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Beyond a liberal reading of *insurgent* in transformative planning practices

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As I begin this response, I am drawn to a recently published article by [Vasudevan and Novoa \(2021\)](#) where the authors name as “pluriversal planning scholarship” a constellation of creative methodologies and theoretical insights rooted in “southern” or “south/eastern” realities. Pluriversal planning scholarship centers the needs and voices of subordinate communities, challenges the hegemony of Western thought, embraces epistemic multiplicity in planning, and advances engaged research that co-produces agitations and alternatives. My motivations for meditating on insurgent planning (IP) practices resonate with those commitments and IP practices occupy that pluriverse of planning practices as well. We are, or perhaps already always have been, living through a time when planning as the “organization of hope” is gasping for breath under societal and ecological collapse ([Baum, 1997](#)). The global pandemic, itself symptomatic of the frictional results between planetary urbanization and “wild” zones, has morphed into a vaccine apartheid generating new perils. The racialized police violence in the U.S., whose spatial politics is intricately linked to planning, continues to devalue and suffocate black lives. Dominant planning is also co-constitutive of the hardening of colonial borders coupled with ethno-nationalist fantasies that have intensified humanitarian crises. Humanitarian planning, rushing to the rescue, has at times deepened that structural violence. Humanitarian planning in Bangladesh, for instance, is forcibly displacing one of the largest refugee communities of Rohingyas to a flood-prone and isolated island in the Bay of Bengal. The toxic lands and waters in and around cities exemplify the social-ecological devastations of urbanization we have barely started to redress. As the interlocking crises of what the late bell [Hooks \(2004\)](#) called “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” continue, ordinary people all over the world are remaking life in its ruins as the rallying cry of the Pacific Climate Warriors go: “we are not drowning, we are fighting”. In this moment, planning, which I broadly understand as the intentional construction of collective life and space, can gain from furthering the conversation on insurgent planning practices. In raising several concerns regarding the elaboration of insurgent planning (IP) practices that I offered in the article ([Huq, 2020](#)), “Seeing the Insurgent in Transformative Planning Practices”, Basta has opened up the space for that thinking.

I will try my best to address the concerns raised, but will focus on those that stood out to me as primary. Basta writes that assuming neoliberalism to be homogenous, universal, and unjustified in all contexts is not empirically valid. Basta takes issue with IP's break with liberalism and points out that radical planning is compatible with classical liberal conception of planning. Finally, Basta suggests that non-violence is an overlooked component of theorizing "illegal and confrontational modes" of planning practices. Below I respond to these concerns by restating characteristics of IP practices elaborated in my article.

First, the particularities of neoliberalism. It has been an accepted observation that neoliberalism is heterogeneously configured in varying contexts. The first footnote of my article stated that "despite the proliferation of neoliberalism in planning theory, the term remains incomplete and contested among its promoters and dissenters." To be clearer, IP practices do not "uncritically embrace" neoliberalism as a universal and homogeneous totality or in Basta's words, "the alpha and omega of all world's evils". Instead, IP practices respond to the oppressive and exclusionary specificities of neoliberal citymaking which looks different across time and place. Most importantly, IP practices challenge those modalities of neoliberalism where the logic of inclusion and participation is co-opted to further oppression. Since IP practices are specific to the oppressive contexts where they materialize, IP practices reveal the heterogeneity of neoliberal urbanization. I also want to suggest that the debates over the ontology of neoliberalism may in fact be distracting us from more pressing issues. [Santamarina \(2021\)](#), for instance, analyzed the spatial politics of an ultranationalist, racist, and anti-feminist party of the Spanish far-right, and showed how they exploit "spatial inequalities linked to the urban dimension of border regimes, institutional racism and spaces of precarity" to advance an everyday politics of hate at the neighborhood level. As global far-right populism intensifies from Delhi to Washington, D.C., perhaps we should be debating how IP practices will be responding to the evolving neo-fascist urban conjuncture of contemporary cities.

Second, Basta takes issue with IP's break with liberalism and points out that radical planning is compatible with classical liberal conception of planning. Basta argues that from a liberal standpoint any form of "monopoly and hegemony," such as neoliberalism, would be questionable. Underlying this "ethico-politics of liberalism" is an imaginary of an innocent and benevolent form of liberalism which is always corrupted by capitalism ([Roy, 2008](#)). I am sympathetic to this internal agony of liberalism—this struggle to balance profit for individuals versus moral restraints for the sustenance of collective life. Radical planners, whether located in the global north or south, have wrestled with these ethico-political tensions of liberalism. But for the wretched of the earth, liberalism has neither delivered the goods nor been their only site of struggle. Seminal works such as [Sandercock \(1998\)](#) and [Miraftab \(2009\)](#) precisely make the point that IP practices had to resist and operate beyond the modernist and liberal understandings of planning and citizenship. IP practices, therefore, shift to new terrains of struggle relying on the agency and epistemic privilege of oppressed social groups. In that evolving terrain of complexity, flattening "all radical activists of different backgrounds" into one homogenous mass fighting for liberation risks reinforcing the hierarchical realities of eurocentrism, colonialism, and so on once more. Notice how quickly we are pulled to consider Rachel Corrie

in Basta's discussion. Corrie, a peace activist with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), was killed horribly by the Israeli army in Rafah and her willingness to die has been honored and held as true solidarity to Palestinians. Yet centering Corrie can work to erase Palestinian women deaths and Palestinian deaths that are relegated as normal in contrast to Corrie's, a possibility that troubled the organizers of ISM as well (Burrows, 2003). I am not suggesting that solidarities and collaborations across entrenched power differences are impossible. What I am proposing instead is that seeing the *insurgent* in transformative planning practices demands attunement to such nuanced perspectives.

Assuming a flat world of individuals, Basta argues that "any initiatives of individuals united by the political aim of advancing rights of the vulnerable and marginalized... is perfectly compatible with a liberal conception of planning." Several clarifications are due at this point because it seems we are interested in two different things. For Basta, the unit of analysis is individuals (the word appears 5 times in the comment). Without submitting to this liberal preoccupation with autonomous fictitious entities, Miraftab (2009) argued that IP is not about actors (e.g., individuals) but about actions (i.e., practices). This distinction is crucial because looking at planning as a set of practices horizontalizes the realm of planning where planning practices are not the exclusive work of any one person or one organization. Furthermore, any initiative with a political aim is not part of "political society". This is where IP practices rely on a finer distinction between civil society and political society, a concept I borrowed from Chatterjee (2011, 2004). This distinction has been elaborated in the "political society" segment of my article. To quickly summarize, IP practices occupy a social space that traverses through and transgresses civil society. Civil society initiatives that have a political aim take associational forms that are legible in a liberal constitutional order. In addition to engaging with civil society, IP practices unfold in a political society where hybrid property relations, deep identity conflicts as well as mutual aid result from historically entrenched social inequalities. Without understanding these grounded, overlapping, and intractable complexities, one can fall into the trap of segregating IP practices as "courageous acts of outstanding individuals" while radical planning is understood as a "practice elevatable to an operationalizable theory." This is the trap one falls into when one understands the easily visible side of protests as IP practices. IP practices are not reducible to protest spectacles. As Miraftab (2004, 2009) argued, IP practices fluidly move between invited (e.g., formal participation) and invented spaces (e.g., protests). It is important, however, that Basta has articulated the silently held perspective even among radical planners that it is radical planning (and varieties of professional planning) that can be considered planning, while the practices of subordinate communities are ephemeral acts of courage and survival. A central goal of IP scholarship has been to challenge this professional bias where planning is the sole prerogative of professionals. It is way past time for professional and radical planners to courageously embrace a multiplicity of planning practices.

Supposing the need to distinguish between "illegality and justifiability," Basta suggests non-violence as a component of insurgent modes of planning. This distinction is redundant as IP practices prioritize survival and livelihood of subordinate communities over the maximization of profit. That is, the principle of "necessity" is a feature of IP practices (Jabareen, 2017). Actions of groups in cases such as Casapound squatting in Rome or the

2021 U.S. Capitol Attacks are not IP practices because they do not meet characteristics of IP practices—for example, necessity, equality, counter-hegemony, transgression, imagination, and identity reconstitution. Therefore, it remains unclear to me why a discussion of IP practices in the context of transformative planning practices warrants a deliberation on justifiability and violence. Rushing to argue for non-violence even before we have fully recognized the IP practices of subordinate groups as planning could also be read as an undercurrent of institutional anxieties around ‘rebellious masses’ and ‘violent natives’. The rhetoric of non-violence emerges from historically specific discourses. Butler (2021), for instance, suggests that the polarity of violence versus non-violence surfaces as an epistemic problem only within a harmful liberal individualist framework. Without embarking into an unpacking of non-violence in the context of planning, I want to simply caution against assuming non-violence as apolitical and universalizable. Basta writes that non-violence “rejects the personification and political coloring of the objectives it pursues” and creates a space for problem-solving. I am skeptical of such depoliticized portrayal of non-violence. Perhaps, we can return to this argument once “a nonviolent narrative” of radical planning has been further developed and contextualized. On a related note, it might be more generative to understand and reflect on the practices of “situated solidarities” growing from “radical vulnerability” that can imagine pathways for just urbanisms (Nagar, 2019).

As imperialist wars and an unending pandemic eclipse our present moment, there are new questions that the IP scholarship has to grapple with. Such grappling will require careful understanding of IP practices that are seeds and roots of transformation. In this we will have to confront the reality that eurocentric, canonical planning has been a site of collective pain. We will be faced with the question: can we tackle planning’s ever-growing historical baggage without liberalism’s anxieties, individualized guilt, responsibility, and shame, and the drama of profit?

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