

## **Communicative Planners as Naïve Mandarins of the Neo-liberal State?**

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In a recent contribution to the European Journal of Spatial Development (EJSD), Christer Bengs (2005a, b) raises some critical questions concerning communicative planning theory. The questions are each in some way related to the relationship between planning theory and the neo-liberal society. For example,

- Can planning theory solve the moral dilemmas faced by planners in neo-liberal and globalized society?
- Have planners become facilitators of development, working, in effect, as moderators of the divergent interests of stakeholders?
- Is communicative planning theory therefore a purely ideological tool for the establishment of a neo-liberal society bolstering the neo-liberal economy?
- Is this all there is to communicative planning theory, such that it is essentially useless for all other theoretical and practical purposes?
- And, consequently, is communicative planning theory only for the naïve?

Although Bengs ends his polemical title – *Planning Theory for the Naïve?* – with a question mark, his editorial and his comment in the EJSD give the impression that his position would be to answer each of the last four questions in the affirmative.

In this response to Bengs, I begin by addressing the first of the above questions. This provides us with the opportunity to reflect upon what we do and do not require from planning theory. Thereafter, the comment deals with Bengs' core question, or rather his contention, that the main function of communicative planning theory is to lubricate the neo-liberal economy, and in particular the workings of the real estate market.

### **Planning theory, democracy, and moral dilemmas**

Planning theory is not a fully-fledged global academic field. It does however seem to be more widespread in democratic countries than in authoritarian ones. Little would be left of the various theories *of* planning, were their ideas for promoting democracy excluded.

Planning theory is not global because democracy is not global. The most familiar modes of planning aim to promote democracy in the following ways:

- Synoptic planning: Increasing the respect for democratic decisions by improving the preparatory stage of decision-making and the professional quality of the plans handed over to the politicians.
- Disjointed incrementalism: Ensuring that every interest has its watchdog, and improving democratically enacted plans by encouraging multiple and competing input from a broad array of groups and organizations.
- Advocacy planning: Strengthening the equity and social justice aspects of democracy by ensuring that even disadvantaged and weak groups are heard in the political decision-making process.
- Communicative planning (critical pragmatism): Making planning processes less vulnerable to manipulation and other repressive power strategies by revealing and counteracting communicative distortions. Aiming for broad participation and dialogue in planning processes and broad support for planning recommendations.

In normative theories of planning, that is, recommendations of how to plan such as the above, attention to the ethical basis of action must act as a foundation. However, I am not convinced that a new theory *of* planning is needed to guide planners in moral dilemmas (for instance, those mentioned by Sanyal (2002) and Bengs (2005b)). As an analogy, consider the fact that planners need some knowledge of economics to forecast the demand for new facilities and estimate the net social benefits from infrastructure projects. This does not mean that there has to be a particular planning theory dealing with these matters. Most planners are aware that solutions to such problems of demand and evaluation are to be found in economics, and thus they do not turn to planning theory for assistance. Similarly, suggestions over how to deal with moral dilemmas are found in ethics, and unless planning dilemmas are of a type peculiar to our field, a particular planning theory is probably not needed to supply guidance. Actually, synoptic planning theory is often associated with utilitarian ethics, and communicative planning theory is linked to discourse ethics (Rehg 1994). The conclusion to draw from the above is that the ethical basis needed by planners can enter the planning field as theory *in* planning, that is, as ethical theory applied to the planning field.

When theories of planning can be linked to aspects of democracy, it is not a large step to assume that they can also be linked to the broad political development of society. The central argument put forward by Bengs (2005b) hinges on this assumption.

### **Planning theories mirror broad political trends**

Does it make sense to interpret prevailing planning theories in the context of general political developments? I agree with Bengs that this can be done and even that it should be done. It is part of the planning theorists' reflection on their own academic field. They *should* ponder the association of their theoretical constructs with politics. Such an exercise is also necessary for planning theory to be considered a socially critical endeavour.

Synoptic planning was associated with the technical-economic expertise valued in the reconstruction period following World War II. Disjointed incrementalism was seen as a translation of economic market logic to the 'market of ideas' laying the basis for planned intervention. Advocacy planning was a response to the degeneration of many U.S. inner cities in the early 1960s. Moreover, the transactive planning of John Friedmann (1973)

reflected the radical trends and the quest for more participation of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Why has communicative planning theory gained momentum during the last quarter of a century? Some candidates for partial explanation have no clear connection to neo-liberal politics:

- Many Western societies and cities are becoming more multicultural, with a more diverse ethnic and cultural make up and thus increased need for negotiation and communication in the preparation of public plans and projects.
- The citizenry is more educated than ever before and demands to be heard in public matters.
- Civil society is thoroughly organized, with a large number of interest organizations and social movements that are strong enough to challenge bureaucratic and political decisions.
- The 1970s saw a large extension of the range of effects deemed relevant to the evaluation of plans and projects. There is a lack of objective standards for assessing many of the environmental and social consequences, in contrast to the traditional technical and economic ones, so the preferences of affected groups are needed in addition to expert calculations.

Bengs, however, points explicitly to the neo-liberal currents and maintains that mainstream planning theory supports a liberalized land regime by stressing communication with stakeholders in contrast to public control. Stakeholders thus increase their influence in planning systems relative to democratically elected representatives. This is encouraged by communicative planning theory, according to Bengs, and is an adaptation to a more liberal real estate market as part of neo-liberalism and globalization. 'Planning reduced to communication is a political statement in line with the building of a neo-liberal society' (Bengs 2005a:3).

Bengs is correct to hold up neo-liberalism as an explanation for the emergence of communicative planning. Not that he is necessarily right in his conclusions on this point, but whether the explanation is right or wrong, it is certainly the most interesting and challenging hypothesis. The following three paragraphs compare Bengs' position to that of others who have explicitly acknowledged some kind of link between communicative planning theory and the development of neo-liberal society.

Recent managerial restructuring of government has aimed at depoliticizing decisions by making them a matter of operational management. The dispersal of state functions to a range of extra-governmental organizations makes this evident. Moreover, according to Imrie (1999:110), the pursuit of process over substance implies the reduction of social and political issues to technical and procedural matters; they are translated into problems to be managed. Imrie makes use of this insight to build a case against communicative planning, contending that it 'is a powerful conception in legitimising a managerialist approach to the problems confronting the planner' (ibid.119). Organizing networks, forging partnerships, and developing procedural mechanisms are seen both as managerial tasks and as core tasks of communicative planning. Although Imrie has a point, he ignores the contrasting reasons for the process-orientation. The proponents of New Public Management want to render issues less political and opt for a streamlined managerial process. Communicative planning theorists focus on the process because issues are acknowledged as political, and

the groups and interests affected should therefore have a say. Moreover, the process should be participatory and fair not only because this is valuable in itself, but because the process will usually affect the final plan.

Allmendinger (2001:134) holds the denial of a central coordinating role for the planner to be a main theme of collaborative planning. Planners need to engage with local stakeholders in an unbarred search for local consensus. He interprets collaborative planning theorists as wanting a levelling down of the planner's role to that of any other stakeholder. Allmendinger sees the function of communicative planning as 'providing planners with the theoretical justification for their continued existence in the shadow of the deregulatory approaches of the 1980s' (ibid.123). He treats the recourse to communicative theory as a reasonable strategy on the part of planning theorists and not as a naïve and ill-considered attempt at democratization leading to the opposite.

Taylor (1998) points out that negotiation and undistorted dialogue are both types of communication, and that the last type has taken centre stage in communicative planning. Negotiation is also however an important part of participatory and communicative planning processes, and helps in taking the step from analysis to action. Taylor therefore regards communicative planning theory as a strand of thought following the upsurge of implementation analysis in planning and policy-making throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. Efficient implementation, in the form of speeding up the handling of development proposals, is also a core interest of the neo-liberal regimes emerging in the 1980s, and it therefore provides a stepping-stone between communicative planning and neo-liberalism. Taylor asserts that the 'developments in planning theory in the 1980s and 1990s cannot be disassociated from the changes to planning practice brought about by this political shift to the right' (ibid.130).

### **Bengs on communicative planning theory as the child of neo-liberal ideology**

According to Bengs (2005b), communicative planning theory is part of the set of rules, norms, and bureaucratic procedures (i.e. institutions) supporting the neo-liberal state. Communicative planning is regarded as advancing development and the free flow of investment. His core thesis is that a new planning regime with a minimum of predefined restrictions and guidelines, and with ample opportunity to strike deals at the local level, is in conformity with the neo-liberal ideals (ibid.6). Such a regime is, allegedly, introduced by communicative planning. The concepts of 'the public interest' and 'stakeholder' are now briefly dealt with, because Bengs uses them as the launch pad for his critique of naïve communicative theorists. Thereafter, his position can be more fully interpreted.

Bengs (2005b:7) regards communicative planning theory as contrary to the idea of a public interest. According to him, this mode of planning takes the economic interests of investors and developers as the point of departure, not as one particular issue among others to be modified and balanced against the public interest (Bengs 2005a:1). What seems to be worth doing, according to communicative planning theorists, is determined by what the parties can agree on in a dialogic process. Hence, collective action should not be determined by an 'objective' notion of the public interest that is independent of the outcome of dialogue. However, with the very demanding requirements that have to be fulfilled by a communicative process in order for it to be dialogic in the Habermasian sense adopted by communicative planning theorists (Forester, Healey, Innes), it might not be unreasonable to *define* the outcome of dialogue as being in the public interest. After all, all those concerned should take part, freely and equally, in the cooperative search for truth,

where nothing coerces anyone except the force of the better argument. This is ‘a speech situation that satisfies improbable conditions: openness to the public, inclusiveness, equal rights to participation, immunization against external or inherent compulsion, as well as the participants’ orientation toward reaching understanding (that is, the sincere expression of utterances)’ (Habermas 1999:367). Nevertheless, I interpret Bengs as implying that scepticism on the part of communicative planning theorists towards the notion of a dialogue-independent public interest is just another sign that they are against predefined guidelines and instead want to strike deals at the local level in the service of business and unhindered development.

While Bengs criticizes communicative planning theorists for reducing citizens to stakeholders, the New Public Management version of neo-liberalism is widely criticized for reducing citizens to consumers. It is of some importance to Bengs’ argument how the term ‘stakeholder’ is understood. The term spread to planning from the field of business administration and management, there denoting a person, company, etc that has shares or an interest in a business or an industry. It is understandable, therefore, that Bengs sees stakeholders as partners in a particular development project. Prominent communicative planning theorists however often use the term more broadly to include citizens, groups, and organizations that are affected by a plan. The kind of stake people may have in a planning process ranges ‘from being residents of neighbourhoods to the interests of global investors, or national heritage considerations, or the nesting needs of migrating birds’ (Healey 1997:271). This wider meaning is significant, as it in turn affects the meaning of ‘political community’, which, according to Bengs, is applied (by Patsy Healey) to undermine the notion of the public interest.

Healey (1997) does not think of a political community as a fellowship of stakeholders, and certainly not stakeholders in Bengs’ narrow sense. In my interpretation, Healey does not abandon ‘the public interest’, but rather avoids this controversial phrase while articulating its content in alternative terms. She writes about ‘an aggregate interest’, ‘our shared interests’, and our ‘common concern, though immensely various in forms’ (ibid.124-25). Moreover, the political communities having such interests and concerns do not only have stakeholders as members. On the contrary, we – the community members – are citizens or ‘ordinary people’ and ‘human beings trying to live our lives’ versus business organizations and political institutions (ibid.124). Therefore, use of the term ‘political community’ is not likely to be a trick to replace the public interest by what is in the interest of the partners in any particular development project.

The position of Bengs, then, seems to be that communicative theory ensures that planning ends up as a confusing and arbitrary game with underdeveloped rules. The players all have special interests, and the strategies of the game are therefore manipulative. The planners, having refuted the idea of the public interest, have simultaneously impaired their role as public servants. Because they fail to see the association between their professional ideology and the neo-liberalism of New Public Management, communicative planning theorists and planners are becoming naïve mandarins of the neo-liberal state. Instead of empowering those who want to build a society based on common principles, planning theorists actively and naïvely promote a system placing themselves and those catering for community needs in the roles of pure ‘extras’ at the tables where important deals are being made.

Bengs has at least one thing in common with Imrie, Allmendinger, and Taylor, as they all see a connection between communicative planning theory and the predominant neo-liberal politics of many Western societies. However, when explaining this connection, their ideas immediately differ. Allmendinger sees communicative planning theory as an attempt to rescue planning by finding a role for it in the hostile political environment of neo-liberalism. Taylor sees communicative planning theory as an attempt at riding two horses, at the same time promoting deliberative democracy and facilitating implementation. The last aim might be to the advantage of neo-liberal development interests. Imrie sees the appeal for communicative interaction in order to respond to difference as a diversion, but does not question the rationality or integrity of the planning theorists. He finds it more than likely that planning theory will be framed within a managerial logic and seems to believe that this unification might well give priority to consensus seeking, collaboration, and communication between diverse and disparate actors.

Bengs (2005b), on the other hand, believes that communicative planning theorists consciously or unintentionally support the neo-liberal transformation of society. They are naïve, as they do not see that their ideas lead to the establishment of institutions for the few rather than the many. Nor do they see that they introduce what they purport to eliminate, as communicative planning, in his view, implies an array of manipulative elements. Alternatively, Bengs is open to the possibility that planning theorists are just opportunists yielding on professional standards and scientific rationality, and embracing the logic of the market in times when the political winds blow from regulation towards consumer sovereignty. Perhaps the planning academics who earn their daily bread from teaching planning merely fabricate planning theory as an 'innocent' pastime, although fully aware that this is a political act in the classical sense of the word (Bengs 2005a:1). Bengs gives communicative planning theorists the choice between conceding to naivety or opportunism. In any case, they are seen as teaching pure ideology serving market-oriented neo-liberalism and facilitating globalization.

### **Comments on Bengs' critique**

Planners (at least in the Nordic countries) usually assume that lay people know what is best for them (Olsen 2000), and this is the basis for a largely favourable attitude to public involvement among planners. Furthermore, several theorists in the field of communicative planning argue that planning theory ought to be a critical theory, and that Habermas' theory of communicative action holds the potential to develop it further in that direction (Forester 1993, Sager 2006). Critical communicative planning should counteract communicative distortions and reveal false consciousness standing in the way of the fair provision of public goods.

Bengs' critique is therefore radical and provocative. Today's mainstream planning theory is seen as displaying a simple apology for neo-liberal ideology (Bengs 2005a:3). Furthermore, the rationality assumption that planners apply to everybody else is not acknowledged as valid for themselves. On the contrary, the planning theorists are singled out as a group haunted by false consciousness, making their claims to possess and administer critical theory a sham or delusion. The rationality, whether instrumental or communicative, that planners have always aspired to (Breheny and Hooper 1985) is by implication claimed to be in a sorry state.

I have never heard any prominent communicative planning theorist (e.g. John Forester, Patsy Healey, or Judith Innes) say that it would be a good idea to adapt planning theory to

neo-liberal *realpolitik*. Nor have I come across such an aim in their writings. Certainly, I have not found any suggestion that the interest of investors should have a privileged position when arguments are balanced in the dialogic process – perhaps because this would completely alienate communicative planning theory from its Habermasian roots. Nevertheless, it is a phenomenon well known to social scientists that the results of public intervention might turn out to be quite different from that which was expected. The saying goes that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Planning theorists should therefore not ignore critique suggesting that their well-intentioned reforms are being transformed and perverted by economic-political forces only to end up making society less rather than more democratic.

New Public Management is the administrative and managerial formulation of neo-liberal ideology. In order to stimulate the assessment of how likely it is that communicative planning theory promotes neo-liberalism, the following two paragraphs highlight some differences between the communicative ideal and New Public Management (Sager 2005).

In communicative planning, the planner should continually foster participatory processes to expand democratic rights, support citizens' voices, and redirect resources to the most needy. Communicative planning contributes to deliberative democracy. New Public Management, on the other hand, conceives the welfare state as a market-based delivery system, and its aim is to empower customers and free managers from political shackles and the idiosyncrasies of labour unions. The main feature of New Public Management is its one-dimensional emphasis on economic norms and values. Communicative planning instead opens up the process and welcomes all sincere arguments from involved parties. New Public Management narrows the public debate, as cost-effectiveness is given a hegemonic position among the arguments. Moreover, this managerial ideology seems to induce the de-politicization of decision-making in the public sector, while communicative processes engender politicization of public planning in the sense of bringing a wide range of interests to the table.

Some further tensions between New Public Management and communicative planning can be read from Imrie's (1999) critique of the regime shift from bureau-professionalism to steering principles dominated by managerialism, a shift paving the way for business or corporate values and technical-economic procedures and discourses. For planning, the efficiency goal of New Public Management entails speeding up the turnaround of planning applications, faster completion of local plan preparation, facilitation of development objectives, and the streamlining of procedures. Important procedures in the present context are those arranging for public consultation. The risk is that the pressure on local planning authorities to simplify procedures and reduce delays in plan preparation and development control diminishes the time devoted to public participation in planning processes (ibid.117). This is contrary to the stated aim of communicative planning theorists.

As a final point, I turn to the question of power exerted in planning processes. Bengs (2005b:8) contends that communicative planners dis-empower most actors and place them in the role of 'extras' when planning decisions are to be made. Bengs is here in line with other critics who consider communicative planning theorists naïve, because they sometimes write as if planners have a way to level the power of different groups and interests in the planning process, while in reality, or so the critics say, they have no strategy for achieving this. Sager (2006) argues that critical communicative planning has such a strategy, and that it consists of altering political transaction costs by going against

manipulative tactics and other deliberate perversion of communication whenever it promotes the fairness of the plan. Altering political transaction costs means changing the relative costs for the involved parties of getting their message across and building support for their arguments. The effectiveness of this strategy does however remain in dispute. If the strategy is considered realistic, it entails that at least one source of the naivety-critique is probably exaggerated.

## **Conclusion**

The main conclusion is that Christer Bengs does planning theory a favour by raising the question of the relationship between its communicative branch and neo-liberalism and, hence, New Public Management. Only a few of the theorists giving attention both to planning and neo-liberalism (or the New Right) have explicitly dealt with communicative planning theory. Among those who have, even fewer – if any – have provided a critical and thorough analysis of the connection between communicative planning theory and neo-liberal intellectual, economic, and political currents. In the planning field, participatory and communicative theorizing has been one of the strongest influences over the last quarter of a century. Among the external influences, however, New Public Management has had a considerable impact on the agencies and the working conditions of many planners. If the two influences spring from affiliated interests and ideas, and mutually corresponding theory building, a well integrated new role for planners might emerge. On the other hand, if communicative planning theory and New Public Management do not go well together, and I think they do not, considerable tension may well be felt by planners who are thus increasingly torn in different directions by a confusing and inconsistent professional role. This theme calls for further analysis.

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