatory planning (Allmendinger 2017). Such theoretical critiques of planning do not stand alone. In many western European countries, one can observe that the critiques of the more 'traditional' forms of planning have been an important driver for planning reforms (Allmendinger, Haugton 2010; Booth 2007; Gerrits et al. 2012). Combined with changes in the wider society and particularly the political landscape through which others actors and other ideals gained a more prominent position in governance, these critiques enabled a profound change in the way institutional structures, in particular planning laws, enable a particular form of planning and hamper alternative ones. Neo-liberal and market-oriented ideas had a profound

impact on planning and the way in which it is institutionalised. In several countries, the critiques of planning have served the minimalisation and marginalisation of planning as a government domain (Gunder 2010; Lennon, Waldron 2019; Lord, Tewdwr-Jones 2014; Niedzialkowski, Beunen 2019; Olesen, Carter 2018). Planning reform consequently implied that planning was deregulated and decentralised. These shifts are also reflected in the expertise that plays a role in planning processes. Legal advisors, branding specialists and urban designers have, for example, gained much more prominent roles (Raco, Savini 2019; Van Assche et al. 2020).

The discourses in which planning was presented as a technocratic endeavour that excludes citizens and their opinions and perspectives co-evolved with discourses in which planning was depicted as a barrier for economic development and as a bureaucratic and procedural burden. Jointly these discourses have facilitated processes of deregulation and decentralisation in various Western European countries (Lord, Tewdwr-Jones 2018; Olesen, Carter 2018). These reforms have, in general, reduced the capacities of the planning system to tackle contemporary societal challenges, while new planning institutions increasingly restricted planning to procedural steps and did not necessarily give citizens more possibilities to participate in planning processes and to influence the outcomes of the processes (Alfasi, Migdalovich 2020; Ferm et al. 2020; Lennon, Waldron 2019; Tait, Inch 2016; Wargent 2020). Planning has, thus, increasingly become what it was blamed for. Policies and practices largely diverge, making it difficult or even impossible to draw unequivocal conclusions, yet it is clear that the promises of deliberative and participatory planning have certainly not yet materialised to their full extent. The literature on participatory approaches, for example, points to the gap between rhetoric and reality of participation that it often presents and to cases in which disappointment with participatory processes has eroded trust in the wider planning and governance systems.

More recent insights show that the decentralised and often deregulated forms of planning that emerged also face implementation difficulties and exclude actors (Dryzek et al. 2019; Lennon, Waldron 2019; Moore 2017; Pellizzoni 2015), while, moreover, in many places, planning seems to have lost much of its capacity to coordinate development and use of space. One can thus conclude that it is as easy

to overestimate the power of planning as it is to underestimate it.

If one wants to explore the pros and cons of a flat ontology for planning, those more recent developments should be taken into account. A focus on the contingent and emerging nature of planning can help to analyse in greater depth how the capacities of planning, in whatever form, depend on the acceptance of planning in that form by actors within a community and, for a large part, also on the societal beliefs in planning as an activity, profession, or even scientific discipline that can and will deliver something good (cf. Alfasi, Migdalovich 2020; Van Assche et al. 2011). Disappointments with planning can lead to shifts in governance and in the planning system and, therewith, change the position of planning in society.

Performance of success might strengthen planning, but create blind spots for its actual functioning, while performance of failure can point to particular issues that can be tackled, but also strategically be used to erode and undermine planning as a collective endeavour (Van Assche et al. 2012). Rhetoric plays an important role in the development of planning systems, whereby simple and often incorrect critiques about bureaucracy and planning as a barrier for development make it difficult to develop and institutionalise a planning system that actually has the capacity to go beyond basic zoning plans and related regulations. Either way, once planning has lost its powers, it might be difficult to restore it. Even if part of society looks back fondly at old times, a changed governance configuration is likely to prevent a return to those old times.

Concluding remarks

Flat ontology, so what? Just another conceptual hype that helps us to contribute to the critical and reflexive literatures on planning? Despite the abstract character that comes with a discussion on ontological perspectives in planning, we refuse to dismiss its practical relevance. The strong connection between planning as practice and the (scientific) reflections on that practice has brought forward many ideas about how scientific insights should be translated into particular ways of doing and organising (Voß, Freeman 2016). Theoretical debates had many anticipated and unintended effects on planning practices, see, for example, the widespread 'application' of Habermas's theory of communicative action (Hillier 2003).

The perspectives presented in this paper cannot and should not be read as a recipe for a particular form of planning. Which form of planning is suitable depends on planning ambitions, goals and visions, as well as on the particular context in which these should be brought about. A co-evolutionary perspective on planning offers insights for top-down forms of planning, for local bottom-up initiatives, as well as for approaches and strategies that are often not labelled as planning. Very likely the coordination of policies and practices affecting spatial organisation is, in fact, an entangled web of different perspectives and institutions in which various forms of planning co-exist and co-evolve (Mazza, Bianconi 2014). These perspectives and the institutions and organisations in which they are embedded are contingent and important elements in the evolution of planning and governance.

As governance configurations are hybrid and complex entities, and as they are designed to be machinic, to produce new realities, they are under continuous pressure, but those pressures go in different directions. There is a strong investment in the stabilisation of the entity and a strong power play to enter it and change it (while maintaining enough relations to keep the production going). As planning can create new spatial realities, these serve as input for the assemblage or system, and immediately enter into a relation with the system and its actors and other elements. This contingency, recognised by EGT, is also a key feature of the Deleuzian theory supporting flat ontologies (DeLanda 2006; Deleuze, Guattari 1987; Pottage 1998).

The emphasis on flat ontology, contingency and multiplicity does not diminish the potential role and impact of planning but it does imply that no form of planning will perfectly fit the diverse and ever-changing set of societal demands and expectations. The forms of planning that fit a particular context diverge and in order to maintain relevance, planning should be able to adapt to changing circumstances. Adaptation itself is already challenging and risky as various more recent planning reforms have shown (Aberbach, Christensen 2014; Beunen et al. 2017; Smith, Stirling 2010). Some aspects of planning can be adapted more easily than others and the existing configuration of actors, institutions and power/knowledge forms highly relevant dependencies that shape both the possibilities for adaptation as well as the actual changes that will emerge over time.

A flat ontology perspective can reveal and unravel the contingent nature of the structures

and elements that constitute planning and help to bring attention to the fact that things could have been different and, hence, might be subject to change. This, however, does not imply that existing forms of planning become obsolete or that they should necessarily change in order to make room for forms of planning that are less hierarchical or even flat in their own way. A planning system that is designed according to the core ideas of a flat ontology might be more difficult to envision. Boelens even argues in the introduction to this special issue that planning practices inspired by a flat ontology would question the very roots of traditional planning theories as they will reject the central position of the government and any hierarchical relation that constitutes a particular form of planning (2021).

Given the effects of recent planning reform in various Western European countries, the discussion on how to translate the ideas of a flat ontology into recommendations for planning might come with some warnings. The first is not to mix prescription and description. A flat ontology can bring to the fore interesting insights about and for planning, but it cannot provide a recipe for how planning should be organised or how it should function. The merits of a flat ontology mainly lie in the descriptive domain, through which it can enhance the reflexivity and, as a result, the adaptivity of planning. A second warning is that any critiques of planning and all the recommendations for alternative forms of planning might be used for the better or worse. Several attempts to improve planning have, in fact, opened the way for planning reforms that not only made planning more difficult, but certainly did not always improve spatial governance in terms of democracy, public goods, and environmental sustainability (Lennon, Waldron 2019; Lord, Tewdwr-Jones 2018; Niedzialkowski, Beunen 2019). The preferred relation between planning and government cannot be judged in general terms nor distilled from theory. In many countries, where states and other governmental organisations do play a pivotal role, it makes sense to firmly embed planning in the roles and responsibilities of governments, whereas elsewhere, other forms of planning might be more legitimate and effective. In both scenarios, one form of planning certainly does not exclude others forms and many varieties and combinations of planning can be found and developed. The fact that planning in many places is strongly connected to governments and often organised through nested scales is, by itself, a contingent outcome

of the evolution of societies and their governance that has also brought many good things. A flat ontology does not contrast hierarchical forms of organising planning, but basically considers these to be contingent outcomes of the ongoing co-evolution between different elements and the structures in which they are embedded that are likely to change over time, partly under the influence of new theoretical perspectives on planning.

A flat ontology can bring attention to the wider societal dynamics and political processes that continuously reformulate what planning is and should be. Many western European countries have devolved and regulated their planning capacities because of a growing dominance of discourses in which planning is presented as technocratic, bureaucratic and hampering economic development. Once lost, planning capacities are difficult to regain because benefits are no longer seen, other disciplines have taken over certain roles of the planning expertise, dedicated planning organisations are no longer in places, and because critiques of planning linger on. In such circumstances, an evolutionary perspective on planning might help to identify possible pathways of change and forms of planning that better fit the context in which traditional planning approaches are fiercely rejected.

Evolutionary Governance Theory offers various tools for a more profound analysis of planning, its current configuration, its history, and its embedding in the wider contexts of governance and society. Such analysis can offer insights into the possibilities and limits of planning and help to gain an overview of the elements and mechanisms that are likely to influence any attempt to plan. These insights can be used to explore which form of planning would fit the particular context and to identify possibilities for its introduction and implementation. Particularly in places that are more hostile to planning, e.g., because planning is strongly associated with bureaucracy or with older top-down ways of organising space, such reflections might help to find forms of spatial coordination that are, nevertheless, possible. All this might, in itself, not be specifically novel, but it is very likely that most failed attempts at planning failed precisely because of their mismatch with a particular context and because the people involved did not sufficiently pay attention to possibilities and limits that come along with that context, ignored or marginalised alternative perspectives and critiques, and set out on a path that, at a later moment in time, even with new insights, was difficult to alter.

It might be clear that there is no perfect planning system and no simple recipe that works everywhere and always works in the same way. The possibilities and effects of planning are highly context-specific. Any attempt at planning has to acknowledge that effects and outcomes of planning are likely to diverge from what was expected at some point. Rather than seeing this gap between expectations and effects as a problem or argument to put forward alternative models for planning, one could also explore why it is amazing that planning works at all (cf. Pressman, Wildavsky 1979).

So, to wrap up, accommodating flat ontologies in planning, in an EGT presentation of the fine mechanics of planning and governance, can make both insiders and outsiders more attentive to the processes of emergence at work in governance, and by means of governance. Which can make planning more adaptive, creative and more democratic. Moreover, the understanding of governance configurations as entities with a real existence, history, reproductive logic and external effects makes all the difference in managing adaptation and reform in governance and planning.

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