



PLANNING THEORY SYMPOSIUM

Beyond the Limits of Planning Theory: Response to My Critics

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'Little Things' that Re-enchant the World

I want to thank the editors for giving me this opportunity to respond to the comments on *Rationality and Power* made above by Oren Yiftachel, Lisa Peattie, John Forester, Andreas Faludi and Arnold van der Valk, and Peter Marris. In what follows I shall give my response to their criticisms. I shall focus less on the many positive things they also say about the book. First let me mention, however, that I was particularly happy to learn that the critics are favourable to the depth of detail in the book's case-study of planning in Aalborg. This is especially important to me, because during the years when I was working in the archives, doing interviews, making observations, talking with my informants, etc. a nagging question kept resurfacing in my mind. This is a question bound to haunt many carrying out what Peattie calls 'dense data case-studies': 'Who will want to learn about a case like this, and in this kind of *detail*?'

I wanted the case-study to be particularly dense because I wished to test the thesis that the most interesting phenomena in planning and policy making, and those of most general import, would be found in the most minute and most concrete of details. Or to put the matter differently, I wanted to see whether the dualisms general-specific and abstract-concrete would metamorphose or vanish if I went into sufficiently deep detail. Following Dewey, Rorty has perceptively observed that the way to re-enchant the world is to stick to the concrete. Nietzsche similarly advocates a focus on 'little things' if we are to understand the problems of politics and social organization, which, needless to say, include problems of planning. Both Rorty and Nietzsche seem right to me. I saw the Aalborg case as being made up of the type of concrete, little things they talk about. Indeed, I saw the case itself as such a thing, what Nietzsche calls a discreet and apparently insignificant truth, which, when closely examined, would reveal itself to be pregnant with paradigms, metaphors and general significance.

That was my thesis, but theses may be wrong and the study could have fallen flat on its face. This has not happened, and it is especially satisfying to me to see that this particular aspect—the focus on 'little things'—is emphasized by many reviewers, including the present ones, as a strength of the Aalborg study.

Planning Is too Important To Be Left to Planning Theorists

Yiftachel finds that *Rationality and Power* “strangely ignores” seminal works on the rational planning paradigm by Friedmann, Faludi, Castells and others as well as more recent approaches to the theorization of planning which incorporate issues of identity, culture and space. Forester similarly suggests that I do not theorize the Aalborg case-study by relating it to the works on urban planning and politics by Meyerson & Banfield, Altshuler, Wachs, and Krumholz & Forester. I agree that the kind of comparisons and theorizing that Yiftachel and Forester call for may be useful in planning scholarship and planning theory. In *Rationality and Power* I am interested less, however, in such specialized theorizing and more in encouraging philosophical reflection about planning and how it is shaped by rationality and power. What I have tried to do is to portray the complex and dense dynamics of the planning process and then cross-reference between this and the broader views of thinkers like Machiavelli, Nietzsche and Foucault in order to create a linkage between, on the one hand, the local and ethnographic and, on the other, the philosophical issues that are embodied in the local story. My intention has not been to imply that Friedmann, Meyerson, Banfield or others are not important to understanding planning but to emphasize that Machiavelli, Nietzsche and Foucault have something to tell us that is just as important, and is much less explored in the field of planning. Because it is less explored, it holds greater opportunity for learning something new, or so was my thesis.

I would also question the assumption held by Yiftachel and Forester that it is the task of individual researchers who do in-depth case-studies to also theorize their work in relation to other studies. As Platt (1992) has found in her analyses of how case-studies are used, it is the sign of mature social science, with its division of labour, that case researchers do not necessarily themselves theorize their studies or make comparisons with other studies. Other researchers routinely do it for them, or do it for their own purposes. Where such specialization is common, i.e. where a division of labour exists between empirical depth and development of theory, progress in scholarship appear to be more advanced than in fields where such specialization is rare. This is easy to understand. Given the fact that resources for a given piece of research are typically finite, doing one thing fully will often advance the field better than doing two things partially. This does not deny the importance of works of synthesis. However, whether an author of a case-study compares and theorizes her study is accidental in mature social science, according to Platt (1992). It seems to me that we should act maturely in this sense in planning research and planning theory. It will get us further as an academic field. And, indeed, the comparisons and theorizing of Aalborg in relation to other cases and other studies have begun, as Forester himself points out.

To Yiftachel and Forester, and to the other reviewers above, *Rationality and Power* is a book attempting to make a contribution to the field of planning theory. I invite such an interpretation because I am a planning researcher. From my studies of planning and planning theory, however, I have come to see the empirical phenomenon of planning as too important to be limited to interpretations within the theoretical categories that exist in the rather narrow confines of what is called planning theory. I agree with those historians and anthropologists who see planning as constitutive of what it means to be human, and especially

to be a modern human. Therefore I deliberately wrote *Rationality and Power* in a way that might make readers see planning the way I do: as an exciting and omnipresent phenomenon with general import across the social sciences. I wanted to write about planning in ways that might be of interest not only to planning theorists and specialized planning scholars but also to scholars in other social sciences.

The main means of doing this were twofold. Firstly, I decided to demur from the role of omniscient narrator and summarizer. Instead, I told the story of the Aalborg project in its diversity, allowing the story to unfold from the many-sided, complex and sometimes conflicting stories that the actors in the case had told me. Secondly, I deliberately avoided linking the case with the theories of any one academic discipline, be it planning, political science, sociology or another. Instead, I related the case to what I see as important philosophical positions that cut across the social sciences, as described above. In this way I hoped to leave scope for readers of different backgrounds to make different interpretations and draw diverse conclusions regarding the question of what the Aalborg case is a case of.

The goal was not to make the case-study be all things to all people. The goal was to allow the study to be different things to different people. I tried to achieve this by describing the case with so many facets—like life itself—that different readers might be attracted, or repelled, by different things in the case. The reader is not pointed down any one theoretical path or given the impression that truth might lie at the end of such a path.

When I devised this strategy for writing up the case-study, it was not clear that it would work. For me this was part of the excitement of devising the strategy. But today I think it has. The reviews and uses of *Rationality and Power* show that to planning scholars the book is a study in planning. Political scientists say the book is a study in democracy and community power, policy analysts that it is about policy implementation, legal scholars that it is about the abuse of power. To environmentalists it is a study in environmental degradation, to sociologists a study in discourse analysis and the social construction of reality, to anthropologists an ethnography of the cultures of planning and politics, to students of management and public administration a study in interorganizational complexity, to political theorists and philosophers a study in Foucauldian and Nietzschean power, to historians a study in contemporary history, etc.

If I had done what Forester and, partly, Yiftachel suggest I should have, that is, explicitly engage with planning theory and frame my study with the concepts of such theory, I would not have been able to bring out the many facets I think planning has and to demonstrate to other social scientists what planning scholars already know: that planning is important. As a consequence I would have lost the major part of the readership that the book now has. I do not see how this would have benefited anyone, including planning theorists. Although, like Yiftachel and Forester, I find planning theory interesting and relevant, the fact is that not many do within the social sciences, or even within planning and planning research. In social science, planning theory comes nowhere near political, economic or social theory in uses and importance. Perhaps we should begin asking ourselves why this is so, instead of encouraging colleagues and students to limit themselves to the confines of such an esoteric discipline just because it happens to be ours.

The Value of Dense Case-studies in Planning

Where Forester and Yiftachel criticize my work for theorizing and generalizing too little, Peattie has the opposite view. She finds that I theorize and generalize too much. Peattie holds dense case-studies in high esteem—she is herself the author of a distinguished study of planning in Ciudad Guayana (Peattie, 1987)—and she sees such studies as more useful for the practitioner and more interesting for social theory than either factual ‘findings’ or the high-level generalizations of planning theory. I agree, which is one reason I chose to do the Aalborg study as a dense case-study. Peattie claims, however, that I am not doing my own ideas justice when in the final chapter of *Rationality and Power* I sum up the study in 10 propositions about the relationship between rationality and power. Peattie finds it odd that I generalize in this way and she calls my summing up a “theory”. She says it positions the researcher outside the practice of planning. Peattie goes on to observe that the very value of the case-study, the uncovering of the contextual and interpenetrating nature of forces, is lost when one tries to sum up in large and mutually exclusive concepts like rationality and power.

I would agree with Peattie’s criticism, had I done what she claims I have. But, firstly, I explicitly state in the book that the 10 propositions about rationality and power “cannot be seen as general theory”; that they are specifically grounded in Aalborg and do not necessarily apply elsewhere (p. 226). I deliberately chose the term ‘proposition’ (as opposed to ‘thesis’) to indicate a modest position in relation to claims as to generality and theory. Secondly, I say up front in the book that for the reader who sticks with the minutiae of the Aalborg case from beginning to end, the payback will be an awareness of the practices of planning and politics “that cannot be obtained from ‘maps’, that is, summaries, concepts, or theoretical formulae” (p. 7). Here my point of view seems to be exactly that of Peattie. Thirdly, and finally, the bulk of the book is a dense case-study, whereas the summing up to which Peattie objects is a few pages, mainly in the final chapter. Given this background, it is hard to see how the value of the case-study could be lost, as Peattie says it is. The study is there in its entirety for the reader to engage with.

Peattie thinks that planning researchers should apply to dense case-studies “concepts of very broad applicability” in order to identify recurrent patterns of social phenomena. I agree. Peattie clarifies what she means with an example from development research: she believes that it made a difference to the world when the prevailing story that planners worked with about shanty towns stopped being the one about “the creeping cancer of slums” and became that of “communities in the making”. Again I agree. But I do not see this as an *alternative* to what I am doing, as Peattie seems to indicate. I see it *as* what I am doing. Power and rationality are “concepts of very broad applicability” and I employ them in my case-study, and in cases within the case. In doing so I identify the type of recurrent patterns of social phenomena Peattie says we should look for. For instance I point to the pattern that power dominates rationality and that rationalization presented as rationality is a principal strategy in the exercise of power. In addition, I try to demonstrate that it would make a difference to the world if the prevailing story planners and planning theorists work with about planning stopped being so much about ‘rationality’—whether of the instrumental or the communicative kind—and became more about ‘power’. My study is intended as a step in that direction.

Peattie clarifies a misunderstanding about *Rationality and Power* that is sometimes seen. She writes that the title of the book may suggest a struggle between reason and power where reason is good and associated with planners and planning, whereas power is bad and associated with obstructing planning. Such caricatured interpretations are not warranted by a close reading of *Rationality and Power*. As Peattie says, "This is not the story". The story is one of power and rationalization. And all actors in the case, including the planners, use power and rationalization when attempting to achieve their objectives. The reality of planning in Aalborg is too complex to divide into simplistic sound bites like 'good planners' and 'bad business'. I am happy Peattie emphasizes this point and I expand upon the concept of 'bad planners' in Flyvbjerg (1996).

'Modernity Blackmail'

Forester has a long list of what he would have liked me to do with *Rationality and Power*: apply Habermasian analysis, compare Cleveland and Aalborg, analyze the conditions under which the rational critique of dominating power is possible, theorize the study, etc. Forester concludes his review by stating that perhaps in my future work I will address some of these pressing questions. I thank Forester for the suggestion, and I agree that his list contains interesting issues for planning research, though they may fit his research agenda better than mine. Obviously, I would have preferred to be judged in relation to what I have tried to accomplish with *Rationality and Power* and not according to Forester's list of what he would have liked me to do.

Above I have given my response to Forester's suggestion that I theorize the Aalborg study in relation to planning theory. Here I will address only one other point. Forester says that my analysis in *Rationality and Power* seems to be at war with itself. If I conclude that rational knowledge is bound up with power, *either*—so Forester reasons—I must claim that my own analysis is outside power (if it is to be considered rational) *or* my analysis is just the same type of manipulated rationalization-presented-as-rationality that I criticize in the Aalborg case. Forester's argument is a well-known complaint from rationalists, Habermas included, against Foucauldian and Nietzschean analyses of power and knowledge. My answer to the complaint is what Foucauldians and Nietzscheans have answered before me: I do not accept the paradox Forester postulates with its simplistic 'either-or'. It can be sustained neither logically nor empirically. It is the type of argument Foucault calls 'modernity blackmail': either you are for the Enlightenment and you do not question rationality, and especially not by implying that rationality is related to power; or you are against the Enlightenment and your own analyses are just instances of will to power lacking rational grounding.

Like Forester, I accept that in planning and politics we must "side with reason". But to respect rationalism as an ideal should never constitute a blackmail to prevent the analysis of the rationalities really at work. *Rationality and Power* is intended as that kind of an analysis. And such analyses may be rational like any other analysis, provided they are supported by validity claims that live up to the usual canons of validity in scholarly work. Thus if Forester wanted to argue that the analysis in *Rationality and Power* is not rational, he would have to demonstrate that the validity claims supporting the analysis are insufficient. He cannot do it by conjuring up false paradoxes between being

inside or outside power. I do not claim final, indisputable objectivity for my validity claims, however, because empirically such objectivity has never been demonstrated to exist in the social sciences. It is not available to me, nor to Forester, nor to anyone else studying human affairs. I also do not claim my analysis to be outside power, because no analysis is. The latter point has been established by several decades of Foucauldian and Nietzschean scholarship, even if some Habermasians have difficulty coming to terms with it.

What Is Rationality?

Faludi and van der Valk want to make me an honorary neo-rationalist. At the same time they take me to task for seeming undecided regarding the meaning of rationality. I would say that the undecidedness they identify is an attribute more of reality in Aalborg than of my understanding of rationality. When writing the case story, at any stage in the narrative I would let the meaning of rationality be that which is given to the concept by the actors in the case at that particular stage. Thus the meaning of the concept is grounded in the reality I study. Here the term 'rationality' was defined and used with all sorts of different and ever-changing meanings, even by the same actors at different stages in the unfolding of events. Moreover, the meaning of rationality that best suited power at any given stage tended to win the day. This is one of the main conclusions in the book. The book shows that Schön and Garfinkel are right when they say rationality is a constructed concept, produced by actors in action in specific settings.

In researching and writing *Rationality and Power* I had ample opportunity to ponder the question of what 'rationality' means and whether general statements and definitions are possible. Students of Max Weber, the scholar of rationality *par excellence*, have found a profusion of meanings of the concept even in Weber's work. One systematic study (Brubaker, 1984) identifies 16 different meanings in Weber's work, often overlapping and unclear. Weber himself spoke about "the complexity of the only superficially simple concept of the rational" (Brubaker, 1984, pp. 1–2). I side with Levine (1985) on this issue when he says that broad statements about 'rationality' *tout court* are simply unsupportable. In *Rationality and Power* I unfold the concept of rationality phenomenologically. Therefore I am more interested in studying actual instances of what is called rational than in providing a general definition of the meaning of the term.

Faludi and van der Valk go on to say that in attacking the normative ideals of rationalists, I appear to be claiming that my own views are not normative. My reply is that I do not make such a claim. I try to make this clear in the very first pages of the book, where I explicitly state that my analysis takes its point of departure in the normative ideals of the Enlightenment such as freedom, justice and truth (p. 2). The book is intended as a contribution to such ideals. However, I find so-called anti-Enlightenment thinkers more effective in working for the ideals, through their capacity for thinking differently and their skills in thinking about power.

Yiftachel argues that I overlook the enduring potential of rational values such as utility, democracy and justice to still win the day in many political conflicts. This, according to Yiftachel, is a deficiency in *Rationality and Power*. I agree with Yiftachel that rational values like the ones he mentions are desirable and may well win out, in whole or in part, in many political conflicts.

But in *Rationality and Power* I am not writing about “many political conflicts”. I am writing about the specific conflict over planning in Aalborg. And in this conflict utility, democracy and justice did not “win the day”. They lost it. Thus, as for Faludi and van der Valk above, the “deficiency” Yiftachel talks about is not a deficiency in *Rationality and Power* but a deficiency in the political reality of the Aalborg project. To criticize the book for not emphasizing the strength of rational values is like killing the messenger because you do not like the message. This is common but hardly satisfying.

Genealogy and Guidelines for Action

Faludi and van der Valk rightly point out that *Rationality and Power* is unclear about guidelines for action to be derived from its analysis. This is because the goal for the type of genealogy of planning which *Rationality and Power* contains is not to be constructive in the proactive manner Faludi and van der Valk would like. The goal is to problematize planning by exposing dubious social, political and administrative practices. The goal is to bring it about that planners and politicians no longer know what to do, so that the practices and discourses that up until then have seemed to go without saying become problematic, difficult and even dangerous to those involved. For the Aalborg project, writing and publishing its genealogy led to transparency, transparency led to public attention and public attention led to accountability. And after accountability, no more Aalborg project. Or, to put it more accurately: after accountability, another Aalborg project, since the problems in downtown Aalborg had not disappeared by any means. Quite the opposite: they had been exacerbated and needed to be taken care of more than ever. In Flyvbjerg (2001, chapter 10), I explain what happened with the Aalborg project after the publication of *Rationality and Power*.

In his review, Yiftachel sees clearly what I am up to with the book in terms of theory: I wanted to get beyond what Yiftachel calls the “normative, inward-looking discourse” which has long dominated planning theory, currently in the guise of communicative rationalism. I wanted to release the observer from what Yiftachel calls an *a priori* belief in the profession’s supporting ideological apparatus, i.e. the taken-for-granted ‘truths’ adopted by most planning scholars about the progressive and rational promise of planning. Yiftachel is right in pointing out that if we are to thrive as a profession of practitioners and scholars, we need to do what successful professions do elsewhere: carry out an ongoing critique of our study object, here planning. Especially for scholarship, critique leads to progress. Such critique cannot be done on the basis of the assumption that planning is good, or on the basis of hope. As scholars we must see planning as simply a phenomenon to observe and engage with which may be good or bad. Only by relaxing our *a priori* assumptions about planning like this will we be able as scholars to make our contribution to the progress of planning. This is what I have tried to do with the Aalborg study.

However, even if scholarly genealogies, problematizations and critiques are useful and may effectively lead to action and change in themselves, I am too much of a practical planner to neglect what Faludi and van der Valk call for: on the basis of my problematizations of the Aalborg project, I did reconstruct a set of power-based, proactive planning and policy measures spelling out how city governments may significantly reduce their risk of ending up with the type of counterproductive and undemocratic plans and policies seen in Aalborg. Unfor-

tunately, these measures exist in Danish only (Flyvbjerg, 1991, 1993). They have found use in practical planning and policy making in both Aalborg and a number of other Scandinavian towns.

Hope is Hopeless, Power is Powerful

I find Marris's comment to be more of an enlightening and general essay on rationality and democracy than a commentary on *Rationality and Power*. Consequently, I will remark only briefly on the essay. Marris concludes by saying that if we believe in rationality we can only do our best to promote it in the hope of making the world a less wicked place. I agree with Marris, but I would substitute 'fight for' for 'promote' and I would count more on power than on hope in this fight. If there is one thing *Rationality and Power* shows it is that hope is hopeless for planners and planning scholars. Hope is the curse of the profession. We should not hope for more rationality and for its positive effects. We should fight for them. And we should back our fight with power—in legitimate ways, needless to say—learning from students and practitioners of power. How to do this—participate in the *agon*—is the topic of the sequel to *Rationality and Power*, called *Making Social Science Matter* (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

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