Theory for Practice: Anticipating not only Interactions but Success and Failure

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I have been exploring not only theories OF planning practice,but theories FOR planning practice as well. Theories OF practicemight help us to understand what planners do in some new ways,and they might help us to link the behavior and thought of planners to encompassing institutions, planning and political-economic history, or cultural influences (Sandercock 1995; Sandercock and Forsyth 1992; Friedmann 1987; Healey 1992, 1993, 1997; Hoch 1994;Baum 1997a, 1997b). But theories FOR practice might go one step further: to suggest, in effect, to planners that if they view heir work in a certain way, they may avoid specific problems and achieve certain desired ends instead. Such a «use» of theory is not quite instrumental (to achieve this goal, use this means), but it is practical (by viewing value conflict, for example, in THIS way, we can consider THESE responses that might FIT our situation WELL and avoid substantial problems).

Such theory depends on our having a sense of success and failure in planning, a sense of value to be gained or squandered, achieved or lost, a sense of welfare to be achieved or harms to be avoided. Thus «theory FOR planning practice» is intimately tied to a sense of the ethics of practice, what can be gained or lost in practice. So far, this does not specify which ethical arguments are necessarily involved, but it means that the «use» or «application» or «appropriation» of a «theory FOR practice» might enable planners to achieve some value or welfare and avoid some loss or harm. A theory that is USEFUL IN THIS WAY is necessarily (if often implicitly) wrapped up in ethics, since that is just what «useful» (consequentially good!) means. Otherwise, the theory would be use-less.

In this presentation I will review three initial attempts to sketch «theory FOR practice» that address problems of (i) information processing, (ii) participation and negotiation, and (iii) deep value conflicts in planning. Each of these analyses responds to situations in which planners can get into trouble. My suggestion, roughly, echoes a sentiment I expressed in Planning in the Face of Power (Forester1989) to the effect that «Planning theory is what planners need when they get stuck.» So I am working backwards. After choosing three types of planning situations in which planners can get into trouble, I then ask what kinds of planning analysis or theoretical understandings might help planners get out of (or avoid altogether) such sticky situations and do well instead.

Politically shaped constraints and limits on information and understanding deepen problems of any possible rationality in planning. Processes of citizen participation are often not well articulated with negotiations in public planning processes.Often, too, planners deal uncertainly with the claims of substantia value differences that may be at hand. My argument presumes that such politicized and contested situations are quite common in planning, and I argue that good theory can help planners not only to do well, but to avoid problems of confusion, deep misunderstanding, inefficacy, and needless resentment that often plague planning practice in such complex and inevitably adversarial circumstances.

Political rationality

Consider first the problem of listening to others so that planners can make coherent and well-reasoned recommendations about courses of public action. To provide the basis for their recommendations, planners must often gather information in politicized, contested meetings or planning negotiations. But what quality of information is available? Our basic models of rationality address this question, and Herbert Simon's behavioral critique of optimization, his suggestion of «satisficing» models, had profound consequences for decision theoretic models (March 1988). In Planning in the Face of Power I argued that we could extend Simon's analysis to inform rational decision-making in politically structured contexts. Simon argued that the quality of information is INEVITABLY "limited" or "bounded." Habermas suggests that we assess conditions of "systematically bounded information" (what he called the analysis of

"systematically distorted communication"). Habermas's concern, of course, grew from his interest in Marx and the structural, institutional influences that can corrupt or bound human understanding. Integrating the insights of Simon and Habermas, we can see that in a given situation, the quality of information might be more or less SYSTEMATICALLY shaped, just as it might be more or less INEVITABLY bounded. So once we relax the strong assumptions of perfect information (in the optimization model of rational understanding and decision-making), we can assess four types of "bounded rationality" in the four quadrants of a two by two table (Forester 1989:34,cf53):

i) inevitably (or necessarily) imperfect (or bounded) BUT NOT structurally shaped information (Simon's problem)

ii) inevitably bounded AND structurally shaped information (Weber's problem of bureaucratization, for example)

iii) NOT necessarily bounded AND NOT structurally shaped information (Lindblom's a-structural incremental bargaining, for example), and

iv) NOT necessarily bounded BUT structurally shaped (mis)information (Marx's problem of ideology).

Now it turns out that each type of «limited information» calls for corresponding strategies of response by listeners, as Simon argued and we can argue further. So: (1) in the face of inevitable but non-systematic bounds, we ought, as Simon suggested, to satisfice and lower expectations, not to try to optimize. But (2), in the face of inevitable and systemically structured bounds, we need not only to satisfice but to span organizational and institutional boundaries to improve the quality of information we might gather; we need to "network" actively, we might say. Then (3) in the face of unnecessary, non-systemic bounds, we need not so much to satisfice(since we might fall for a contingent "bluff" and be fooled), but to negotiate astutely. And (4) in the face of unnecessarily bounded but structurally shaped information, we need an analysisof political-economic structure that allows us to anticipate and correct for predictable types of misinformation we are likely to face: which we do every time we bargain in a bazaar and treat the initial prices we hear as structurally staged signals, not realistic indications of final purchase figures!.

So our analysis of types of "misinformation" that we might encounter suggests strategies we can use to counteract such misinformation or protect ourselves from our own mistaken presumptions about the quality of information we might gather. This analysis can help us NOT TO FAIL at optimization when conditions forbid it, NOT TO settle for less when institutional analysis can inform our choices, NOT TO bargain poorly when a reading of the institutional setting should inform our negotiations, and so on. If we fail to have a careful analysis of the threats to the information we rely on, we can then fail in the analyses and actions we base on such always vulnerable information.

Enabling Participation and Negotiation

Planners often seek to involve affected parties without knowing very well how to do so. When many thousands of people are affected by plans, "participation" necessarily seems to take some form of representation. At the same time, planners find themselves both negotiating with parties in light of politicians' wishes and mediating between a wide range of involved and often conflicting parties (neighbors, developers, public agencies, non-profits, and so forth) as well. For many years I did not see clearly how planners' abilities to NEGOTIATE BETTER OR WORSE related to their abilities to develop MORE OR LESS citizen participation.But if we array «high voice» or «low voice» versus «effective negotiation» or «weak negotiation,» we generate another two by two matrix. Quadrant 1 might represent "high voice, skillful negotiation»; quadrant 2 might represent "low voice, skillful negotiation"; quadrant 3 would then represent "high voice, unskilled negotiation," and quadrant 4 would represent "low voice, unskilled negotiation." These quadrants represent both DANGERS AND OPPORTUNITIES in the planning process, and planners who fail to attend to the demands of BOTH voice and negotiation will fail in the ways suggested by quadrants 2,3, and 4. They may exclude parties and undermine credibility, trust, and public ownership (quadrants 2 and 4); they may encourage voice but reach few agreements and so fuel resentment and cynicism (quadrant 3); or they may both exclude representatives and reach few agreements that actually satisfy the interests of parties, and thus undermine public confidence and miss opportunities for mutual gains bargaining (quadrant 4).At the same time, quadrant 1's combination of "high voice and skillful negotiation" points to planning practices that involve

mediated negotiations, a form of practice that has grown rapidly in the U.S. and that involves important skills that planning staff can usefully employ (cf. Susskind and Field 1996; Arnstein 1969; Susskind and Cruickshank 1987).

Dealing with Deep Value Differences

Planners also find themselves in circumstances where they face apparent claims not just of interests and preferences but of the "deep values" of other parties. How are they to respond in such cases, for better or worse? I have recently argued that this problem presents planners with both opportunities and traps, and careful analysis of the interactions in such cases can help inform practice (Forester 1999).

Consider what happens when a planner listens to a party (a developer or neighborhood resident or environmentalist, for example) who claims to be invoking a cherished commitment or what we can call, "a deep value claim." Planners may (1) believe the claimant is serious, or (2) believe that they are bluffing, perhaps acting strategically, exaggerating or misrepresenting their true commitments. At the very same time, of course, the claimant (1) may or (2) may not be bluffing, acting strategically, or misrepresenting their deeper commitments.

So let's look at the array of the resulting possibilities as four quadrants, once again, of a two by two matrix. If the planner takes the claimant to be serious AND he or she is speaking genuinely, the planner may convey respect of the other, acknowledge their values and commitments, and begin a dialogue and joint exploration of issues (quadrant 1). If the planner believes the claimant to BE serious, but the claimant is really bluffing (quadrant 2), the planner is vulnerable to being exploited or manipulated. If the planner does NOT believe the claimant to be serious and suspects bluffing and misrepresentation when the claimant is indeed serious (quadrant 3), then the planner can question the integrity of the other and damage their relationship; the claimant is likely to feel disrespected and, no doubt, quite angry! If, however, the planner suspects bluffing when the claimant is indeed bluffing (quadrant 4), then both parties face all the problems of «positional bargaining» and the famous traps of the prisoners' dilemma (Fisher and Ury 1983; Raiffa 1985; Lax and Sebenius 1986).These four possibilities present dangers (being exploited, fueling anger,

positional bargaining) AND an opportunity for joint inquiry as well. Failing to distinguish these possibilities, planners act in the dark and risk creating as many problems as they resolve.

In each of these three lines of analysis, we see modest theory-building FOR practice, not just OF practice. Each example characterizes the diverse challenges of a certain type of planning situation (when information, participation, or value conflict is at stake). Such THEORY FOR PRACTICE builds upon and extends existing theories of practice as it SUGGESTS HOW PLANNERS CAN FIND OPPORTUNITIES OR FAIL in such complex situations.

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