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# Response: What Works Best? Reflections on the Role of Theory in Planning

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*In this commentary, the author considers how theory helps one understand the development process and how it helps situate the role of planning as an agent of change in society. The problem is not that there is no theory of economic development but that there is too much and that there is little unity to this theory. Theory is also by construction about "what is," whereas planning is about "what should be." Planning is socially constituted and is, therefore, contingent on ideology, history, and politics. Similarly, planning initiatives reverberate through a region's historic, geographic, economic, social, and political fabric. It is the artificial separation of theory and planning that is at the heart of both "the problem with planning" and the "problem with theory."*

I would like to reflect on the notion that much of development planning takes place in a theoretical vacuum. In particular, I am concerned with two interrelated issues: how theory can help us understand the development process, and how theory helps us situate the role of planning as an agent of change in society.

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## DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND PLANNING

There exists ample theory about development. If there is a seeming vacuum in which much of development planning is conducted, it surely stems not so much from not having enough theory but, rather, from having too much. Although we can largely dismiss antiquated theories that propose continuous capitalist development as being historically incorrect (Rostow, 1962), we are still confronted by a fractious collection of current theories without any unifying corpus.

If fractious, existing theories are not strictly contradictory. Because the exact weight of national versus local forces in determining development outcomes is heavily dependent on spatial scale, we have tended to seek explanation of development from a variety of theories, each somewhat scale dependent. The theory of long waves (Ayres, 1990a, 1990b; Berry, 1991; Grubler & Nowotny, 1990; Kondratieff, 1935; Mandel, 1980; Marshall, 1987; Mensch, 1979; Schumpeter, 1939; van Duijn, 1983), for example, is primarily a theory seeking to explain empirical regularities in the dynamics of global capitalism. Theories concerning the new international division of labor (Fröbel, Henrichs, & Kreye, 1980) seek to explain the ways in which national, regional, and local economies confront global capitalism. Regulation theory (Aglietta, 1979; Boyer, 1988, 1990; Dunford, 1990; Jessop, 1990) is directed at understanding national systems of capitalism, whereas theories concerning regional disequilibrium (Clark, Gertler, & Whiteman, 1986), uneven development (Smith, 1984; Walker, 1978), and new industrial spaces (Scott, 1988; Storper & Walker, 1989) are most useful in understanding capitalism at the subnational scale.

It is worth recalling that these theories of how capitalism works are by definition positive, not normative. That is, they seek to provide understanding of a process that has already taken place, but they do not generally provide clues as to how to proceed—unless one wants to heroically



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assume that the future is like the past. But clearly, a minimum prerequisite for all development planners should be that they have considered available theory on the development process, pondered it, and arrived at an understanding of that process.

## SOCIAL THEORY AND PLANNING

Planning itself, however, is normative. It is about "what ought to be" as opposed to "what is." Because planning is about "what ought to be," it is constituted socially; thus, it implies, at the very least, an understanding by planners that policy and plans are social constructions. A cogent example of this is provided by considering welfare policy in the United States (see Knudsen, 1996, for more detail).

To understand U.S. welfare policy, one must first understand the role of individualism in American life. Writers from the time of de Tocqueville (1805-1859) have commented on the unique American notion of individualism (de Tocqueville, 1966, p. 477). These themes have been enlarged upon by subsequent writers (Crozier, 1984; Riesman, 1950; Veblen, 1973). More recently, research (see, for example, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1986) has confirmed that ultimate meaning in American life is personal and individual; the individual is seen as the ultimate source of value and meaning. Bellah et al. (1986, pp. 27-35) trace the history of individualism in American culture, illustrating the roles of biblical, republican, utilitarian, and expressive individualism. Two of these are of particular importance to this discussion. Biblical individualism is seen in the role that Puritanism continues to play in American society: the twin notions that successful life is not measured by material wealth but by the creation of community in which a genuinely ethical and spiritual life can be lived, and that material prosperity is a sign of God's approval. Utilitarian individualism stresses the right of individuals to succeed economically on the basis of their own industriousness, as best captured by the aphorism of Benjamin Franklin, "God helps those who help themselves." The obverse implies that poverty is an individual problem (those who fail do so because of lack of effort). It is against this social backdrop that current American welfare policy is constituted. In countries (such as Denmark) where social life privileges collective action over individual action, it is hardly surprising that poverty is not an individual but a collective problem and that the state intervenes so as to buffer individuals from the ups and downs of unchecked capitalist competition (Kuhnle, 1994).

Clearly, development planning, like welfare policy, is contingent on ideology, history, and politics. Any development plan both is derived from and will reverberate through a region's historic, geographic, economic, social, and political fabric. The plan will create change of some form, and this change will be filled with both intended and unintended consequences. Planning is a form of action that is a collective extension of our daily lives as social individuals. As a result, theories of social action are useful in situating the role of planning in society.

Although the postmoderns, such as Foucault (1982) and Derrida (see Kamuf, 1991), have provided powerful insights into the politics of social construction, my previous remarks reveal a preference for the works of Giddens (e.g., 1984) as providing the most useful basis for a theory of social action for planning. Giddens has extensively explored the relationship between history, structure, and agency. In Giddens's conception, the structurally and historically conditioned actions of individuals—acting alone or collectively—produce events, but those events continually create and recreate such structures and histories. Structures and histories are, therefore, instantaneous in that, although conditioning the actions of individuals, they are continually being revised and re-formed by those same actions. For Giddens, the individual is an active, knowledgeable, reasoning person, reflexively monitoring her or his own actions and those of others (Moos & Dear, 1986, p. 235) so as to understand and alter their socially constituted significance (Cohen, 1989, p. 49). That is not to say that all action is characterized by purpose, because not all action is guided by clearly thought-out purposes at the time it takes place (Cloke, Philo, & Sadler, 1991, p. 99). Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Giddens's thought is that many social practices in a day-to-day life are performed without being directly motivated. Unconscious motivations indirectly dispose agents to undertake institutionalized, ritualized forms of conduct (Cohen, 1989, pp. 52-53). Thus,

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unconscious routine is essential both for the reproduction of social institutions and for the personality of the agent (Cohen, 1989, p. 53); that is to say, both the unintended consequences and the unacknowledged conditions are unconscious.

## DISCUSSION

So what works best? It is virtually impossible to say, but that does not mean we have nothing to say—that planning is atheoretical or that planning is ineffectual. It merely means that *best* is contingent and socially constructed. It is not theory or planning but the artificial separation of theory and planning that is at the heart of alternatively "the problem with planning" or "the problem with theory." Most theory originates in social science, and planners, like virtually all professionals and academicians, do not read sufficiently outside their field. For their part, social scientists do not as a rule venture into the world of planning; thus, social science theory is rarely tested in practical application. Ignorance of theory by planners and of planning by theorists quite naturally results in piecemeal planning and unrealistic theory. My own experience as both a geographer and a planner, and as a teacher who requires both theoretical understanding and practical application from students, confirms the belief that only through deeper understanding of the development process (that is, a theoretical understanding of the dynamics of capitalism) can planners hope to make the interconnections between various bits of policy. Only by grounding their actions in social theory can planners understand and fulfill their role in society. Similarly, only through hands-on experience can social scientists hope to make a difference in the world.

There needs to be a closer link between theory and planning at all levels. We must destroy the equally old myths that there is no theory within which planning can be framed and that science is somehow value free, unencumbered by the ethical and political dilemmas that practical application imposes. Breaking down barriers between theory and planning requires the formal teaching of theory to planners, the requirement that theorists put their theories into practice (not just empirically confirm or reject them), the formation of multidisciplinary teams for attacking planning problems, and a variety of other adjustments. Unfortunately, there are too few good examples of this in the United States. We are somewhat distinct from the remainder of the world in the distance that academia and planners (typically residing in federal, state, or local government) are separated. Good examples of the interaction of theorists and planners are common in Europe and the Third World, where planners readily discuss current theory and theorists readily take on planning assignments.

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