PASTEURIZED AND HOMOGENIZED: MODERN URBANISM AND HUMAN NEEDS

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A review essay on Paul Rabinow's *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989)

French Modern is one of these books that one should read twice: the first time, in order to enjoy the author's storytelling; the second time, to learn from his skillful analysis. The story, in this case, is that of the genesis of French *urbanisme*. It is the story of "technicians of general ideas": social reformers and statisticians, military men and politicians, architects and social scientists whose work lies in "the middle ground between high culture or science and ordinary life" (p. 9). Rabinow tells us about their efforts to fashion new fields of knowledge and technologies of social control, as well as new urban forms and social spaces. Through this story, Rabinow analyzes the specific forms of rationality that these men embodied and articulated, forms of rationality that made possible a new mode of social regulation: modern city planning. While the book is about French planning, it has lessons for American planning practitioners, historians, and theorists, who may find that the field of planning evolved in similar ways on both sides of the Atlantic. Both French and American planning share an early emphasis on hygiene and both gradually came to rely on universal standards in order to analyze and regulate the city and its population.

Paul Rabinow, Professor of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley, looks at French city planning with the aim of capturing "some of the contours of modern power and knowledge Foucault had begun to map" (pp. 8-9). More specifically, Rabinow describes how new representations and interventions -- new modes of analysis and action -- crystallized into "the planned city as regulator of modern society" (p. 12). As a student of modernity, the author is concerned with objectification and rationalization; as an anthropologist, he does not bother with Reason and Rationality, but scrutinizes the specific "practice[s] of reason" (p. 9) and the particular "type[s] of rationality" (p. 1) that made modern planning possible.

Rabinow recounts the story of the nineteenth century development of an "apparatus of finely grained observation of the social body . . . in the service of the health of the population and the general good" (p. 39). At the end of the century, however,

> [w]hat had begun as a predominantly hygienist and philanthropic concern gradually expanded to a debate about the nature of the modern city, public services, and the role of the state as an agent of social transformation (p. 332).

Modern urbanism was born at that time, as a response to the crisis of modernity. In the face of social disruption, whether it was seen as anomie or as class struggle, "the challenge was to invent new forms for society" (p. 116) and to develop norms on the basis of which one could implement and regulate these forms.

Rabinow identifies two main stages in the genesis of modern urbanism: "techno-cosmopolitanism" and "middling modernism." The first phase is one of "modernization before modernism," in which the object of planning still possesses natural, historical, and political dimensions. That is, the purpose of interventions is to regulate society in a rational manner, but with an explicit recognition of the cultural and political diversity of the city. In the second phase, which opens the era of technocratic planning, space is seen as an abstract "socio-technical environment [regulated] by committed specialists dedicated to the public good" (p. 320). Architects, urbanists, and social scientists now join forces in order to "produce and regulate an optimum social environment" (p. 321) -- which they do, of course, "in the name of efficiency, science, progress, and welfare" (p. 322).

Through legal and legislative battles, battles which they often lost, reformers attempted to introduce their ideas and techniques into local government practice. At the end of the nineteenth century, their efforts slowly started to pay off. As in the United States, victorious battles meant "the legitimation and institutionalization of pairs of expert urbanists and administrators in local government" (p. 332). More importantly, the new procedures made possible the institutionalization of a new conception of society. Imbued with organic and mechanical metaphors, this new conception made society a possible object of regulation in itself. Not only did the frequency and scope of public intervention change, mostly in response to economic downturns (or wars), but the nature of intervention changes too. With the birth of the Welfare State (*l'Etat Providence*), city planning turned into an arm of "the scientific administration of modern life as a whole" (p. 343), and its task became one of shaping the environment according to functional criteria and normalized sociological categories.

What is modern about twentieth century planning, then, is not only a preference for specific architectural or urban forms; in fact, planners have given their allegiance to a variety of styles, from Neo-Classicism to High Modernism, and on to Post-Modernism. Nor is the use of scientific analysis *per se* enough to characterize modern planning; at all times

planners have had to rely on technical understanding in order to implement their plans. Nor is the normative dimension of efforts to shape the urban environment typically modern; rulers and citizens have always had some higher good in mind when giving form to their milieu. What is specific about modern urbanism lies in its guiding norms and in the corresponding conceptions of society and space. More precisely, it is not so much the new norms themselves (e.g., hygiene) that make modern urbanism modern but the nature of these norms and, especially, the nature of their practical application: modern norms are not transcendental; they are the children of analysis and calculation.

Rabinow describes the road from divine illumination to scientific enlightenment through the lives and works of some colorful figures. One of them was Hubert Lyautey, military man and pacifier of French Morocco. Lyautey exemplifies the "technician of general ideas" in search of "new social techniques" (p. 106) to modernize and improve a problem-ridden society. This future *Marechal de France* found in the protectorate of Morocco one of the "laboratories of social modernity" (p. 26) that enabled reformers to develop new approaches to planning in relative freedom from political and institutional constraints. (Rabinow describes another type of laboratory as well: the company town.) Relative independence was important, for Lyautey's goal was nothing but the "reorganizing of power relations among social groups," a goal whose achievement required "large-scale social planning, in which city planning played a central role" (p. 288). Reaching this goal also required the creation of an administrative elite "above politics and concerned only with the long-range public good" (p. 289). More importantly for our discussion, Lyautey's strong (and elitist) sense of social responsibility did not mute his belief that invigorating a social body required the differentiation of the social from the moral sphere. He therefore advocated techniques which "can be put into practice with an absolute efficiency by agents who are in no way moral, much less virtuous" (Lyautey, quoted on p. 124). For Rabinow, the separation of "social effect from the moral character of those running society" (p. 124) is precisely what constitutes the modernity of the new mode of social and spatial regulation. One of the key features of this mode -- though not present in its actual form in Lyautey's work -- is the technical standard, a rationally constructed, scientifically derived norm.

With the technical standard, the differentiation of the social from the moral is introduced into the heart of urbanism. The most important vehicle of that change is social statistics, a new technology developed, in part, by the Belgian statistician Adolphe Quetelet. Quetelet's work, Rabinow observes,

> marked a major step away from natural law and from all related moral, psychological, or metaphysical theories which gave an absolute primacy or independence to the individual. Society was becoming an object *sui generis*, with its own laws, its own science, and eventually its own art of government (p. 67).

Not only did social statistics provide a tool for understanding the social body and for its regulation; it also brought about a new conception of the norm. The norm was no longer a transcendental value, but a state of normality that could be scientifically determined. Drawing on the work of Georges Canguilhem,[1] Rabinow writes that for Quetelet,

> human traits . . . were not normal because they were found frequently, but were frequent because they were normal, and in that sense normative for a given way of life (p. 66).

Thus, the analysis of regularities and distributions was and still is a source not only of sociological understanding but of social evaluation. Modern normative thought on society therefore is driven by norms that are less given by metaphysics or morality than by sociological analysis and standardization. Modern norms are not so much fixed visions of a virtual state as changing reflections of a society's self-understanding. Higher values of justice and order still loom over social action, but they are conditioned by a representation of the internal state of society. For instance, social fragmentation and the needs of producers in capitalist societies have placed the ideals of Social Harmony and Efficiency high in the normative order.

Another such ideal is Welfare. In fact, for Rabinow, "[t]he most general value in the name of which modern normalizing efforts have been justified is the welfare of the population" (p. 10). This value is also the normalized value *par excellence*. Between welfare as abstract ideal and welfare as operational criterion in social regulation lies the concept of need.[2] The normalizing effect of modern welfare institutions can be traced back, at least in part, to the standardization of need. Indeed, the scientific assessment of need presupposes a homogeneous population, and it expresses difference within that population in quantitative rather than qualitative terms.[3] The centrality of the concept of need in planning is an important fact. Among other things, it is a clear indication that planning must be seen within the larger framework of the welfare state.

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As Rabinow acknowledges in the Introduction, *French Modern* is an unorthodox book. When it comes to genre and methodology, it is much easier to explain what this book is *not* than what it is. For instance, the book will not satisfy readers in search of causal explanations, readers in search of a history of the "average" or "general" way of planning in the last two centuries, or readers in search of another essay on the "political-economy" of planning. It will be clear, however, that what Rabinow sacrificed in scope he gained in strength.

The first and most general methodological question raised by the book is this: what is the structure of its argument? How is *French Modern* constructed? The book begins with an "Introduction to the Present," a description of French technocratic urbanism in its heyday (the period from the 1950s to the 1970s), an urbanism that is still very present in our so-called post-modern age. Rabinow then goes back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, in order to work his way back forward to the present. The points through which the author draws his narrative line represent the individual actors who helped bring about changes in knowledge and in practices (e.g., in sociology, statistics, social welfare, architecture); these discrete changes can be considered as sub-points on the narrative line. Though the story runs, logically, from the past to the present, the selection of points occurs, in a genealogical perspective, in the reverse direction. Yet in tracing back the origins of new understandings and techniques (and these origins' origins and so on), Rabinow does not ask which X prompted Y, but which X made Y *possible*. Hence readers who are looking for determinism, even for causality in general, are bound to be frustrated. On the other hand, those who expect to find a process devoid of agency and actors because they found the name of Foucault in the introductory pages will be disappointed too. This is so not only because agents are (despite what superficial readings of Foucault suggest) very present in Foucault's genealogical work. It is so, first and foremost, because the ethnographic methods that Rabinow uses bring concrete human beings into the foreground.

Rabinow's way of selecting specific individuals as milestones on the road to the present raises another, related question: if these individuals are to be selected "because each embodied and articulated, in diverse and often contradictory ways, an essential dimension of the French practice and ethos of social modernity" (p. 16), how do we first get to know what this practice and ethos are? We discover them by means of an interpretive analysis of the present, of present modes of thought and action, of present norms and forms. The product of that analysis, then, is the mirror to which the past is held, the screen through which we create the image of a process. It is obvious that the analysis of the present must result in a sketch of what is typical to the present. What

is perhaps less obvious, is that the analysis of the past in the light of the present reveals what is typical to the present too, not what is typical to the past. Readers should therefore not expect to find a supposedly "true" picture of nineteenth and early twentieth century French planning.

For planners and students of the city, a third methodological question is in order: how does the book deal with what we now call "the political-economy of the city"? The question is important because it directs our attention to the explanation of what made modern planning materially possible, what shaped its mandate and authority, and what circumscribed its realm of action. Here too, Rabinow's perspective is specific. With its focus on individuals and on their work, *French Modern* is only secondarily a history of social phenomena and of their political-economic context. This is not to say that these factors are absent -- quite the contrary. Indeed, one of the themes of the book is that new norms and forms came about as responses to social and political problems. Yet the central object of the book is the *how* of modern planning more than the *why* of it, the innovations that drove planning rather than the social forces that imposed it. The book will therefore not satisfy readers who are trying, for instance, to understand how new modes of understanding and action were transformed, used, and institutionalized by the dominant and anonymous forces of French capitalism.[4]

Rabinow's specific perspective highlights a sequence of "historical practices combining truth and power" (p. 11). Thanks to this approach, Rabinow reveals with great force the sequence of developments that made possible a certain way of conceiving of and acting upon society and the city; he describes with detail the norms and forms that were generated to address new problems; and he forces us to reexamine our own understanding of contemporary practices and issues. In particular, he forces planners and planning theorists to look critically at some of their interpretations and theories.

For Rabinow, modern urbanism was born "at the end of the [nineteenth] century, when a form was invented that combined the normalization of the population with a regularization of spaces" (p. 82) -- that is, when planning produced not only spatial schemes but "normative projects for the ordering of the social milieu" (pp. 76-7). Yet the order thus created is not, despite what some "Foucaultian" writings on the history of city planning would have one believe, a purely disciplinary one. Contrary to Christine Boyer's claims,[5] modern city planning did not simply apply to the city and its population as a whole the techniques developed for the control of marginal populations (patients, inmates, children, etc.). Instead, as Rabinow explains, the new urbanism was shaped by new problems, guided by new interests, and nour-

ished by new technologies. In fact, the search for new technologies of regulation was, if only in part, a consequence of "the crisis of the disciplinary model" (p. 182). The goal of modern urbanism, then, was the regulatory (not disciplinary) control of urban society and its activities; the technologies it employed were meant to bring about not only greater efficiency and productivity but also social welfare.

Likewise, the "rationalization of spatial practices" (p. 58) must not be seen, Rabinow warns, as stable or hegemonic: the process of modernization occurs in a field of tension, in which the mechanical, efficient, and standardized must still contend with the cultural, social, and historical. Still, over time, planning became increasingly scientific and functional in its norms and forms, totalizing in its scope, and normalizing and standardizing in its methods. The new urbanism required not only new practices (e.g., scientific needs-analysis), but also new "assumptions about the nature of the individual, the state, space, and society" (p. 169). The task of planning became to regulate the normal -- not only to cure the pathological -- and to do so within a comprehensive framework, according to "basic, universal principles" (p. 269) enunciated by experts.

One of the lessons of this book for planners and planning theorists, then, is that most of the traditional debate about the Rational Model of planning is a mere waste of time. There is never Rationality, but always multiple types of rationality. The question to ask is therefore not whether planning should or should not be rational -- should it be irrational? -- but what specific forms of rationality are being used in planning practice, what the value of these modes of understanding is, and what their use costs us.[6] A second and related point that this book raises is that the key to understanding a type of rationality that guides us today is to look at yesterday. Looking back over our shoulder enables us see what problems prompted the development of our modes of thought and action, what conditions affected the development of new theories and instruments.

A third lesson of this book concerns both planning theory and planning history: if planning is a response to social problems, it is shaped by how we define these problems. In *French Modern*, Rabinow goes beyond describing the response of intellectuals and technicians to public problems: he also analyzes the way in which they framed these problems. That is, he makes clear that there is no "natural" answer to a problem of social order or of capital accumulation; there are only specific answers to specific perceptions of crisis. The reader interested in city planning should *not* gloss over Rabinow's lengthy descriptions of changes in the fields of biology, statistics, sociology, and political philosophy. These developments are important, for they shaped the ways

in which reformers and experts came to conceive of society and of the built environment, the ways in which they framed social and spatial problems, and the ways in which they designed the plans and regulations used to solve these problems.

Finally, this book carries an important lesson with respect to the nature of our theories. It teaches, in particular, that the history of planning cannot be seen as the mere expression of class struggle or of technological change. For instance, there is no clear political division of labor in the story that Rabinow tells. At different times and for various reasons and purposes, the scientific analysis of social conditions was favored, developed, and applied by conservatives as well as by socialists. That the former were trying to improve social control and the latter the general welfare does not change the fact that both ultimately contributed to a process of objectification and normalization. Claims to truth are never independent of strategic purposes, but heterogeneous and even contradictory purposes will confront one another within a common conceptual framework. After all, the same language of rights serves both laissez-faire liberals and progressive Liberals,[7] and the same social indicators are used as weapons on both sides of the political divide. Arguments that emphasize different rights or different indicators (or varying interpretations thereof) do not support different kinds of truths; they only carry different claims within a common type of discourse.

French Modern reminds us implicitly that social reality is always richer than our theories would want us to believe. The book is an inquiry into more than a century of varied and often uncoordinated, if not contradictory, ideas and actions that culminated in a modern "apparatus of planning."[8] Sketching the genesis of such "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble"[9] is no easy task. Making the reader enjoy reading the hundreds of resulting pages is even bigger a challenge. Paul Rabinow wins on both counts.

NOTES

[1]Georges Canguilhem, French historian of ideas; he was one of Foucault's mentors.

[2]Another important concept is that of risk. The experience and objectification of risk formed the basis of our systems of "social insurance." Yet the concept of risk is not as central to welfare as the concept of need when welfare is conceived of as active social regulation.

[3]The homogenization of the population is of course countered by the (re)creation of social hierarchy. In our modern age of Equality, in which class and caste are taboo, social ranking is cast primarily in cultural terms. On the one hand, people distinguish themselves from others by their distance to need. In

this case, enjoying a high standard of life means being far above the standard that forms the threshold to need. On the other hand, social hierarchy can be reintroduced by separating different (homogeneous) sub-populations from one another. Here, what distinguishes people from one group from people in another group is the norms according to which they evaluate their needs. In that case, enjoying a higher standard of life means literally to have different thresholds of need.

[4]For a work on the forces behind the institutionalization of new norms and forms into public planning in the U.S., see for example Marc A. Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders: The American Real Estate Industry and Urban Land Planning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987). While this book is rich in one way (i.e., in its analysis of the relationship between the reformist efforts of planners and the attempts to achieve efficiency and market stability on the part of large-scale real-estate developers), it also misses what makes *French Modern* so interesting, namely an analysis of "the cultural conceptions of good city form, design, and living standards" (Weiss, p. 76) of planners and developers and an analysis of the new knowledge that underlaid the "carefully interwoven network of private and public institutional innovations" (Weiss, p. 159).

[5]M. Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1983). For a critical review of Boyer's book, see Cliff Ellis's article in *Berkeley Planning Journal* 2, 1-2 (Spring/Fall 1985): 170-182.

[6]See for example the issue of needs, as briefly discussed above.

[7]See for example, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy and Capitalism: Property, Community, and the Contradictions of Modern Social Thought* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987).

[8]The expression is borrowed from M. Christine Boyer, op. cit., p. xi.

[9]Michael Foucault, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Colin Gordon, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980). For Foucault, this ensemble contains "discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions."