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Introduction: historical institutionalist perspectives on European spatial planning

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ABSTRACT

In a context where European integration is put into question, under the weight of external (migration, safety issues, economic) and centrifugal forces (Brexit, growing Euroscepticism), European spatial planning has been somewhat sidelined in the debates on the European Union's goals, cohesion and future. This special issue aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of these dynamics by revisiting the history of European spatial planning - from its origins, gradual institutionalisation to its current rolling back - by exploring it both at the European and the national level, stressing its difficulties and idiosyncrasies.

The conceptual framework of historical institutionalism is used across the papers in an attempt to shed more light on this processes, through the analysis of critical junctures and path dependency of planning and cohesion agendas, transnational networks as well as changes to the national institutions and planning systems.

This tightly woven collection of papers touches upon not only upon the underlying arguments for European cohesion, which are currently being called into question, but also the questions about the (rather bleak) future of European spatial planning in light of current discussions concerning democratic credentials and legitimacy of the EU project as a whole. In fact, the European spatial planning field can be considered as an 'EU microcosm', where the process of institutionalisation or unravelling of shared rules and concepts reflect the the broader trajectories and the state of the European integration.

Keywords: European spatial planning; historical institutionalism; institutionalisation; territorial cohesion; strategic planning; place-based development; European Union.

André Sorensen's proposal¹ for the application of the historical institutionalism (HI) approach to planning history inspired the design of this special issue. Responding to Sorensen's pledge to take path dependence more seriously in planning research, this collection of papers applies the HI framework to shed more light on the evolution of European spatial planning as well as on the ways in which the European Union (EU) norms related to planning have resonated with the domestic institutional and planning systems across Europe. While approaching the topic from different thematic and empirical angles, the papers share an emphasis on critical junctures as a concept which is extremely useful in unpacking and understanding of the historical development of European spatial planning, its current stagnation (and possible future) as well as its differentiated impacts on the institutional reforms and planning practice on the ground.

Several of the papers in the collection combine the HI approach with a focus on Europeanisation processes. The latter can be understood as "Processes of (a) construction (b) diffusion and (c) institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, "ways of doing things" and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, political structures and public policies."²This definition is wide enough to be both applied to the study of the institutionalisation of norms across the EU and within particular EU member states or even their regions, while at the same time being particularly well suited to investigating the informal dynamics of institutional development in European spatial planning.

Over the past two decades, the mechanisms and processes through which Europeanisation has taken place at both EU and domestic levels have been investigated from diverse perspectives. The planning literature on this topic focuses on the emergence of new planning concepts, discourses, policies, structures and instruments for EU territorial cooperation,³ the mutual learning between actors involved in transnational cooperation programmes,⁴ the mechanisms of change and influence on domestic planning policies in different countries,⁵ and the impact of EU sector policies upon the planning agendas,

¹ Sorensen, "Taking Path Dependence Seriously."

² Radaelli, "Whither Europeanization? Concept stretching and substantive change."

³ Faludi and Waterhout, "The making of the European Spatial Development Perspective."

Faludi, "European spatial planning: a contested field."

Kunzmann, "The Europeanization of spatial planning."

⁴ Colomb, "The added value of transnational cooperation." Dabinett, "The Europeanization of spatial strategy." De Jong and Edelenbos, "An insider's look into policy transfer in transnational expert networks."

Dühr, Colomb, and Nadin, *European spatial planning and territorial cooperation*. Dühr, Stead, and Zonneveld, "The Europeanization of spatial planning through territorial cooperation."

Hachmann, "Promoting learning in transnational networks."

⁵ Dabinett and Richardson, "The Europeanization of spatial strategy." Giannakourou, "Transforming spatial planning policy in Mediterranean countries." Lingua and Servillo, *The modernisation of the Italian Planning system*. Reimer, Getimis, and Blotvogel, *Spatial Planning Systems and Practices in Europe*. Rivolin and Faludi, "The hidden face of European spatial planning."

Shaw and Sykes, "Investigating the application of the European Spatial Development Perspective."

Tewdwr-Jones and Williams, *The European dimension of British planning*. Waterhout, "Episodes of Europeanization of Dutch national spatial planning."

Zonneveld, "The Europeanization of Dutch national spatial planning."

structures and policies of the member states.⁶

There are several gaps in this literature however, which informed the design of this special issue. First, whilst there is abundant evidence of inter-governmental, cross-national and national learning, and there are many examples of good practices and diffusion of policy approaches and instruments, the trajectories of adaptation behind these processes and the mechanisms through which learning, lesson-drawing or transfer have taken place appear to be diverse and call for further exploration. Although Europeanisation has become a concept widely used in the planning literature, the research to date has hardly taken into account its informal nature and the conditions determining the mechanisms and trajectories of change. Second, since European spatial planning is an informal and lightly institutionalised field of EU governance, the role of actors in responding to changes through learning and transferring knowledge and good practices is of key importance for it. This actor-centred perspective predominates in the literature on Europeanisation of planning⁷ and networking for transnational cooperation in the field of planning.⁸ Such institutionalist perspective,⁹ emphasising processes of mutual learning, has been adopted in those studies considering Europeanisation as the outcome of a dialectical interaction of actors and social institutions, referring mainly to sociological institutionalism (SI). Much less attention, however, has been paid to the historical contingencies in these processes.

In order to bridge those gaps, this collection of papers investigates the history of Europeanisation from an institutionalist point of view, shedding light on the multi-scale dynamics inherent to the EU setting and the formal and informal processes that are both top-down and bottom-up in nature. Whether unpacking the narratives of European spatial planning (papers by Faludi and Zonneveld in this issue), the diffusion of shared norms and understandings through territorial cooperation (paper by Dühr) or the impacts of the EU on the national planning systems and practices (papers by Lingua, Dabrowski and Piskorek), the special issue papers draw on a shared set of key concepts from the HI toolkit, namely 'path dependence,' 'critical junctures' and 'adaptation.'

The rise of European spatial planning can indeed be best understood as a process punctuated by 'critical junctures,' i.e. exogenous forces challenging the status quo and pushing towards a new equilibrium, in which new institutional arrangements and new developmental pathways are created, albeit along pathways distinct to different countries.¹⁰ From the EU member states' point of view, indeed, the major steps for the Europeanisation of spatial planning can indeed be considered as exogenous forces shaping the pathways toward the institutionalisation¹¹ of European concepts and norms within their domestic planning systems, where institutionalisation is seen as "a process in which recurring patterns of the agent's behaviour lead to valued and stable organizations, procedures and beliefs".

⁶ Shaw and Sykes, "Investigating the application of the European Spatial Development Perspective."

Tewdwr-Jones and McNeill, "The Politics of City-Region Planning and Governance."

⁷ Faludi, "European territorial cooperation and learning." Hachmann, "Promoting learning in transnational networks." Nadin and Stead, "European Spatial Planning Systems."

⁸ Dühr, Colomb, and Nadin, *European spatial planning and territorial cooperation*.

⁹ Booth, "Culture, planning and path dependence." González and Healey, "A sociological institutionalist approach." Healey, "The new institutionalism and the transformative goals of planning." Servillo and van den Broeck, "The social construction of planning systems."

¹⁰ Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*.

¹¹ Waterhout, "Episodes of Europeanization of Dutch national spatial planning," 312.

The ability of such exogenous forces to disrupt the *status quo* and promote change depends, in turn, on the distinctive features of the institutional contexts in those countries and the strategies adopted by the actors involved.

The special issue deals with three aspects of European spatial planning. First, it explores the directions of change, i.e. the ways in which European spatial planning, even being outside EU formal competencies, has triggered institutional and policy changes both in the EU and national arenas. Second, it emphasises the role of the critical junctures that punctuate these processes of change. Here critical junctures correspond both to the key historical moments in the rise (and decline) of European spatial planning, and to the role of these in driving domestic changes, acting as exogenous forces destabilising the internal equilibrium and opening new paths for institutional change. Third, it explores the role of veto players and the ways in which they affect trajectories of change.

While looking into the past, this investigation remains topical as it can inform the debate on the state of European spatial planning and its future evolution at a moment in which the effectiveness, the legitimacy and purpose of the EU and its policies are being strongly questioned both by Eurosceptic political actors and some of the EU member states. In fact, considerations on further institutionalisation of European spatial planning reflect the debate on the state of the EU as a whole. Considering that for a decade at least the 'European dream' of an 'ever closer Union' has been unravelling and the EU Member States are increasingly keen to protect their sovereignty and 'take back control,' the future European spatial planning agenda looks bleak (see Faludi's contribution to this issue).

However, in debating the future of the European integration project, one cannot avoid reflecting on its territoriality and on the mechanisms of adaptation put in action in the Member States in response to EU policies and planning concepts. Thus, if pessimism about the institutionalisation of European spatial planning on the EU level predominates, a more nuanced picture emerges while looking at the national and regional levels, where, in some places at least, interesting processes of adaptation to changes stimulated by the EU policies, concepts and rules can be observed. Here, HI and the critical junctures concept help to understand and explain better why, when and how the domestic actors adapt to the European influence.

The notion of veto powers further elucidates why certain paths in institutionalisation of European spatial planning are taken or not. The processes of adaptation and learning are strongly determined by the strength or weakness of veto players defending the *status quo* and on the opportunities for discretion in implementation or enforcement allowed by institutions. The papers collected here also indicate a notable difference between the EU and national level in this respect. At the EU level, veto powers seem diffuse and connected to individual actors that are directly involved in the processes on behalf of the Member States. The strength of their commitment to the notion of European spatial planning and their desire to infuse it with elements of their own planning culture¹² are important factors here. As reported by Zonneveld, a feeling of great enthusiasm and consequent coalition of interest toward innovation can be reported at the beginning of the European spatial planning efforts, when the epistemic community become the driving force for change; at the same time, the community of practices¹³ involved in transnational cooperation networks

¹² Nadin and Stead, "European Spatial Planning Systems, Social Models and Learning."

¹³ Lave and Wenger, *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*.

gave a new boost to the transnational scale as an arena for the coordination of policies and actors across different levels, sectors and administrative boundaries (see Dühr's paper). The difficulties in activating and developing EU spatial planning processes emerge while confronting national interests and differences in planning cultures, as shown by Faludi's contribution. While the European planning debate appears to be a technocratic area of 'low politics', the 'high politics' often weighted on it as, by engaging in planning across national borders, the EU impinged upon the sensitive area of national sovereignty. Hence, the efforts to institutionalise and reinforce the EU's capacity to steer territorial development were quickly dashed by some Member States reluctant to delegate any competences in this field to the European level. The focus on the 'critical junctures' sheds more light on those 'behind the scene' powerplays between the promoters and opponents of European spatial planning, which tended to intensify at the 'turning points' in the development of the European integration project. At the national level however, veto powers of actors are more evident and structured around political parties and strong coalitions of socio-economic and political stakeholders. Here the mechanisms of change are more connected to distinct national pathways of Europeanisation and depend on the features of the political and institutional context (see papers by Lingua or Dąbrowski and Piskorek in this issue).

The papers in this special issue tackle the topic from two complementary perspectives: (1) the emergence of the European spatial planning at the EU level and (2) the impacts of European planning norms and ideas as conveyed through EU cohesion policy, on the domestic planning systems and practices in various EU member states and their regions. The first research perspective is adopted in the contributions by Wil Zonneveld, Andreas Faludi and Stefanie Dühr. Zonneveld's paper looks into the early attempts at enshrining a spatial planning agenda into the European integration project through the activity of the Conference of Regions in North West Europe (CRONWE). The HI lens allows us to demonstrate that the planning subject has been present almost from the very beginning of the European community, even though the road towards a European spatial planning had later proven long and rocky. Faludi's contribution draws on the HI theoretical framework to investigate further this story. He retraces the protracted efforts to establish spatial planning at the EU level by exploring the interplay between planning knowledge and the pathways of the EU's own institutional development that, ultimately, led to the emergence of the 'territorial cohesion' agenda. Following a similar line of inquiry, Dühr uses the HI perspective to investigate the challenges in the institutionalisation and governance of transnational spaces in the EU through territorial cooperation programs. Similarly to Faludi, Dühr surveys the various territorial cooperation initiatives in the EU and argues that they should be understood as part of a wider evolution of the European integration project itself.

The second perspective, concerned with the impacts of European spatial planning concepts in the EU member states and their regions, is the focus of the two remaining papers. Valeria Lingua's contribution ponders upon the challenges of the institutionalisation of strategic spatial planning promoted as part of the EU cohesion policy framework across differentiated domestic spatial planning systems. She compares the cases of England and Italy, stressing the role of path dependencies in the process of translating the European strategic planning concepts into domestic practices. Finally, Marcin Dąbrowski and Katarzyna Piskorek explore the difficult and uneven process of institutionalisation of strategic spatial planning practices conveyed via EU cohesion policy in Central and Eastern European countries. The emergence of local and regional self-government and the ways in which the strategic planning has developed at those two levels as a result of domestic and European pressures is compared across three regional cases from Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary.

The special issue closes with a commentary by André Sorensen. This closing piece offers a reflection on the issues cutting across the papers, on the application of the HI framework to study European planning history, and on the future potential applications of the HI research agenda for international comparative planning studies.

In summary, this collection of papers demonstrates the potential of HI to deepen the understanding of European planning history in a multi-level context (see Sorensen's piece) by analysing how and why EU and domestic planning ideas, concepts, systems and practices interact, evolve and change over time. The papers collected here also outline some exciting avenues for future research, which will hopefully inspire further planning research using the historical institutionalist perspective.

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