

Co-Production Between Insurgency and Exploitation: Promises and Precarities of a Traveling Concept

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Abstract

Co-production has inspired planning practice and research in the past decades. Along with its appropriation in the planning literature it has undergone manifold translations and its boundaries have become blurry. In this commentary I propose a conceptualisation of co-production not only as efficient service provision by citizens and state actors together but furthermore as a kind of city-making that has transformative potential beyond concrete interventions in the present moment. This matters because it enables a conceptual discrimination between co-production and the exploitation of marginalised people’s resources, time, and labour. I argue that the necessity of this discrimination becomes apparent when analysing co-productive efforts in their embeddedness in space and time.

Keywords

co-production; heterogeneous infrastructures; insurgent planning; Southern urbanisms

1. Introduction

Co-production traveled globally in the past decades, from place to place, across academic discourses and urban practices. On its journey, co-production entered the planning field where it inspired new thinking about citizen–government relationships in city-making and urban governance (Watson, 2014). It is a promising concept not least because its roots in Southern urbanism enable it to refresh and transcend more traditional perspectives on state–society relations shaping urban planning, as transported for example in notions such as participation or citizen engagement. Unsurprisingly, on its journey, co-production has run through myriad translations and appropriations, from place to place, from discourse to practice and from one scientific field to another, changing its meaning and shifting its boundaries. Not only does the concept of

co-production share blurring boundaries with participation or citizen engagement but, on its global travel, and in the wake of its reception in the planning literature, the term has also decomposed into a variety of notions, such as co-design, co-governance vis a vis co-finance, and so on.

This bears the question: What is left at its core, what remains there for us to recognize one thing as co-production and another thing as something else, maybe participation or other forms of citizen engagement? This is a question this thematic issue makes important contributions to. I argue that this matters because co-production is not just a promising concept but at the same time a precarious one. It is precarious because it may engender a normalization and stabilization of exploitative state-citizen relationships and thus a further marginalization of already marginalized groups in the global South and beyond. The precarity of co-production becomes visible when seeing it in its spatial and temporal embeddedness in broader urban dynamics of resource access and distribution. Therefore, I propose a narrow definition of the concept. I illustrate this point below considering instances of basic service delivery in Southern cities.

2. Approaching Co-Production

In her seminal piece, Ostrom (1996, p. 1080) argues from an economic viewpoint when she suggests to balance wages of public officials for a given service against opportunity costs for the urban poor in providing this service as an indicator for potential success of co-production. According to her, co-production works when officials' and residents' activities complement one another to the effect that public officials and residents together provide a better service than each party alone. Her focus is more on state actors and their role in granting citizens a space to co-produce rather than excluding them from contributing time and labour. Mitlin (2008) adds a stronger emphasis on the people's roles and perspective when she argues that for co-production to realise its transformative potential, the initiative needs to come from the people themselves. In other words, only if urbanites see the need and possibility to change a situation and to engage with government actors in different facets of city-making, will co-production efforts be lasting and fruitful. This echoes Appadurai's (2001) notion of deep democracy, according to which change needs to start from what people can know and understand. As Watson (2014) explains, this may engender the production of collective spaces for city-making beyond those legitimized by the government. This is particularly insightful for planning research and practice in the global Northwest, where government institutions are often still seen the sole legitimate frames for citizen engagements.

3. Limitations of a Promising Concept

Co-production is clearly inspirational for planning studies and practice globally. Nevertheless, it remains a precarious concept. Its precarity becomes visible when considering it in its spatialities, that is, its embeddedness in broader urban dynamics of resource distribution, and in its temporalities, that is, the ways in which it may transform over time and how it may further transform not only urban space and access to resources, but also dominant discourses about these.

Firstly, promising co-productive engagements may slowly erode, as we saw in our own research on water and sanitation in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. We found that in an NGO and CBO-initiated co-production of water through kiosks connected to utility pipes, the community over time withdrew from kiosk management and

allowed the person selling water from the kiosk to run it as a profitable business, not adhering to the formal rates for water (Schramm, 2018). In another instance, it was the utility that prevented the co-production of water through community-run kiosks sourcing water from the utility network by not actually connecting the kiosks to its pipes. After a while, the kiosks were run by private entrepreneurs who bought water from tanker trucks and sold it on to people living in the neighborhood. This distancing of officials and people from the project that local residents once had constructed together with local governments and the utility mattered because it resulted in water costs considerably higher than those officially stipulated and paid by urbanites connected to municipal networks, who are often wealthier than those disconnected. While this may be read quite simply as a story of failed co-production, this project in the end further stabilized uneven resource access in Dar es Salaam.

Further, the limitations of co-production become apparent when considering it across service domains. In a much-lauded NGO engagement in water provision for the urban poor in Dhaka, Bangladesh, actors were able to co-produce water infrastructures through water kiosks connected to the utility network across settlements without household connections. This clearly improved economic returns of the utility as well as the reputation of the NGO that received funds from international donors. The NGO then supported non-sewered sanitation in settlements disconnected from the sewage network. However, here the utility withdrew, leaving sanitation of poorer disconnected settlements to NGOs and CBOs alone and serving only the minority population connected to municipal networks. This again improved the utility's books, but urban dwellers were left to cope with their sanitation without state support or involvement (Heidler et al., 2023). Referring to Ostrom (1996) who emphasizes the importance of state actors engaging in co-production, we see here the opposite of a situation she found: Officials do not prevent co-production because they feel their dominance in service provision is questioned, but because they withdraw in the name of efficiency—not of the service provided, whose efficiency may actually suffer, but of their own operations. Thus, particularly in the present moment when utilities remain subject to broader pressures of commercialization and demands of cost-efficiency, co-production may become compromised when officials' calculations focus more on the efficiency of their operations than on the service, encouraging them to withdraw from providing or even co-producing services when these efforts may run counter to their goal of efficiency in utility operations.

More broadly, a perspective on co-production in its embeddedness makes apparent its precarious relationship with questions of urban justice. The incidents mentioned here and elsewhere underline how urbanites' dis/engagement with service provision reflects uneven power relations, between state and non-state actors, within neighborhoods, where actors appropriate co-produced infrastructures as a business, and between neighborhoods, when more solvent geographies are connected to less costly alternatives that do not require residents' contributions of time and labour. Further, where officials may withdraw from service provision to poorer neighborhoods, co-production of other services may enable actors to normalize unjust infrastructural constellations. Importantly, in light of a broad recognition of the heterogeneity inherent to urban infrastructures per se, the task lies in distinguishing unjust infrastructural constellations from mere differences in access to basic services, as the latter need not be unjust.

4. Transformative Potentials

My point is by no means to discount co-production. On the contrary, precisely because of its transformative potential it is paramount to hint to its precarities and the related necessity to advance it beyond the aspect

of efficiency in service provision through the contribution of resources by officials and citizens to include its transformative impact in terms of the relationship between citizens and state actors. Only if such a changing relationship toward a more progressive one exists may co-production prevent further exploitation of already marginalized urban dwellers. On the other hand, if this change in relationship is not in sight in citizen–state engagements in a given project, citizens, NGOs, and governments may well decide to turn away from the project and rather focus on long-term engagements with each other. This resonates with Appadurai’s (2001, p. 28) idea of a politics of patience, which calls for urban actors to not only focus on improved services or access to basic needs in the present moment but to engage in a slow and long-term political process.

I propose to mobilise Miraftab’s (2009) concept of insurgent planning in order to determine whether a co-productive effort has transformative potential. Miraftab (2009) defines insurgent planning as transgressive, i.e., happening in two distinct spaces, namely *invited* spaces of participation, the formal channels for engagement that are legitimized and provided by the government, and *invented* spaces of participation, spaces that people have created themselves outside of formal platforms for engagement and that are often delegitimized by governments. I argue that beyond the production of, and engagement with, these two spaces by citizens, co-production requires a further condition: State actors need to be willing and able to engage with invented spaces of action and to turn them into sanctioned spaces in the co-productive process. Only if these conditions, the economic one, that either actor cannot provide the service as efficiently as both actors together, and that actors engage in a transformative process together that will work against broader inequalities and injustices, are met, can we actually speak of co-production.

This means that despite the burgeoning literature on co-production and the enthusiasm of many urban scholars for co-production, given these conditions, actual co-production may be rare. Still, applying these conditions enables us to draw a line between co-production and the exploitation of people’s financial resources, time, and labour by official utilities, state agencies, or other actors. This matters specifically in the present moment, where, for example, dominant paradigms of commercialization and full cost recovery put utilities under pressure when engaging in more costly or risky endeavours.

Lastly, when seeing co-production as transgressing spaces of participation provided by governments (Castán Broto et al., 2022), a key task for scholarly engagement with co-production becomes the analysis of existing uneven power relations and inequalities in access to resources between governments and people. Thus, one important merit of this thematic issue is the problematization of these relations and inequalities, and the ways people and governments address these in co-productive processes. Overall, precisely because of the potentials and precarities of the concept, this thematic issue’s contribution to a clarification of the term is laudable, for this clarification may be a step toward transformative urbanism and city-making more broadly.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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