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T h e o r y

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WHY DO PLANNING THEORY?

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In a recent issue of this journal, Bish Sanyal argues that, based on a survey of planning practitioners some years back, none of them had found planning theory or, indeed, any theory, useful as they 'grappled with conflicting interests' (Sanyal, 2002). They learned 'by doing', not from theories. His comment raises the question, why, if practitioners find planning theory to be of little or indeed, of any use, we should bother with contributing to the several ongoing discourses on theory.

I suspect that Professor Sanyal's views on this matter are widely shared. Even within the academy, there is no consensus as to what constitutes 'planning theory'. As a result, most planners go through their education without a clear understanding of planning theory in its multiple dimensions. There is not even, I would venture to guess, a clear view of 'theory', whether the term should be reserved for predictive theories only, or whether, as in the case of economics, a theory about what *is* can also be employed as a *prescriptive* theory, or whether it is possible for theoretical discourse to be entirely normative, with large claims but little evidence, or whether it is simply a loose term, as in thinking about planning.

There is a widespread acceptance in our *métier* that there are significant differences between theories that are used *in* planning and are specific to its several specializations (land use, transport, urban design, regional development, environmental planning, etc.) (theory 1); and theories that address what is common to all of them, i.e. theories *of* planning *tout court* (theory

2). In addition, I would propose a third category that I shall call theories *about* planning (theory 3).

No one argues about the relevance of theories of migration or economic location as they are deployed within the sub-discipline of regional development planning (theory 1). Neither is there much argument about the potential value of what some have called *critical planning,* theories, that based on studies, take a critical look at planning as it is actually practiced (theory 3). Such critiques may come from Marxist, political economy, or sustainability perspectives, among others. They are general statements or theories *about* planning. What is at issue, then, are the so-called theories *of* planning (theory 2) which are said to be irrelevant to practice.

Before proceeding, I think it needs to be said that there is no planning practice without a theory about how it ought to be practiced. That theory may or may not be named or present in consciousness, but it is there all the same. Thus, when we argue that planning *ought to be* in or *reflect* a general or public interest, we have in mind a theory of planning. And the same is true when we speak of *comprehensive* or, alternatively, of *advocacy* planning. It should also be clear that all of these terms (and there are several more that could be cited) are hotly contested. Some of us might remember Herbert Simon's and Charles Lindblom's arguments in the 1950s and 1960s about *synoptic* and *incremental* planning, or Amitai Etzioni's proposal for what he called *mixed scanning.* These arguments, which had a decisive influence on thinking within the profession, understood planning to be about *decision-making* and more specifically about how to make decisions more *rational.* They were also built on certain (unquestioned) epistemological assumptions and, more generally, about the powers (or lack thereof) of social scientific analysis.

The prevailing model of planning as a form of rational decision-making was challenged in the early 1970s in my book, *Retracking America: A Theory of Transactive Planning* (Friedmann, 1973). I argued that the model had run its course, and that a new way of thinking about planning was needed that would emphasize the relation between knowledge and action. In line with this new planning problematic, I proposed an epistemology of social learning, arguing more specifically for a relation of dialogue as a basis for *mutual* learning between planners and client groups. These ideas were picked up, or at least resonated with the work of others, including Donald Schoen (reflective practice), John Forester (communicative planning), and Patsy Healey (collaborative planning). It also shifted the discourses of planning theory away from planning as an *instrument of control* to one of *innovation* and *action,* which in turn, raised questions about what values ought to guide our practice, what strategies should be adopted, and how participation by community and/or stakeholders might be furthered.

I have no way of telling whether planning practitioners are influenced by these still ongoing debates (theory 2), but it does seem to me that the issues

being posed are most relevant for practice *across all planning specializations,* even when they are not fully resolved.

Meanwhile (and I have in mind the half century of post-Second World War planning) our world has changed dramatically, and planning needs to be brought in line with what is happening, from globalization and neoliberalist ideologies to multiculturalism and postmodernity. One of the major contributions to this re-thinking of planning is Leonie Sandercock's *Towards Cosmopolis: Planning for Multicultural Cities* (1998). The enthusiastic reception of this book, including by policy makers and politicians, especially in Europe, has resulted in a second, largely rewritten and augmented edition to be published by Continuum Press in 2003.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about *radical* or *insurgent* planning, a tradition of planning that is rooted in civil society rather than the state (Friedmann, 1987; Hartman, 2002). Generally ignored by mainstream planners, radical planning is action-oriented. It is allied with social movements for the right to housing, feminist concerns, socially and ecologically sustainable development, bio-regionalism, gay and lesbian rights, anti-racism and others, and is inspired by the normative theories undergirding these movements. The history of radical planning goes back to the early industrial revolution in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, to the utopian communities of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, and on to the federalism of Pierre Joseph Proudhon, the anarchism of Peter Kropotkin, and the social activism of Saul Alinsky, but equally to the rise of Marxian socialism and the international labor movement as a political force. To deny this radical edge a place within planning theory is equivalent to saying that the issues addressed by radical planners are of no concern to contemporary city builders, that only mainstream, state-centered planning counts. And yet, it is precisely that part of planning which is the most closely linked to practices, which is the most passionately and politically engaged, and which deeply matters for the future of our cities and regions.

So, why do planning theory? My answer is because, *pace* Sanyal, it does matter, because it is essential to the vitality and continued relevance of planning as a profession.

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