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Jackie Leavitt: Social Justice as a Calling

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What was perhaps most unusual about Jackie Leavitt's professional and political social justice work was the relationship between them and her personal life: how she informed her own work by her lived experience with people, and drew the lessons of that work for socially concerned planners and planning. One of those lessons was that work was only one aspect of life, and should not be used as the defining characteristic of people, characterizing them as individuals simply by what they did, what role they played in society. People were central for her: central in her life, an amazing set of friends and contacts that enriched her life and the lives of those who she touched, and central in her work, in which she never treated the people involved as numbers, as categories to be dealt with according to their position in one hierarchy or another, but as full and unique individuals, to be respected and treated in all their diversity and humanity. Her life illuminates both who planners are and what planners do. One of the outstanding threads in her life is the focus on the humanity of the individuals involved, both in her life and in her work.

For those on the activist social movement and professional planning end of her work, Jackie had much to offer. Rather than bow to the pressures for "objectivity" and "neutrality" often encountered in academia and professional research, she was clearly politically committed in the best sense of the phrase, to the ideals of social justice and how her work might advance that interest. Start with her conception of who planners are – and what they are not. They are not simply professionals, servants of whoever employs them or contracts for their services; they are not simply technicians for hire. Their clients, for planners, in their own minds, should be those in need, those poorly served by existing societal arrangements, particularly in day to day urban life, those for whom a deeply felt and thought-through concept of social justice requires priority to be given.

Further, those priorities are the ones that those in need themselves set, to be ascertained by transparent processes in an effective democratic manner. The conception goes beyond the advocacy model suggested by Paul Davidoff, itself a giant step forward for planners. It requires planners themselves to think through and espouse the values needed for the improvement of urban life for those ill served by it. Planners—true to the social function they are asked to perform—are ethical persons with ethically grounded values that they must use in their work.

But planners are technicians as well. They need to know how the urban system works, for whom, how, what alternatives are possible, how they might be shaped. Jackie recognized the dangers of an over-stress on the work of professional planners, the danger that they might become technocrats, seeking technical accomplishments as ends in themselves, efficiency as a goal per se, isolated from their social and particularly distributional consequences.

Jackie was a teacher all her life, and not by accident. She saw students as individuals studying to learn what planning was about, not only how to do it but why to do it, for whom, following what principles. In her consulting work, she was a teacher as well, not of the techniques of planning as such but of how those techniques might be applied in a manner to promote social justice, to serve those that most needed help in their own pursuit of social justice.

As a feminist planner, Jackie had much to offer for those typically on the receiving end of what activists and planners do. A large part of it was dedicated to changing the relationship between the two: between the activists and professional planners on one side and the intended beneficiaries of their work on the other. She wanted to overcome the separation between the two, to make the targets of the work participants in it, in its direction, in its implementation. Her dissertation, *Planning and Women, Women in Planning* (1980),¹ provided a critique of “the relationship between the planning profession’s impact on women planners and women planners’ impact on the profession and its products.”²

Jackie’s foregrounding the interests of those suffering from social injustice was not one that saw the definition of justice as quantitative, defining it by the level of inequality or the number of the homeless or hungry or ill. Jackie saw the poor, the homeless, the sick also as individuals, as human beings

1. I was privileged to serve as her dissertation advisor.

2. In the words of a profile in *Progressive Planning Magazine* (Winter 2008).

entitled not only to help but to dignity and respect – and indeed to the power to speak and act for themselves, to determine their own destinies. That led her, willy-nilly (more willy-than-nilly!) into political controversies, to speaking truth to power, and indeed often helping organize others to do the same effectively on their own behalf. Much of her research was directly motivated by the desire to gather facts and understand processes that would be useful to those struggling for their rights.

It seems to me that Jackie's view of planning and who planners are and what they do, requires a redefinition of planning, to see it not only as a professional activity but also as a political one, one serving an actively defined concept of the public interest, one rejecting the concept of professionalism as an entitlement to make decisions as experts for others. Professional planners indeed had a certain technical expertise, but it did not give them the right to set public priorities for others; rather, their skills had to be used within the political processes to make those priorities truly democratic and responsive to the wishes and needs of those most requiring the kinds of governmental actions with which planning today deals. The technical expertise of professional planners needs to be advisory, in a political process in which planners can also legitimately be involved as citizens, not as themselves decision-makers. Their role is to enlighten the political process, not to dominate it.

All of this had consequences for Jackie's concern with who planners are. To the extent that planners' expertise gives them a particular voice in the politics of public decision-making, they should themselves already be a democratically constituted and effectively representative group. Jackie's first major research project, her dissertation, cited above, had to do with the role of women in planning. Her involvements in various aspects of the civil rights movement since then, including the efforts to expand minority enrollment in planning schools and in the profession, are well known.

Those efforts were part of an over-all view of who planning students were that saw them, not simply as persons who happened for complex reasons to want a degree in some field that looked interesting and would give a decent living, but to see them rather as rounded human beings with hopes and fears searching for meaning in their lives and exploring a career in planning as one option. She understood that they had lives outside of planning, and came into the field with some generally held misconceptions of the role of planners in society, including in particular their power to "fix what's wrong with cities," as so many of them had indicated in the applications for admission. And

she dealt with them as fully rounded individuals, not as fixed vessels to be filled with the accepted verities of a particular program in which they were enrolled. I recall faculty meetings at Columbia when we were both teaching there in which particular problems of individual students were discussed, in which we all looked to Jackie to tell us what the problem was. She would know whether there was a split up with a boy or girl friend, or a death in the family, or some other particular outside event in their lives that ought to be taken into account in efforts to help them with their academic work. She knew her students as people.

The Community Scholars program that Jackie directed for over a decade at UCLA seems to me to exemplify ideally what Jackie was about. It took individuals from the community, non-academics but engaged activists dealing with the problems bringing labor and community leaders together with urban planning graduate students to conduct applied research projects. “It embodied her deep commitment to participatory planning, and both brought the university into the community and brought the community into the university,” commented Chris Tilly, and Professor of Urban Planning.³

Jackie believed deeply that all men and all women were created equal, equal but not the same, equal in deserving the understanding, respect, and dignity of treatment by the society, including recognition and respect for their astounding diversity, wants, and needs. Her work is full of people: taxi drivers, graduate students, undergraduate students, social activists, the homeless, local community-based business people, architects, sociologists, community researchers, housing managers, public housing residents, grass-roots women in the third world, immigrants, home care workers – all not as objects, but as subjects. People to be interviewed, worked with, learned from and taught, individually as well as collectively – and people to be gotten to know as persons, with families, experiences, desires, limits and potentials and contributions to joint efforts and projects.

Looking back at Jackie Leavitt’s life and work, I think we can draw some important conclusions about the educational processes involved in the education of planners. They have to do with the value that hinges on the human relationship between teacher and student, in which the knowledge and experience of the teacher are put at the service of the student, and not made the master of what is done.

3. Taken from UCLA’s draft obit.

And what conclusions could one draw as to the practice of the profession of planning? Professionalism involves a constant awareness of the limitations of the knowledge and power of the expert, and requires a human relation between the professional and those affected by their work, a relationship of equality and mutual respect in which the ethical values of the profession become one of solidarity and collective learning, wherein work is being jointly undertaken.

Jackie Leavitt's life and work offer some shining examples of these conclusions. Her legacy, through her writing, her research, and above all her influence on the people she worked with and was concerned for, will long endure.