On Justice
Towards a Framework for “Just Planning”

A tour of the city of Siena in Italy is not complete without a visit to the Palazzo Pubblico, which was the seat of government in the 14th century and is Siena’s Town Hall today. Covering three walls of the Sala dei Nove is a set of magnificent frescoes by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (1337–1339). They are known as Allegoria del Buongoverno and Allegoria del Malgoverno. They depict the virtues of good government and the vices of bad government and provide a vivid image of how the quality of life experienced by citizens is affected by their government. Justice is depicted as one of the virtues of good government, along with other qualities such as prudence and fortitude.

What is intriguing, however, is that justice also appears on its own as a majestic figure sitting between the good and the bad governments. As suggested by the British philosopher, David Miller, Lorenzetti seems to suggest that justice is not merely an individual virtue of the kind advocated by Plato and Aristotle. It is also a set of principles that are fundamental to the institutions that turn a mass of individuals into a political community. This means that the pursuit of justice is central to the justification of political authority and political obligation. In this sense, justice has a legal connotation and is about how people are treated.

Another meaning of justice is how society’s benefits and burdens are distributed (distributive justice) and how this distribution is decided upon (procedural justice). The former is about just outcomes and the latter is about just processes. I concur with Susan Fainstein who argues in her book Just City that in the past few decades, planning theory has been largely preoccupied with “just processes” at the expense of “just outcomes”. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the focus should be reversed, because, without just processes, there are hardly any just outcomes and without seeking to achieve just outcomes, just processes are little more than empty formalities. Instead, planning theory and practice should move away from this dichotomy and embrace the concept of “just planning”. By this I mean acknowledging not only the significance of outcomes and processes, but also three other dimensions of justice: recognition, capability and responsibility, without subsuming any one of these into the other.

The concept of recognition comes from the work of Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser, who argue that egalitarian concerns about the redistribution of resources should be combined with a second type of claim for social justice that is based on the politics of difference. This means that the same planning outcome may have a profoundly different impact on different groups, not just because of their differential levels of income, but also because of the differences in their culture, health, life experiences, values and wellbeing. It also means that “just planning” should recognize and enhance the status of the beneficiaries of redistribution as full citizens. Combining redistribution with recognition requires procedural justice and parity of participation. So, “just planning” requires a fair distribution of political power to allow all members of society to interact with one another as peers.

The fourth dimension of “just planning” is capability. It is defined by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen as the capacity of people to flourish in the lives they choose for themselves. So, “just planning” should seek to enhance people’s
freedom and capabilities. Following Sen, concerns for “just planning” focus not so much on people’s means of living, but on their actual opportunities of living.

Putting the emphasis on people’s capability and freedom leads to the fifth dimension of “just planning”, which is the need for reciprocity and responsibility. Responsibility is particularly pertinent with regard to the environment and, consequently, to planning for which sustainability is a central goal. In this context, the responsibility dimension binds together concerns for social justice with concerns for environmental sustainability. While scholars such as Julian Agyeman have argued for “just sustainability” and the need for embedding the discourse of justice in the framework of sustainability, the responsibility dimension of justice complements that by advocating the reverse, i.e., embedding the discourse of sustainability in the framework of social justice and ensuring justice to nature.

Thus, an inclusive framework for “just planning” includes all five dimensions: distribution, participation, recognition, capability and responsibility. “Just planning” seeks to move beyond a concern with the geographical distribution of resources (who gets what) to embrace concerns for particular circumstances of places and people and their vulnerabilities, capabilities and responsibilities (who counts, who gets heard, what counts, and who contributes). In practice, planning decisions should be subject to a test of fairness, which could include such questions as:

- Does a particular planning decision have a disproportionately adverse impact on deprived communities?
- Are deprived communities vulnerable to the adverse impact because of their health, ethnicity, gender, etc.?
- Have deprived communities been adequately represented in the decision-making?
- Can deprived communities exercise free choice in protecting themselves from, or reducing their exposure to, the adverse impact by moving to another area, for example?
- Are deprived communities exposed to a cumulative adverse impact caused by previous planning decisions?
- Are deprived communities compensated by the benefits that may be attendant upon the adverse impact?
- To what extent do deprived communities contribute to the cause of the adverse impact?

To adopt the five-dimensional framework and the “test of fairness” may sound like an idealistic goal, but, in a non-ideal world, we need what John Rawls calls a “realistic utopia” to enable us to seek transformative alternatives. Although justice, like democracy, is an unfinished business, every step taken to reduce injustices is a step in the right direction, even if perfectly just institutions are not in place.

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