



Jörg Knieling — From Sustainability to “Great Transformation”: Reflections on Klaus Kunzmann’s Thoughts about Planning Education in Europe

Jörg Knieling

To cite this article: Jörg Knieling (2017) Jörg Knieling — From Sustainability to “Great Transformation”: Reflections on Klaus Kunzmann’s Thoughts about Planning Education in Europe, *disP - The Planning Review*, 53:2, 72-73, DOI: [10.1080/02513625.2017.1341109](https://doi.org/10.1080/02513625.2017.1341109)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02513625.2017.1341109>



Published online: 26 Jun 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Jörg Knieling is Professor of Urban Planning and Regional Development at HafenCity University Hamburg. He was educated in territorial and environmental planning, and political science and sociology, and is a member of the German Academy for Spatial Research and Planning, and the Advisory Board for Spatial Development of the respective German Federal Ministry. He was Directeur d’Etudes Associé at the Institute of Advanced Studies in Paris and Guest Professor for “Contemporary Cities” at Politecnico di Milano.

Klaus Kunzmann’s paper on “The Future of Planning Education in Europe” seems to have been written only recently – and yet it was 1997, 20 years ago, that he undertook this concentrated approach to planning and its education. Most of the issues he mentioned are still quite relevant. “Sustainable urban development” was as trendy a goal in the 1990s as it is today. After the Rio 1992 Agenda had led to that huge impulse for urban development and planning all around the world, the topic has remained at the top of the political agenda. Nevertheless, the planning discussion has been confronted with further developments, adding to, deepening, and strengthening Kunzmann’s agenda. Consequently, competencies and requirements for planning and planning education need critical reflection. In the following, three respective topics have been chosen: (i) from sustainable development to “Great Transformation”; (ii) fundamental threats through climate change; and (iii) social and territorial polarization in a new dimension.

From sustainable development towards “Great Transformation”

Along with Agenda 21, in many European countries in the 1990s a new quality of urban development was envisioned. Sustainable development became a core issue in politics and was integrated into many planning documents on all levels. As a result, critical consequences of sectoral interventions became more visible, and calls to further develop processes and instruments of integrated and anticipatory planning arose. On the instrumental side, a number of assessment tools were developed and included in planning procedures. Nevertheless, the success of all those strategies was limited due to unrestrained economic growth taking its toll: increasing land consumption, environmental pollution of water, air and soil, and reduced biodiversity are only some of the consequences seen along this path of development. Urban planning has become increasingly aware of the huge gap between the Agenda 21 rhetoric and the reality in cities.

In recent years a new phrase has arisen as successor to the first movements towards sustainability. The “Great Transformation” stands for a fundamental critique of the status quo and the insufficient achievements towards sustainability so far (WBGU 2011, 2016). Taking a global resource perspective, it requires decisive steps towards a new self-conception of development and more responsibility for future

generations. For planning, this is more than “business as usual”, but critical reflection is necessary in order to consider to what extent existing goals, processes, and instruments are still suitable and whether they can satisfactorily contribute to transformative practice. Core topics are sustainability innovations, transformation processes, motivating pioneers of change, and, thus, transformation of the dominant societal regime (Geels, Schot 2007). In his paper, Kunzmann (1997: 3) mentioned that “the future planner will have to play many roles in his/her day-to-day practice, he/she may have to be a specialist in the morning, a promotor over lunch, a coordinator in the early afternoon, a moderator at five o’clock, and a communicator at a public meeting in the evening. He/she will have to be visionary, motivated and committed. And he/she will have to exert the given work with competence and efficiency. Along such lines they will be accepted, influential and successful.” Certainly, those are still core competencies of the planning profession, but will they be sufficient for real influence and success under the conditions of the “Great Transformation”?

Fundamental threats through climate change

In 1997, the issue of climate change was much less prominent than today. Meanwhile studies conducted by the IPCC and others have confirmed the dramatic impact of climate change on those living in cities. A huge amount of people live in cities in coastal areas, which have attracted settlement but will face major problems as sea levels rise. In the Global South, in particular, people are threatened due to the lack of adaptation capacities. However, European cities will also suffer major problems, including flooding, temperature rise, and sudden extreme rain events. With so many activities having been concentrated in cities and the continuously increasing process of urbanization, cities are one of the main contributors to climate change. Industry, traffic, and housing emit most of the climate change relevant gases.

Many concepts of urban planning can be used to tackle emission levels. Integrated settlement and mobility concepts favoring public transport, bikes, and walking; short travel distances encouraged by mixed uses; or more energy-efficient building and housing were already discussed in 1997, but there is a much stronger need for them nowadays in the face of climate change. This provokes a few major

questions. What went wrong with planning in the last twenty years? Why did existing concepts and tools not deliver the expected results? And, why has urban and spatial planning not only failed to win more prominence as a problem solver, but also, in many countries, even suffered a loss of influence?

New dimension of social and territorial polarization

Klaus Kunzmann (1997:3) also cited the issue of “increasingly fragmented and polarized urban regions of Europe” as central for planning. Whereas polarization had always been one of the core issues for urban development, the topic has become much more pressing during the last twenty years. Europe is confronted with polarization on different levels, threatening solid co-operation on the continent. First, on the macro level, the countries of the South have been stigmatized by the economic crisis that has massively affected the lives of great parts of the population: youth unemployment, the housing crisis in the middle class, impoverishment of the elderly etc. threaten the democratic quality of Europe. Second, on the national level, metropolises cannibalize the future of rural areas as young people move to growing cities and the periphery is confronted with demographic shrinkage and economic downturn. And third, on the city level, housing has become an unattainable goal for many parts of the population. Investor-driven housing development serves the rich and neglects the poor, leading to the homogenization of central areas, with office space and expensive condominiums, and the segregation of cheap housing in the neglected quarters and the suburbs. Overall, this polarization undermines the policies of European cohesion and also the European project as a vision for better, more democratic living. Planning must be challenged: it must answer the question in how far its goals, strategies, and instruments are still suitable to contribute to the creation of solutions to these problems.

“The Future of Planning Education in Europe”

Kunzmann’s paper was published in 1997. What do the new challenges mean for planning education in 2017, 20 years later, and beyond? Planners still “will have to play many roles... (to) be accepted, influential and successful.” However, now even more than in 1997, they have to reflect and redefine their role in society in providing solutions and tackling new challenges. Reflections on the habits of the profession make this clear: if urban planning mainly

serves a market-driven real estate sector as a tool, one should not be surprised if planning loses support in society. If the metropolises continue to cannibalize the rural areas, social shifts will be the consequence in both the cities and the periphery. And if territorial development on the European scale does not tackle the social problems in southern Europe and other parts of the union, one must not wonder why cohesion policy is not seen as sufficient.

In 1971, the political scientist Fritz W. Scharpf (1971) pointed out that planning is always a political process. Every intervention in the complex system of the city or region is political, meaning that it is connected with specific interests, serves some stakeholders and neglects others, and is influenced by institutional, procedural, and cultural frameworks. However, the current challenges for planning demand more social responsibility, more anticipatory capability, and creativity in problem-solving in order to contribute to the “Great Transformation” or – to stick to the older but still highly relevant term – “sustainability transition”. How could a revision of existing goals and strategies of planning be shaped to take the transition requirement seriously? Which instruments and tools could better overcome the resistance against transformations? And, finally, can planners become the necessary pioneers of transition? (Knieling, Klindworth 2017) From the author’s point of view these are central aspects that need to be tackled in future planning discourse and education. Furthermore, they can contribute to actualizing Kunzmann’s highly valuable considerations from 1997.

References

- GEELS, F.W.; SCHOT, J. (2007): Typology of socio-technical transition pathways. *Research Policy*, 36 (3), pp. 399–417.
- KNIELING, J.; KLINDWORTH, K. (2017): German spatial planners as pioneers for sustainability transition – Considerations towards planners’ self-conception. In TASAN-KOK, T.; ORANJE, M. (eds.), *From planning student to urban planner: Young practitioners’ reflections on contemporary ethical challenges*. London: Routledge (forthcoming).
- KUNZMANN, K. (1997): *The Future of Planning Education in Europe*. AESOP News (Summer 1997), pp. 3–6.
- SCHARPF, F.W. (1973): *Planung als politischer Prozess: Aufsätze zur Theorie der planenden Demokratie*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- WBGU – GERMAN ADVISORY COUNCIL ON GLOBAL CHANGE (2016): *Humanity on the move: Unlocking the transformative power of cities*. Berlin: WBGU.
- WBGU – GERMAN ADVISORY COUNCIL ON GLOBAL CHANGE (2011): *World in transition. A social contract for sustainability*. Berlin: WBGU