

INTRODUCTION: OUTLINING THE POWER OF PLANNING

OREN YIFTACHEL¹

What is the impact of urban and regional planning on social and political relations? What are the main influences of planning on the distribution of power and resources? Are they mainly 'progressive' or 'regressive'? Does planning advance social reform or legitimise oppressive control? What are the political, philosophical, cultural or material roots underlying the power of planning (or lack of) in late-modern globalizing societies? Who holds the power to use the tools and instruments of urban and regional planning? Can we discern changes in the above over time and between places?

These broad questions have guided the editors in compiling this volume. They emerged as a result of unease among the editors and writers of this book, to what appears as a somewhat narrow and limiting analytical scope of planning research and theorization. The book seeks to present a series of studies, which examine openly and critically some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about, and approaches to, planning, and hence assist in broadening and deepening its analytical scope.

This introduction aims to construct a critical and conceptual foundation for the following chapters. It is not meant to offer a thorough review of the literature, but rather to delineate five key areas of deficiency in mainstream planning research, theory and thought. These include: (a) a confused demarcation of disciplinary boundaries; (b) a dominance of professional perspectives; (c) a privileging of process over substance; (d) a slighting of planning's spatial dimensions; and (e) the unchallenged acceptance of planning's benevolent power.

It is the fifth point with which we engage most fully. The book seeks to openly study the power of planning to shape societal relations, and document and the many-fold manifestations of that power: emancipatory, reformist, progressive, normalizing, legitimizing, regressive and oppressive. Following a brief discussion on the engagement with the concept of power in past planning scholarship, the introduction proceeds to describe how the book's chapters and parts engage with these deficiencies, and how they respond to the critical questions we raise about the power of planning.

¹ The Introduction was written after consultation with the entire editorial team (David Hedgcock, Ian Alexander and Jo Little) to whom I owe gratitude for their useful input. The responsibility for the text, however, remains with the author. Importantly, the introduction also includes several ideas developed with Margo Huxley and material from our recent joint article (see: Huxley and Yiftachel, 1999). I am very grateful for Margo's input and wisdom, and for her willingness to let me use material from our joint work.

1. The Canon and Its Limits

For a young discipline, 'urban and regional planning' (or 'town and country planning' and 'city planning' as it is also called in the UK and North America, respectively) has developed an impressive scholarly track record. For nearly a century, highly capable minds have attempted to analyze, comment and prescribe the 'good city'. Their studies and models have formed the backbone of a growing field of scholarly endeavor, as well as given conceptual and practical tools for planners occupied with 'real life' efforts to guide the development of cities and regions.

Without entering into the debate over the relative importance of specific planning texts, it is possible to tentatively mark the seminal works of the likes of Howard, Geddes, Stein, Perry, Garnier, Lloyd-Wright, Le-Corbusier, Mumford, Harvey, McLoughlin, Faludi, Friedmann, Castells and Hall, among others, as having shaped the way scholars and practicing planners have thought about the making of cities and regions, roughly until the late 1980s (for reviews, see Cherry, 1988; Friedmann, 1987; Hall, 1988; Sandercock, 1998, Yiftachel, 1998). Despite the necessarily contested nature of marking any group of works as a disciplinary canon, it can be observed that the works of these scholars (and probably of several others) have formed a frequently quoted and used core of disciplinary knowledge especially in the industrial west.

During the last decade, a growing number of planning theorists have taken a 'communicative turn' (Healey, 1996), in describing and theorizing urban and regional planning (see also: Sager, 1994, 1999; Hillier, 1998). A rapidly growing amount of work drawing on Habermasian, ethnographic and related frameworks has prompted some to articulate the emergence of new forms of 'collaborative' or 'deliberative' planning (Healey, 1997; Forester, 1999). The density of work using this approach brought some to declare the ascendancy of a 'new paradigm' (Innes, 1995), or the existence of 'consensus' among scholars about key theoretical and methodological questions (Mandelbaum, 1996, 2000). The claims to prominence of this approach to planning research are well articulated by Innes (1995: 183) who describes the communicationist scholars as:

Different from their predecessors, who did primarily armchair theorizing.... The new theorists pursue the questions and puzzles that arise from practice ... and do grounded theorizing based on richly interpretive study of practice ... they apply intellectual lenses new to planning ... Their work gained the attention of both academics and practicing planners because it is accessible and interesting.

Although these declarations are contestable (Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000; Neuman, 2000), it appears as though the 'communicationist' approach, in the eyes of some, has joined the disciplinary canon.

But despite the rich and pioneering nature of the seminal studies cited above, and despite their important role in shaping the planning discipline, as-we-know-it, several deficiencies and fault-lines are evident in that scholarship. These form the basis for this essay, which attempt to point towards new areas of thought and research, with the aim of enriching the body of scholarship to which I refer loosely as 'planning knowledge'. The following pages will thus sketch a broad critique and initial agenda which have

framed the selection of material for the book. The various chapters do not always deal with the theoretical and epistemological issues raised in this introduction, but their material addresses some of the deficiencies and agendas highlighted here, and may thus be viewed as an empirical extension (from a variety of perspectives) of the present discussion.

The present introductory essay highlights deficiencies in the prevailing body of planning knowledge in several key areas: analytical confusion, a professional 'straight-jacket', a dominance of process over substance, a diminution of space, and an unwarranted faith in the benevolent power of planning. These deficiencies hamper, in my view, the accumulation and consolidation of a solid body of knowledge, which can form a credible, scholarly foundation for the planning field. Let us now turn to a brief exposition of these areas of critique.

2. Analytical Confusion: What's in a Definition?

It has been commented for quite some time that planning scholarship is marked by deep analytical confusion regarding the nature, boundaries and methods of its endeavor (see, for example: de-Nouffville, 1983; Reade, 1987), leading McLoughlin (1994) to declare that the entire discipline and concept of planning is 'chaotic'. The analytical shortcomings of the scholarly field loosely called 'planning' are too many to enumerate here, beyond focusing on several basic deficiencies which have had a marked effect on the field.

Let us start with the most fundamental requirement for studying a phenomenon – its definition. A brief scan of literature pertaining to 'planning' would immediately reveal that the word has a wide variety of meanings. This does not stem from ideological or political contestation over a term, as common with analytical terms (such as, 'democracy', 'policy' or 'development'), but rather from basic historical and institutional differences between the various settings where 'planning' is practiced.

Hence, for example, Italian scholars have often considered 'planning' as part of the aesthetic design of cities; British scholars have often focused on the regulation of spatial development in cities and regions; and American scholars have often referred to 'planning' as a loose concept, dealing mainly with policy efforts of disparate arms of government, or the efforts of voluntary, community and semi-public bodies in the governance of (mainly local) communities. In the absence of a relatively firm definition of the phenomenon to be studied ('what are we looking for?'), the search to explain and improve 'planning' has often been akin to shooting in the dark. Nowhere has this confusion been more evident than in planning theory, which has been unable to agree on the very subject of its study, and has therefore been sharply criticized (see: Bureaugard, 1995; Flyvbjerg and Richardson, 1998; Scott and Roweis, 1977).

A broad definition of planning appears necessary for the development of a credible body of knowledge about the shaping of cities and regions. Therefore, it is defined here, after Lefbvre (1991), as shaping 'the public production of space', or in a similar vein after Friedmann (1998), as 'the production of urban habitat'. Adhering to these definitions which emphasize the process of 'production', planning is portrayed as

including both the procedural (decision-making) and substantive (material, spatial) aspects of planners' work.

The term 'public' in the definition above denotes the combination of discourses, public policies, institutions and practices which govern urban and regional development. These are often shaped under the (direct or indirect) auspices of the modern state, or other public bodies and organizations. Planning here is both part of the formal planning system (namely agencies which directly produce urban plans), and the wider set of institutions, groups and authorities involved in the public regulation and development of space, including housing, engineering, environmental and development bodies. This definition attempts to demarcate a broad, yet identifiable, analytical space within which a scholarly community can develop a common language, and engage in the useful exchange of ideas and concepts.

Like the confusion over the definition of 'planning', the term 'theory' has found most planning theories confused. Theory can be defined in many ways, but in the book its prevailing meaning is closest to the one identified by Raymond Williams (1983: 316-318) as "an explanatory scheme" (p. 316), or in the words of the Oxford English Dictionary, "suppositions explaining a phenomenon; a sphere of speculations and concepts as distinguished from that of practice".

This emphasis does not necessarily negate the normative or prescriptive elements of social theories. Indeed, social analysis can never be neatly separated from normative and ethical assumptions, as these often frame the very questions posed by researchers and the ways in which the latter observe and interpret the social world. Yet the explanatory, conceptual, analytical, deconstructive and critical aspects are stressed as the main 'pillars' of the theorizing endeavor, without which the prescriptive and normative aspects of theory are often shallow and ineffective (see also Fainstein, 2000; Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000).

The need for emphasizing analytical and explanatory theories is particularly apt for planning theory, due to its close-knit association with the professional world. As elaborated below, this association has pulled planning scholarship towards the prescriptive and the procedural, and away from the explanatory and the substantive, to the detriment of the production of planning knowledge. To illustrate the need for explanatory and substantive theories let us quote Michael Zinzun, a black civil rights activist (cited in Sandercock, 1998: 85):

Theory is necessary to figure out what's *really* going on. People always want to be saviors for their community. It's like they see a baby coming down the river and want to jump and save it. We need to stop being so reactive to the situation that confronts us. Saving babies is *fine* for them, but *we* want to know who's throwing the goddam babies in the water in the first place.

3. A Professional 'Straight-Jacket' and Prescriptive Orientations

Despite the oft-heard claim that planning theory is 'irrelevant' to planning practice, or that a 'chasm' exists between the two (see: de-Nouffville, 1983; Innes, 1995; Hall, 1988: Chap. 6), it can be observed that over the years planning knowledge has developed

through a close association with what McLoughlin (1992) called 'the built environment professions' (see also Taylor, 1998: Chap. 1). This situation can be identified as a 'professional straight-jacket' born out of specific sets of circumstances which gave rise to urban planning as an organized, state-sanctioned, field of human activity during the 20th century.

Hence, planning is not an age-old discipline of relatively independent knowledge emerging from scientific endeavor, such as history, geography or philosophy, but rather part of the consolidation of the modern nation-state, with its dominant capitalist and national motives to control and regulate space (Yiftachel, 1998). These motives are often shaped and buttressed through the association of the state with stabilizing societal elements, such as the professional middle-classes. Thus, state interests are often articulated by professional organizations and institutions, including urban and regional planning. The emergence of most writing with a claim to 'theory' in the planning field, has thus been bound with the institutionalization of planning the need of professional circles to develop bodies of knowledge in order to give the field depth and legitimacy.

Of course, prescriptive theories about the 'good life' and 'good community' have existed since the dawn of human culture, and have proliferated since modernity (see Friedmann, 1987); but their crystallization into what can be termed 'planning theory' is the product of the circumstances which prevailed in the industrial and national west around the mid 20th century, and followed the emergence of institutions which aimed to control, govern and shape the built environment. The emergence of educational institutions has been of particular importance, particularly the introduction of 'planning' degrees in universities. The formalization of the practices, experiences, ethics and models of these teachings and research has given us the procedures, practices and models recognized today as 'planning knowledge'.

But the academization of professional interests has been accompanied, naturally, by the professionalization of the academe (see also Reade, 1987). In many respects, the profession has created an academe which has resulted in a certain dependence of the academe on professional circles for legitimacy, relevance and often financial backing. It is argued here that this institutional and intellectual straightjacket caused planning scholarship to focus on prescriptive, normative and procedural theories to the detriment of the explanatory and the substantive. While procedural and prescriptive theories are important, and indeed essential, in the field of urban planning, the lack of focus on explanatory and substantive theories appears to have hampered the development of a foundational body of knowledge. Such a body would promote an understanding of state-sanctioned urban and regional change, or the 'public production of space and/or urban habitat', as further discussed below.

The link between the academe and the profession has thus shifted the focus and energy of most planning scholars from the perennial question of 'what is a good city' to the more vocational concern of 'what is good planning'. These two questions have existed in parallel in the literature (see: Hague, 1991; Yiftachel, 1989), but the weight has shifted increasingly towards the latter. This meant that the realms of theory in urban and regional education and thinking have been increasingly devoted to planning methods, processes and interactions, and far less to the substantive nature and consequences of that activity. Planning scholarship has moved the planner to center stage, at the expense of the city. It has thus tended to focus on the 'how' over the

The Power of Planning

Spaces of Control and Transformation

Yiftachel, O.; Little, J.; Hedgcock, D.; Alexander, I. (Eds.)

2001, XII, 226 p. 13 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0534-3