TOWARD AN ETHICAL AND POLITICALLY CRITICAL PLANNING THEORY AND PRACTICE

Raphael Fischler

Review of: John Forester's *Planning in the Face of Power*
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> *The propertyless masses especially are not served by a formal "equality before the law" and a "calculable" adjudication and administration, as demanded by "bourgeois" interests. Naturally, in their eyes justice and administration should serve to compensate for their economic and social life-opportunities in the face of propertied classes. Justice and administration can fulfil this function only if they assume an informal character to a far-reaching extent. It must be informal because it is substantively "ethical."* Max Weber[1]

John Forester's new book pursues several objectives: to apply critical social theory to the study of planning, to make sense of the micro-processes that constitute planning practice, and to help planners be progressive practitioners. Forester brings together, in a single volume, essays which have appeared in various journals since 1980 and which have been reworked as chapters for this publication. The key conceptual development in this work consists of redefining planning in terms of communicative action and of refining advocacy planning with "the practical recognition of systematic sources of misinformation" (p. 46). For Forester, planning involves not only technical analysis, but primarily a clash of arguments and social identities. Progressive planning therefore requires arguing and organizing, as well as an emancipation from oppressive structures. His is an important, valuable, praiseworthy work.

As a planning theorist, Forester follows the precepts which he sets for the planner: he raises public awareness, defines problems, and sets agendas. He draws our attention to the ethical and political dimensions of planning, arguing that "progressive planning . . . is at once a democratizing and a practical organizing process" (p. 47). He defines the problem facing planners as the domination of citizens by "concentrations of economic power" (p. xi). This domination is played out and maintained, in a society where the use of private force is illegal, by means of distorted communication. Some people are able to exert power, Forester writes, because "they very selectively inform and misinform citizens" (p. 45) and thereby manage their beliefs and knowledge, their consent, their trust, and their understanding or definition of problems. They do so in three ways: (1) they "inform or misinform citizens effectively by virtue of their ability to prevail in formal decision-making situations;"

(2) they exert power in the setting of agendas, by "controlling which citizens find out what and when, about which projects, which options, and what they might be able to do as a result;" and (3) they "shape the self-conceptions, the sense of legitimate expectations, and finally the needs of the citizens" (p. 44). Here, Forester could have added that domination in urban development also shapes "the self-conceptions [and] the sense of legitimate expectations," the role-frames of planners themselves. (We will come back to that issue below.) Finally, the author sets the agenda for planning research and education by arguing that planning has an "anticipatory character." Researchers and educators should develop planners' ability to anticipate problems as well as make them aware of the relationship of micro-processes of communication to macro-processes of both domination and emancipation from such domination. Planning practice, then, "consists of the elements of *envisioning a problem situation, managing arguments concerning it*, and *negotiating strategically to intervene*" (p. 207; italics in original).

With his "critical-communicative account of planning" (p. 11), Forester presents a very compelling and fertile model. His source of inspiration is critical social theory, in particular Juergen Habermas's theory of universal pragmatics and of communicative action. Forester does recognize the limitations of the work of the German philosopher-cum-social-scientist[2] and works to compensate for them, particularly in terms of empirical application. Yet he follows Habermas, in some chapters at least, in putting more weight on abstract systems of ideal types than on systematic analyses of social reality. In that sense, *Planning in the Face of Power* presents not so much an empirical analysis of planning practice as a conceptual framework for further analysis.[3] Such future analysis should, in turn, make up for the lack of political-economic, historic, and psychological dimensions in this book, a shortcoming which Forester himself recognizes.

It is important to understand that conceptual framework and to see how it differs from those that (used to) dominate planning thought. Forester's goal is to constitute a theory of planning *practice* -- a theory that does not confuse planning with problem-solving or with urban development and that describes planning in different fields of governmental activity (land-use, economic development, health, etc.). The myth of Rationality makes room for a critique of speech acts; the political economy of the city is replaced, under the spotlight, by "political legitimacy," "procedural fairness and accountability," and "interpersonal ethics" (p. 161). Planning is thus about attention and arguments, but only marginally about plans and implementation; its context is a system of hegemony rather than one of urban development. The research agenda that Forester proposes (pp. 157-162) indicates that his analytic framework holds promise for a systematic understanding of how plan-

ning works across various fields. Yet for this general theory to be refined into theories of land-use planning, health planning, and the like, substance has to be added to procedure, product to process, and the "political-economic dynamics" which this book "omits" (p. 162) have to be brought back into the picture.[4] One area that needs particular attention is, I believe, the organizational and political position of the planner. Planning practice, for instance that of urban planners, cannot be fully understood without a detailed analysis of planners' position in the "socio-spatial development process"[5] and their specific contribution to it. Although this book gives little explicit treatment to the position of the planner, its core ideas have important implications for the relationship of planners to the institutions in which they practice.

By framing the task of planners in terms of communicative action and their responsibility in terms of distortions of communication, Forester redefines what gives planning its legitimacy and what constitutes a planner's professional discretion. The shift here is away from expertise and efficiency, and toward ethical commitment and equity. The emphasis is not on what planners know but on how they distribute their knowledge, not on their ability to solve problems but on opening up debate about them, not on public trust in planners' expertise but on individual trust in their integrity,[6] not on consent to planners drawing up plans but on consent to their mediating debate. To the extent that expertise does matter, political savvy now pushes technical skill into the background. The planner has become a midwife of new social identities, helping people to recognize their "real" situations and their "true" interests. Forester's professionals thus find legitimacy not so much in their educational certification and in their relationship to the Prince as in their contribution to democracy. They rely less on the authority of their social position than on the authority of the better (i.e. critical) argument. Their discretion lies more in their ability to engage in informal "organizing strategies" than in their mandate to make decisions according to their expert judgement. Forester's book thus creates an image of the planner not as a bureaucrat but as a social activist. Herein, of course, lies the problem: planners may be and probably should be activists, but they are and remain bureaucrats. Both aspects are inseparable: planning is, at best, "a 'critical' governmental activity" (Beauregard 1988: 73).

"Critical" means, for instance, that "the work of planners and public administrators might be directed specifically to social and labor movements working to attain structural changes in the present political-economy" (p. 61). This type of "nonreformist reform" work makes sense only if one assumes that the government supports it and/or that planners can perform it despite their bureaucratic status and political-economic position. These are precisely the assumptions that Forester

makes, and he calls on two aspects of planning practice to support his case. First, he believes that "bureaucrats [can] appeal to the principles of formal equality and procedural democracy" (p. 60) to which government is formally committed. Planners who help give a voice to hitherto silent citizens are only doing their duty under the law. He argues, in addition, that "how much planners can do . . . depends not only on their formal responsibilities but also on their informal initiatives. [Thanks to the complexity and, hence, uncertainty of the planning process], planning staff can exercise substantial discretion and exert important influence as a result" (p. 84). It is probable, however, that Forester, having opted for agency and not for structure, over-estimates the freedom of planners in their job. More importantly, he does not explicitly apply to planners what he has highlighted in the case of citizens: domination involves the systematic distortion of people's identity, understanding, and action -- or in Foucault's words, the constitution of subjects.

Forces of domination not only use power, they institutionalize it. Forester recognizes that the "organizational and political contexts of [planners'] practice [are] structures of selective attention, of systematically distorted communication" (p. 139) and he must know that, by definition as it were, "advocacy is incompatible with organizational [i.e. bureaucratic] perspectives." What he therefore implicitly expects, is that planners free themselves, in consciousness and in action, from the institutions, the agendas, and organizations, that frame their work. Hence the need for a critical planning education. Forester devotes a whole chapter to education, and he insists that it should help future practitioners anticipate problems and develop persuasive arguments. He could have carried his logic one step further. According to this logic, planning schools should also emancipate future planners from traditional planning ideology and empower them to become activists. That may not square very well with the views of those planners who currently grant, renew, or refuse school accreditation, but there is hope . . . .

The issue of the social position of the planner is important in another way, namely with respect to the problem of power itself. I believe that the title to this book -- "Planning in the Face of Power" -- is not really representative of Forester's ideas and their implications. A more representative title, but perhaps less catchy, would have been: "Planning in the Face of Domination" or even "Planning in the Face of Hegemony." Forester differentiates between legitimate and illegitimate power, but he does not give full expression to the distinction. Power is legitimate when people freely consent to its exercise, if the relationship of dependency, deference, trust, and consideration between the rulers and the ruled results from rational agreement. Similarly, distortion of communication is acceptable if it follows from the "legitimate division of labor" (p. 34), itself grounded in rational agreement. This means two things.

First, one need not stretch these ideas very far to come to the conclusion that planners do not enjoy a legitimacy of rational agreement and, hence, that they exercise illegitimate power. Which is why, as I mentioned above, they can seemingly gain legitimacy only through deserving actions, by contributing to freedom, justice, and democracy, to the "ideal speech situation." The danger is, of course, that some planners will be forced to choose between added legitimacy and their monthly paycheck. (Be progressive? Yes, but be cautious.) Secondly, power is clearly inevitable and not necessarily negative, destructive, and stifling. This is obvious in the case of legitimate power. But it is also true for power in general. Building physical and organizational structures in the city means making hard choices, choices doomed not to please everyone, whatever Habermas says about the "generalizability" of interests. If planning is to be more than defining problems and arguing about them, if it is to lead to concrete change in the city, it cannot do without power, nor can it do solely with power grounded in consensus. "The moral obligation of the politician is to use power to improve the human condition."[7] The same holds for the planner.

Forester, of course, knows this all too well. The great irony of his theory is that while the behavior of planners (and others) in the planning process must be judged against the standards of communicative action (i.e. action aimed at reaching consensus), their success in the development process depends on strategic action (i.e., action aimed at furthering a specific agenda and particular interests). Forester's analysis makes clear not only that the distortion of communication is a major problem in planning but also that planners are, under the present circumstances, *not* served by complete transparency and openness. The dilemma is one between political legitimacy and political efficacy: while the former is rooted in formal agreements, the latter is nourished by informal action. In other words, while the *authority* of planners resides in their institutional position and in their technical expertise, their *power* stems from their informal initiatives and social-political skills. The duality of the planner's mandate "to press professionally . . . for substantive goals" and "to bring about a participatory process" (p. 100) is a source of tension: reaching "substantive goals" in the city takes more than planning and more than communicative action, even if the quality of the planning process partly determines the quality of the planning product.

This "irony" does not signal a weakness in Forester's theory, but its realism: improving the planning process is important, but given the present circumstances, more than that is needed to improve the city itself. Planners who wish to be agents of change must at the same time rely on and transcend, if not transform, their official status. In this respect, Forester's insistence on agency "in the face of" structure must be commended. He is "structurally critical yet hardly fatalistic" (p. 47)

and he calls for resistance and organization, for the creation and maintenance of urban social movements. Even if it renders his vision selective -- indeterminacy over determinacy, informality over formality -- it is Forester's dedication to emancipation and empowerment that make his work so valuable. His conceptualization of planning as praxis has no equal in planning theory, and his recommendations to improve it -- although not always new -- are unique for their practical and political value. This book, he writes,

> seeks . . . to show just what public-serving planning practitioners can do . . . not in theory but in practice, in an organizationally messy world of political inequality and economic exploitation, and in response to Paul Goodman's continually nagging practical question, "Now what?" (p. 13)

Planners, answers Forester, can support citizens victimized by an unequal distribution of resources; they can help organize social movements and provide them much needed information and expertise; and they can share with people their understanding of structural factors in urban development. The primary tools of this progressive practice are "the practical anticipation of problem situations" (p. 164) and "the selective, communicative organizing or disorganizing of attention" (p. 11).

In so conceptualizing planning, Forester will probably attract little sympathy from professionals who do not wish to confuse "reactive planning [with] *real* planning."[8] On the other hand, he will enable others to give legitimacy and cogency to their claims for non-technical and non-regulatory activities. Recent research, to which Forester refers, indicates that the road from paralyzing self-perceptions and powerlessness to emancipation and empowerment is long and arduous.[9] Those who do not choose this road may very well be left with a good deal of guilt, for the planning theorist has shown that they could, if they wanted, act on their moral responsibility -- despite the constraints and the threats. Although it does not make the road to progressive practice any shorter, Forester's book is a guide for the journey.

NOTES

The title of this review is borrowed from the book, p. 162.
Many thanks to Michael Teitz for comments on an earlier draft.

[1]From Gerth and Mills (1946: 221).

[2]For example, in Forester (1986).

[3]Forester has already engaged himself in more systematically empirical work, in structured applications of his analytic framework.

[4]Chapter 6 of the book illustrates this point: as it focusses on a specific area of planning (land-use planning), it comes to rely more on institutional and political-economic factors in its analysis.

[5]The expression is Philip Cook's (1983), who precisely calls for theories that "reintegrate planning theory and development theory."

[6]"Trust is an issue of your integrity in the planning process," remarks a planner interviewed by Forester; p. 93.

[7]Ed Broadbent, former leader of the Canadian NDP, on National Public Radio, CBC broadcast on Sunday, March 5, 1989.

[8]Solnit 1987: 41.

[9]On p. 67, Forester refers to Baum (1983) and to Howe and Kaufman (1979). See also Hoch (1988: 25-34).

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