

# Planning and wilful community action: Epistemological considerations

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## Introduction

While individual accounts vary, most planners would agree that their calling, historically, has been bound up with the idea of bringing an increased measure of rationality to collective human activities. Since the late 1960s, however, traditional neo-positivist models of scientific problem solving and systematic administration have come increasingly under the gun. Urban riots, ecological disasters and the failure of the first UN Development Decade proved a damning indictment. By the early 1970s, new voices were being heard, calling for a different, more certain method of linking knowledge to action. Planning for turbulence through social learning was suggested as an alternative approach, and its emphasis on learning from practice has led to an ever increasing identity on the part of many planning theoreticians with the materialist concept of praxis. Both radical and liberal thinkers have come to endorse quite similar epistemological positions.

In this paper I will briefly criticize the increasingly orthodox learning/action model of planning, which for convenience I will refer to as 'LAM', and then I will go on to suggest some of the important components of another perspective which I have called wilful community action. My central argument is that LAM is extremely inconsistent and at least as naive, in several aspects, as the rational/systems paradigm it has replaced. A workable theory of planned action is not so much concerned with anatology as with results. 'True knowledge' is less important than belief which can be linked to accessible community power. The

role of the irrational in defining what is operationally 'true' and do-able must be openly confronted. And questions like 'Who Plans?' and 'What is the planner's role?' must be given defensible answers.

## Planning on the LAM

The rational/systems view of planning has been all but superseded by what might be called lightheartedly 'planning on the LAM', a sort of anti-planning theory of planning. Although the new paradigm is only now beginning to achieve respectability, its main contributors and central tenets are well established. The major writers have been drawn primarily from three groups:

- the 'radical planners', including Davidoff, Goodman, Grabow and Heskin;
- the 'learning theorist', represented by Dunn, Friedmann, Hampden-Turner and Schon; and
- the 'theoreticians of praxis', such as Arendt, Feyerabend, Habermas, Mao Tse-Tung and Vazquez.

The most frequently cited examples of successful planning practice under LAM are the 'Chinese path to development', and, more recently, the various Western European community participation movements.

In simplified form, LAM states that the methods of positive science cannot be applied successfully to

society. Each social setting is unique, and knowledge can only be gained and applied by self-conscious groups of people working through actual planning practice on concrete problems. The transferability of planning knowledge is all but limited to the internalized problem-solving ability carried around by experienced individuals. And since outcomes are always unsure, on politico-moral as well as epistemological grounds, the people affected by a decision must be responsible for making it. Devolution is, thus, an intrinsic part of the doctrine.

In attempting to collapse the dichotomy between the ideal and the real, LAM goes a long way in correcting the particular excesses of its predecessor, and this simple description is not meant to be a caricature. But there are several inherent weaknesses in its argument which deserve serious examination. Probably the most glaring of these is (1) the assumed relationship between 'truth' and successful action in any given situation; it being assumed that 'true knowledge' is necessary for solving social problems. This leads directly into the second consideration, (2) the question of rationality. The learning/action model of planning adheres doggedly to the idea that workable solutions to human problems rest on a functional base of cause and effect relationships. It posits that action can and should be directed by 'what can be discovered to work', in relatively direct, mechanistic terms. The irrational and emotional elements of experience, on both the personal and communal levels, remain outside the realm of discourse. This, then, leaves two further gaps in the LAM theory: (3) the relationship of planning and the planner to real, observed social action, and (4) the role of effective political power in implementing planning decisions.

I will comment on each of these problems and then attempt to suggest some of the characteristics of an alternative theory which faces them head-on.

The fetishism about science is a leftover from the 19th century, but a real, continuing problem. If we look even briefly at the more noteworthy publications in the LAM traditions, it becomes quickly evident, as in the midst of any paradigm shift, that a good deal of time and space is devoted to dragon killing. Many pages and much intellectual energy are allotted to a debunking and

post-mortem of August Comte, in his many incarnations. Liberal social science is taken to task on both epistemological and political grounds, mainly cantering around the obvious elements of sociology of knowledge - the question of free will, the inability to predict social events, and the importance of politics to social knowledge. Depending on the author, science and society are attributed varying degrees of misfit.

The irony in all this is, of course, that the same writers turn around, from a respectful distance, and resurrect the slain beast. In some form or another an approximation of the scientific method, reminiscent perhaps of Marx or Dewey is advocated, and it is argued that 'processed knowledge' is a continuing imperative for planned social action. Even if various teleological elements are added and sundry methodological constraints are removed, in fact, science still reigns supreme. The magic of planning is to connect an appropriate technique for discovering causal knowledge with the proper social institutions to embody and act upon it.

The basis of this tenacious attachment to 'science' on the part of planners is easily explainable in terms of planning history, if less than satisfying in recorded results. As a reform movement whose origins overlap the turn of the last century, planning hoped and promised to change the appalling human condition under the rule of industrial capitalism, through the introduction of a scientific viewpoint, the application of technology to social problems, and the establishment of scientific modes of administration. Whether in Russia after the revolution or Chicago during the heyday of big business, rationality in public affairs was the sacred held high to banish the profane of poverty and privilege. Few would argue today, however, that social justice, humane urban growth patterns, and controlled, yet adequate economic development were the outcomes. The relationship between scientific knowledge and social reform has proven problematic at best. One might ask if substantive cause and effect relationships are even a relevant consideration in most social decisions, and whether planners are not perhaps faced with a very fundamental choice: science or social change.

Nevertheless, and despite their own arguments demonstrating the ideographic nature of human

perception and cognition, some form of rationality remains the sanctifying principle for most planners. Whether it is a little-modified line of deductive reasoning or the 'logic of action', rationality is championed as the necessary decision principle in choosing information for planning. The fact that 'logic' is almost entirely conditioned by upbringing or that thought chains are utterly riddled with 'non-rational' elements is continually neglected. An admission of irrationality seems taboo, and no real limits to functional knowledge are recognized.

Part of the reason for this continuing call for science and rationality among LAM paradigm planners is involved with the question 'Who plans?' and a natural professional conservatism. Taking the LAM critique of neo-positivism at face value, the query immediately comes to mind, who should do the planning and what should be their assigned role in social change? The answer is just as forceful: people organize and plan for themselves, and there is no real role for an expeditor. Even for most LAM theoreticians, however, this position seems unsatisfactory: Isn't it true that people take only limited interest in public affairs? Only pressing disaster seems to move them! And then only until the immediate crisis is resolved. Continuing, positive action seems impossible without someone to oversee the whole process.

But such a line of argument is genuinely out of tune with the times. There must be a less authoritarian justification! So once again science enters the picture although, admittedly, this time, mixed with such irrational consideration as 'commitment' and 'readiness to serve'. Discussions appear calling for an admixture of scientific and common-sense knowledge as the basis for planning, although, on first glance at least, science has already been dismissed as inapplicable. Thus the debate continues over the respective roles of planners and clients (or the avant-garde and the masses), without any admissible explanation of the planner's existence. Planners continue to exercise power and write about planning, but their own arguments lend them very little legitimacy.

Finally we come to the question of implementation and its relation to political power. Carried to its

farthest extreme, in learning theory circles, knowledge becomes something obtained almost entirely through practice. So the problem of 'implementation' never becomes pertinent. Planning is a *fait accompli*. No-one has to worry how it will get done. Similarly, among the neo-marxist left, power is by definition mobilized for the accomplishment of public purposes which serve the common interest. So once again, theoretically, implementation is not a pressing concern. However, the reality of both these situations is vastly different from the advertisements.

Implementation takes genuine mobilization of social power. Within the limits of technical and economic capacity, it means getting people excited and supportive of something. It means getting the levers of power to move in the right direction. The power can only be avoided at a theoretical level. Without effective implementation, manifestly, planning remains only as successful as the Tanzanian Ujamaa Village Scheme, or the US 55 mph speed limit.

### Planning and the will to power

If one accepts many of the critical assertions of the learning/action model of planning, but has difficulty with its positive prescriptions, what are the alternatives? A return to 'rational planning' would hardly seem to be the answer. I think a useful approach can be suggested, however. It lies in the direction of what I have called *wilful community action*. In a non-teleological world, where positivist social science has lost its credibility, there must *and will* continue to be an accepted body of knowledge about social reality, a world view if you will. This image of things changes from group to group and place to place, imbedded as it is in their shared culture by their own particular historical experience. By way of example, in Watts or in Pays Basque, for the people that live there, *the world is their representation*. Seen another way, it might be described as a projection of themselves, a sublimation of their own will (Schopenhauer, 1966). Within the theoretically undefinable bounds of some sort of reality principle, whether such a worldview is 'true' is not of immediate importance. It provides the requisite information

and motivation by which society functions. The task for anyone who would play an active role in social life is to identify and help transform the group's will *vis-a-vis* particular concrete situations. This is typically a slow, painful communal process. No one can, in fact, conceivably control and manipulate it. But it is only through exercise of the community will (wilful community action) that problems are identified, acted upon and overcome (Nietzsche, 1973).

Knowledge as a community's worldview or representation has several distinctive features, including *specificity*, *limitedness*, *irrationality*, and *action-orientation*. I will attempt to sketch out the meaning and implications of each of these attributes.

*Specificity*: First of all, any community's worldview is limited to its own experience and the ideas it has absorbed in one form or another from other groups. This means that its representation of the world is particular and localized. By definition then, it suggests that there will be other views of the same events, from other perspectives; indeed, what are social problems for one social group may not even be identified as existing from another worldview. The most immediate conclusion to be drawn from such an argument is that only people who live in a particular environment and understand it (know) it though a particular viewpoint can possibly plan for it. This is not to suggest that there is no systematic or special knowledge, but rather that planners, whoever they may be, can only be drawn from their own communities.

*Limitedness*: Another related feature is the notion of limitation. Since not all things enter into a particular cultural perspective, only those that fit within the community's world view can be employed to prompt them to action. This can present a terrible conservative bias, which I would argue is to be encountered daily in all human affairs. But there is absolutely no point in avoiding it or denying its existence! Transformation of limited knowledge is an exercise in community education; a task of the first order, requiring genuine cultural change, and, therefore, significant amounts of time. It is one of the planner's roles and provides legitimate grounds for hopeful, if extended, work by learning

theorists.

*Irrationality*: Specific, limited knowledge has a two-dimensional relationship to irrationality. It contains both rational and irrational elements (from either a positivist or Marxist definition of rationality, for instance) and so must be approached in an appropriate manner. Some ideas are held because of the effective component of attitude; at the community level this could take a host of relevant forms, such as immense pride in a particular aspect of community self-image. Still further afield from traditional planning considerations are communally shared concepts which are a product of almost pure emotion, like a fear for bodily safety, portrayed by burdensome community expenditures or extremely restrictive regulation of public behaviour.

From a second perspective, information which is functional operational in a given situation (*viz.*, 'rational') might be excluded from a particular group's world view, making it, for all practical purposes, irrelevant to planned action. No amount of reality testing or other forms of experimentation, in the short run at least, will change this, *no matter how practical the innovation should prove to be*. Yet at the same time, if a new concept is incorporated into a community's worldview it can significantly change social relationships, even to the point of markedly altering the status of formerly favoured vested interests.

*Action-orientation*: Finally we come to the prime link between knowledge and the implementation of planning, the tie between community will and action. Action is direct manifestation of a group's collective will. Since both knowledge and action are functions of community will, there is, once again, a built-in bias toward the status quo but no unbridgeable gap between the two. Here the planner's role becomes one of helping to bring consistency to the knowledge/action continuum and attempting to encourage transformation of the communal will. Such a task may be Herculean, but is not impossible, for behavioural change does occur. And from this perspective, both knowledge and action share a common root.

### Summary comments

Wilful community action is still a nebulous concept. It needs much exploration and refinement. But I think it offers the foundation for a useful theory of planning. With the demise of the rational/systems approach to planning, a void has been created which the learning/action model has been, as yet, unable to fill. The main problems in the LAM formation are:

- (1) an ambiguous attitude toward the role of science in planning,
- (2) an inability to define a legitimate role for the apparently unavoidable continuing presence of the planner, and
- (3) an unrealistic attitude vis-a-vis the evident constraints of community power.

Wilful community action makes a first approximation of overcoming these shortcomings. It does not have an overwhelming stake in the successful re-definition of science; its epistemological basis lies elsewhere. Planners are assigned a meaningful, legitimate role in social change, identifying and transforming the world view which they share with other members of their own social group. And social power is acknowledged and built-in to the concept as a fundamental object of planning concern. Its use may prove difficult, but its importance is given centre stage.¶

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