

NIMBY and the ethics of the particular

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In their interesting and thought provoking paper, Feldman & Turner define the NIMBY position as revolving around concrete decisions and choices. A typical NIMBY activist does not so much argue against wind farms per se, but would prefer not to build them altogether rather than having them in his or her own backyard. According to the authors, a minimal requirement for a NIMBY claim is therefore that it expresses "preference ranking", although they point out that a NIMBY position also has to "involve something above and beyond the mere expression of preference". Nevertheless, their primary conceptualization of NIMBY claims is to treat them as defending alternative ranking of choices and expressing alternative preferences. By choosing this perspective, the authors tend to underestimate the fact that, more often than not, issues raised by NIMBY protesters do not merely concern concrete decisions, but also revolve around place meanings and world views.

The reason why NIMBY activists so often meet with hostility from policy makers is because they engage themselves with matters that usually are considered to be inappropriate subjects in political debates. Dominant political discourse within liberal democracy requires political citizens to reason either in terms of the 'common good' or in terms of personal preferences that can be weighted against other preferences. I argue that many NIMBY activists do neither. Many NIMBY activists do not so much give voice to personal preferences or to alternative visions of the common good, but rather try to reframe the debate by starting from a radically different approach to the meaning of a place. Central to many NIMBY protests are concern of a (for lack of a better word) metaphysical nature, although many of these concerns remain implicit most the time, precisely because they are considered inappropriate.

Feldman & Turner claim that it is possible to interpret many NIMBY claims as expressions of "geographical partiality" and as "giving voice to the fact that she cares more for the care of this particular place than about others". They rightfully argue that this type of partiality is not on itself a form of selfishness, although "partiality toward places and concern for one's self interest often intertwine". Yet, the very framing of the NIMBY stance as expression of personal partiality fails to recognize a more radical element at stake in NIMBY protests that often remains implicit in so many NIMBY protests. Key to this more radical stake is not the geographical partiality towards one place over another, but rather the denial of the very idea that we could or should compare different particular places altogether.

It has often been pointed out that the type of rationality that dominates western thought in general, and political discourse concerning spatial matters in particular, starts from a universalist world view, in which space precedes place - a Cartesian universe in which particular locations are merely coordinates in universal space. From such a universal perspective it is possible to compare different places with each other, since they are merely particular instances of universal space. It even becomes possible to argue to 'sacrifice' a particular place for the good of society as a whole.

NIMBY activists seem to question this very notion of comparability of particular places. They start from an alternative rationality that leads us away from uniform space into a world consisting of singular, unique places. Similarly, in stead of arguing from a universal conception of common good, and instead of granting that their contribution to the debate merely reflects a particularist attachment to a specific place and an individual preference for certain alternative choices, they engage with and speak from a worldview that is non-universalizable, that starts with unique places with their own character, history and sense of place, and that beckon to be respected and acknowledged with a place-specific measure.

Place-concerns like these are hard to account for in policy processes, since the arguments form a particular place are either considered 'irrational', or personal and non-binding from the perspective of political liberalism. Policy acknowledges that 'thick evaluative concepts' can play a role within the confinements of the private sphere or within a specific cultural context, but denies them the rationality that is needed to have any universal binding force in policy discussions. What is universally binding is the fact that people's preferences should be respected, not the particular reasons they have for holding this particular preference.

In his excellent book *An Ethics of Place* (2001), Mick Smith has examined British anti-road protests in the 1990's, that can help us understand this radical element of certain NIMBY protests. Especially in the second half of the 90's there were vehement protests against the felling of forests for new roads. Many activists build tree houses to keep out the draglines and bulldozers out. At first sight, the conflict revolved around differences in preferences and valuations, and whether or not trees may be cut down for highways. Seen this way, anti-road protests appear as just another political battle over the perception and allocation of space. However, this interpretation does not get to the core of things.

According to Smith, the real issue in this case involved an almost 'metaphysical' dispute over the meaning of space. Highways are especially designed to get goods and people from A to B as efficiently as possible, that is: with as little time as possible and without spending too much attention to all locations along the way. The radical anti-road protests gave voice to all the 'points' between A and B. In the dominant approach space is seen as an abstract dimension, filled with locations (coordinates in a geometric grid) that are in essence exchangeable. Space is a vast expanse and can be used by humans at their discretion - it's like an empty canvas to be filled. In contrast, the anti-road activists expressed another spatial experience, one that revolves around local and specific places with specific meanings, with their own history and ecology, filled with life stories and linked to local communities.

Smith suggests that both conceptions of space imply different conceptions of ethics as well. The dominant notion of space goes hand in hand with an abstract and universal view of ethics and politics, in which 'rationality', 'wise political decision making' and 'common good' are key terms. The alternative view of the activists in stead expresses a different, rather diffuse localized ethos that has barely found a proper articulation yet. This new place-based ethics – that implicitly structures the radical NIMBY protests as discussed by Smith – is difficult to articulate in the context of modern society. For that reason, many activists still give voice to their moral concerns in traditional ethical terms such as 'the right of a forest to exist'. Smith points out, however, that although the new localized ethos may not yet have found suitable wordings, it already had developed other forms of expression. The tree huts themselves fit easily within the new ethics of place: tree huts enable the activists to make the forest their own, to live in forest in such a way that the forest remains intact, while acknowledging the forest as a place filled with stories and meanings, intertwined with people's lives, and recognizing the forest' value which is embodied in human-nature relationships. Whereas, for motorists, each point along the way can only appear as a possible holdup on the fast connection through space between two points A and B, the tree house activists change perspective and point to the intrinsic qualities of concrete places halfway: in stead of merely rushing by, we should acknowledge that these places demand attention and beckon for a place-based ethos. The world does not merely consist of starting points and destinations; places in between have their own specific quality, their own weight of being.

Smith analysis of the anti-road protests makes clear that certain radical NIMBY protests should not be solely interpreted in term of citizens advocating a different choice on spatial matters within the liberal political system, but should also be recognized as attempts to break through the very liberal rationality. This is not to deny that some of the NIMBY arguments can be interpreted in traditional political and economic terms – certain places are considered of great value by some groups of citizens, and the views of these citizens must be represented in the political debate. But it is important to realize that a more radical argument might get lost in that translation. Many NIMBY protests cannot be solely seen as attempts of local inhabitants to promote their interests and preferences in the political arena. The more radical issue is another: whether the place at stake in all its particularity is a particularly valuable, meaningful place, not to be compared to or replaced by other places. It was a metaphysical struggle for the meaning of space and locality.

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Smith, M. (2001). *An ethics of place. Radical ecology, postmodernity, and social theory*. (New York: Suny).