

## Commentary

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### *The Dark Side of Planning: Rationality and "Realrationalität"*

#### REAL RATIONALITY

**N**iccolò Machiavelli, the founder of modern political and administrative thought, made clear that an understanding of politics requires distinguishing between formal politics and what later, with Ludwig von Rochau, would become known as *Realpolitik*. No such distinction has been employed in the study of rationality. Yet I will argue that distinguishing between formal rationality and "*Realrationalität*" is as important for the understanding of rationality and planning as the distinction between formal politics and *Realpolitik* has been for understanding politics.

Having lived most of my life in a part of the world that originated free, universal education, the public library, the public high school, the cooperative movement, the parliamentary ombudsman, and other institutions essential to a well-functioning democracy, I have deep respect for Francis Bacon's dictum that "knowledge is power." Bacon's idea is fundamental to modernity and to that perhaps most modern notion of all, planning.<sup>1</sup> It is basic to the Enlightenment project: "Enlightenment is power." Hence, the more enlightenment—the more rational knowledge—the better. Still there is a problem here, which is also a problem for two of the four articles in this section of the book, just as it is a problem for mainstream planning theory. The problem lies in the naive normativism of many modernists and, indeed, with the modern project itself. Modernity's

elevation of rationality as an ideal seems to result in, or at least to coexist with, an ignorance of the real rationalities at work in actual social institutions and in actual planning processes. Many modernists seem unwilling to accept the fact that if we examine how knowledge, rationality, and power work in real life, we may end up standing Bacon on his head.

I am not trying to place myself in any anti-modernist camp here. Rather, I wish to stress that the modern normative attitude—an attitude that has been dominant in planning theory throughout the history of this discipline—does not serve modernity, or planning theory, well. The ideals of modernity, democracy, and planning—ideals that typically are worth fighting for—are better served by understanding *Realrationalität* than normative rationality. Normative rationality may provide an ideal to strive for, but it is a poor guide to the strategies and tactics needed for moving toward the ideal. This, in my analysis, is the quandary of normative idealists, including the majority of planning theorists: they know where they would like to go but not how to get there. The study of *Realrationalität*, on the other hand, provides both. It pursues what Machiavelli called the *verita effettuale* and Nietzsche *wirkliche Historie* of rationality. In doing so, it depicts what the lived, as opposed to the ideal, world of modern democracy and planning looks like and how it operates as a guide to the transformative mechanisms of democracy and planning.

Let us see how each of the four authors under comment deal with the issue of formal rationality versus *Realrationalität*, Enlightenment planning versus real planning.

### MANNERS AND PLANNERS

Given my view on modern rationality and *Realrationalität*, I am uncertain about Giovanni Ferraro's statement in "Planning as Creative Interpretation" that the planner's "redemption" cannot be expected from "some additional attribute to the word 'rationality.'" I agree, if by redemption Ferraro means salvation. Salvation is for another world, not inhabited by planners, as far as we know. I disagree, if redemption is taken to mean, more modestly, a change in our understanding of planning for the better. I think that all the additional attributes to rationality that Ferraro mentions—"new," "expanded," "existential," and "narrative"—have improved our understanding of planning. And I think, as said, that this understanding can be further improved by adding the characteristic "real" to "rationality." In fact, some of the authors under review help develop the understanding of rationality in this direction, most notably Howell S. Baum.

Ferraro tends to see rationality and planning as good and power as bad. "Practitioners face moral risks. . . . Some risks arise from people with

whom they work," Ferraro writes. "They can be tempted into convenient deceptions and seduced by power. They can be intimidated and fired." All this is true, but it is also a one-sided view that tends to reduce planners to noble victims instead of seeing them as real actors in real political processes. Planners are often much more powerful than Ferraro's characteristic suggests, and the opposite observation to Ferraro's is just as relevant: Those who work with planners—politicians, for instance, and certainly citizens as Allen, Throgmorton, and Baum show in their articles—face risks at the hands of planners.

Given Ferraro's view of power and politics—or lack of view, as Baum would have it—he inevitably ends up in the naive normativism of modernity thinkers. Planners become noble individuals who need "ethical commitments to 'good conversations' and to the 'manners' that sustain communication." Planners must meet "morally acceptable criteria." Yes, but does this hold for planners more than for anybody else? If not, why use it as a characteristic to distinguish planners as a professional group? Planners must "listen" and they must pay "attention." "Dialogue [is] a value in itself" for planners. Planners must promote "[g]ood conversation" to help people "express themselves fully as human beings and as members of a community." Planners need to work with "how to transform non-cooperative into cooperative games," "sharing information" and how to "build a common world of meanings and reciprocally consistent expectations to be shared by the community." In sum, what planners need is a "book of good manners." And the work of planning theorists should be bolstering planners' ethical commitments to the values expressed in this book.

The more I study the real rationalities at work when real planners plan, the less I see such talk as meaningful. Not because I think the ideals depicted are undesirable. I would, in fact, like to see more of Ferraro's noble planners. I would also like to see an end to world hunger, war, and environmental degradation. But such talk is banal without grounding in the *Realrationalität* of planning and politics. It therefore leaves us defenseless against this rationality. It obfuscates our understanding of what planning is and how it works, and developing such an understanding is, in my view, the first task of planning researchers. If you want to change it, get to know it.

Planners and planning theorists have excessively "good manners" in the sense of good intentions. This, too, is the problem with Ferraro's viewpoint. I, quite simply, do not know "the planner" Ferraro and like-minded planning theorists talk about, except from the discourse of planning theorists. As societies go, I think I live in a fairly good society. There is plenty of room for improvement, needless to say; it is not the Good Society of

planning theory textbooks. And planners, as any other professional group, are not the good-willed change agents of that society. Instead, they are civil servants or servants to interest organizations and private companies that pay their salaries and expect them to promote their interests. If they do not, there are sanctions. They are the kind of planners Martin Wachs writes about in his impressive body of work on planning ethics and on the *Realrationalität* of forecasting; for instance this one, whom Wachs met when interviewing public officials, consultants and planners who had been involved in transit planning cases:

[A] planner admitted to me that he had reluctantly but repeatedly adjusted the patronage figures upward, and the cost figures downward to satisfy a local elected official who wanted to compete successfully for a federal grant. Ironically, and to the chagrin of that planner, when the project was later built, and the patronage proved lower and costs higher than the published estimates, the same local politician was asked by the press to explain the outcome. The official's response was to say, "It's not my fault; I had to rely on the forecasts made by our staff, and they seem to have made a big mistake here." (Wachs 1990, 144-5)

It is nice of Wachs to describe the planner as "reluctant" and to give us an example where deception does not seem to pay off for the planner. In this way we can still sympathize with the planner and learn not to do the same. My own research indicates, however, that planners are often not reluctant when deceiving the public and that deception often pays off. Planners participate in deception, weak or strong, so often that they develop their own humor and stories about it.<sup>2</sup> Recently, I carried out a study of the *Realrationalität* of planning and politics in the Danish town of Aalborg. The chief of city planning, a high-ranking civil servant, explained to me in a taped, in-depth interview how he helped manipulate the public debate about alternative locations of a large bus terminal in order to have the terminal built where the mayor wanted it, and the public did not, in the middle of the historical center of town. After telling me this, the chief joyfully related, tape still rolling, the following parable on how rationality was used in this and other decisions in the Aalborg case:

It's like the story of Little Town, where the bell-ringer calls up the telephone exchange because he has to set the church clock. So he calls the telephone exchange and asks what time it is, and the telephone operator looks out of the window towards the church clock and says, "It's five o'clock." "Good," says the bell ringer, "then my clock is correct." (Flyvbjerg 1991b, 142)<sup>3</sup>

The main difference between Little Town and Aalborg is that where the reasoning regarding time in Little Town was circular by accident, the planners in Aalborg deliberately made their reasoning circular: the bus terminal must be located where passengers transfer, they argued, but they had, at the same time, planned the transportation system so transfers would take place where they and the mayor wanted the terminal. The goal was not to have to "change the time," that is, the location of the terminal. In formal terms, the rationality of this kind of planning process is just as imaginary as the time in Little Town. In real terms, by playing games of power covered up as technical reasoning, the mayor and the planners got what they wanted—a monument to themselves—despite rampant protests from socialists to conservatives, greens to business, the city architect's office to the Danish EPA in Copenhagen. The consequences were also very real in terms of steep increases in traffic accidents and in levels of air and noise pollution and physical blight.

These, then, are the kinds of real and bad-mannered planners that, in my view, we need to study in planning theory if we are to make progress—not Ferraro's noble individuals. As Baum shows us, the first step to being moral is realizing that we are not. This holds true for both planners and planning theorists.

### THE LITTLE QUESTION

Judith Allen's chapter, "Our Town: Foucault and Knowledge-based Politics in London," is refreshingly free from wishful thinking about planning and planners. Allen is studying real planning and counter-planning at work in a specific case. In my view, Allen's is the kind of study we need more of in planning research. But I do not think the story Allen wants to tell us, using the ideas she wants to use, can be told within the limited space of a research article. This does not make Allen's choice of subject matter and approach less valuable or less interesting. It just means that she needs a full-scale book in which to unfold her story. This chapter warrants such a book.

Allen says she uses Foucault's ideas "to tell the story" of a group of tenants' associations in central London between 1974 and 1990. Foucault (1982a, 217 [in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982]) emphasizes the need "to begin the analysis with a 'how.'" For Foucault "the little question, what happens? . . . flat and empirical," is the main question. If the researcher does not address this question, "an extremely complex configuration of realities is allowed to escape." Earlier, Foucault (1971, 76–7 [in Rabinow 1984]) said that his method "requires patience and a knowledge of details," and that it

"depends on a vast accumulation of source material" that is interpreted "according to a rigorous method." This explains why Foucault spent a large part of his typical working day in the archive laboring over "entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times." It also explains why he chose books and not articles as the main medium to present his research: in each study he needed the space and possibilities of a full-scale monograph to unfold his material.

In my reading, Allen's article is an example of what happens when a Foucauldian approach is not allowed its proper medium of presentation. The author gets in the way of the source material because lack of space necessitates constant summarizing and makes it impossible to employ the perhaps most important expository tactic of Foucauldian methodology: letting the deep metaphorical detail speak directly to the reader without summaries or other pedagogical devices. In short, the problem is that Allen sums up and *tells* us about the Paddington story instead of letting her material *show* us what the story is about.

Consider the following examples. At one point in her story about the Paddington Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations, Allen tells us that "careful listening practices" of the audience at the Federation's monthly general meetings "taught the speakers both how to speak and how to listen, thereby contributing to the development of a unique form of discourse within the Federation." But we, the readers, are not allowed to hear real speakers speak or the "unique form of discourse" to which Allen attaches such importance. At another point, Allen tells us about a major publication from the Federation, *Home Truths*, which "established the Federation as a political entity." But we are not given excerpts to read that would allow us to understand hermeneutically the power of this publication. In yet another part of the case story, Allen explains how "everyone described their experiences with 'hotelization'" in their own words as preparation for a public inquiry. But not one of these experiences is shown to us. We hear of "back-and-forth of question or answer," but we hear no specific questions and answers. And so it goes. Many actors are apparently active in the Paddington case, but Allen does not allow their voices to be heard. The only voice is Allen's own. All this is not only highly un-Foucauldian, it is also, like most didactics, slightly dull. And what is worse, the main purpose of a Foucauldian approach is lost: grasping the complex configuration of realities Foucault talked about, that would allow us to understand the *Realrationalität* and *wirklich* planning of the Paddington case.

However, at the end of the story, there is an important observation for anyone who works within the context of planning and politics to expand the domain of practices of freedom. Allen rightly finds that existing

"practices and discourses associated with democracy" and existing "divisions within the state's own networks of power" are where to look if we are searching for effective ways to change politics and planning. This is a far cry from appeals to cognitive or communicative models of rationality, or to planners with good manners. Here, the sobering effect of a Foucauldian approach makes itself felt after all.

### INSIGNIFICANT TRUTHS

It is interesting to contrast Allen's chapter with James A. Throgmorton's "'Impeaching' Research: Planning As Persuasive and Constitutive Discourse." Where Allen gets into trouble because of the impossibility of telling a fifteen-year-long story about planning and politics in a Foucauldian manner in a short research article, Throgmorton limits himself to a case a few hours long, with relevant context. Even if Throgmorton is not employing a Nietzschean or Foucauldian approach, his point of departure is, in fact, one of Nietzsche's "discreet and apparently insignificant truths"—a survey of how Chicago business would react to a change from private to public ownership of part of the city's electric power system—that turns out to illuminate what Nietzsche called "cyclopean monuments," in this case the importance of rhetoric to politics and planning and, thus, to planning practice and theory (Foucault 1971, 77 [in Rabinow 1984]).

The result of Throgmorton's approach is that his case comes alive on us, even within the confines of a short chapter. We are there, at the meeting, in the room in Chicago. Furthermore, at the level of detail Throgmorton employs, the dichotomy between the specific and the general tends to dissolve. Phenomena are, at the same time, very specific and very general, as in the best of tales. This, in my view, is no small achievement, and it is something we need more of in planning research.

It is also interesting to compare Throgmorton's article and Baum's "Practicing Planning Theory in a Political World." Baum describes the way some communicative theorists focus on texts without attention to their authors. According to Baum, authors are often—I would say typically—not interviewed about the interpretation of their texts. There is little communication here on the part of communicative theorists. The result is, as Baum rightly points out, a tacit world of ideas without real people, and that world "resembles the rationalists' spacescape." This, too, becomes a problem for Throgmorton. In his case, the "text" is a videotape of a meeting between members of the Chicago Mayor's Energy Task Force, community and consumer group representatives, and the central figure Michael

Leard, a consultant whose company carried out the survey in question. Throgmorton characterizes Leard as "unhappy," "interrupting," "angry," "extremely hostile," "dodging," "rambling," "unkempt," "loud," "incoherent," "deceitful," and "untrustworthy." In short, Throgmorton sees Leard as a "political hack." Indeed, the transcripts of Leard speaking are somewhat rambling and incoherent. But anyone who has transcribed taped conversation and thus has had to transform the spoken to the written word knows that we all sound rambling and incoherent if transcribed verbatim, as Throgmorton says Leard was, only omitting "such verbal ticks as 'ah' and 'uh.'"

By the end of the day we, the readers, may come to agree with Throgmorton's view of Leard. But at present we, and Leard, are entirely at Throgmorton's mercy. This seems neither balanced, fair, nor communicative. It would be interesting to see a dialogue between Throgmorton and Leard about this article, for instance, in a new article about their interaction. As things stand now, Leard does not become a person in Throgmorton's story. He becomes, instead, one of the "ideas without real people" Baum talks about, namely the idea "political hack." In this sense even Throgmorton is not detailed enough, not real enough, too rationalist. And, sure enough, what Throgmorton ends up recommending—despite talk of planners that are not naive—is quite naive and, like Ferraro, dependent on the characteristic modernist leap of faith: ". . . we [*sic*] planners should strive to make possible: to be planners who seek to promote and facilitate a public, democratic, persuasive discourse"; "[s]uch planners would 'listen'"; and they would seek "to learn how [their] audience thinks and feels." These, again, are noble intentions, and it is the opposite of what I mean by an understanding of planning based on *Realrationalität*. No power base is identified for Throgmorton's "not naive" planners, no strategies and tactics on how to get from today's situation to where he wants them (us) to go. In my analysis, this is opportunity lost for Throgmorton. My hunch is that with the impressive level of detail he works with, the strategies and tactics needed to be non-naive and politically effective are right there at his fingertips, to be found by dialoguing with and digging deeper into his very interesting source material.

## DECEIVERS AND LIARS

Howell S. Baum rightly observes that planning theorists say little about planners as political actors and, I would add, therefore say too little of practical relevance to practicing planners. I am in complete agreement with Baum that the way out of this dilemma is to "probe our experiences with



the human problems of power." This, in my view, is the single most important piece of advice in the four chapters. Following it is necessary to move planning theory ahead as an academic discipline. When it comes to portraying planners and planning, the quest of planning theorists could be called the escape from power. But if there is one thing we should have learned today from students of power, it is that there is no escape from it. "The problem is not of trying to dissolve [relations of power] in the utopia of a perfectly transparent communication," as Foucault (1982b, 18 [in Bernauer and Rasmussen 1988]) said, but to give "the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics . . . which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination," for instance by employing and expanding the strategies and tactics Judith Allen briefly outlines in closing her chapter.

Baum is quite the Nietzschean in pointing out the need for planners and planning theorists to deceive others and themselves. Nietzsche (1967, 451) said that the "world is . . . false, cruel, contradictory, seductive, without meaning." Baum refers to "treachery, confusion, victimization, and anxiety" as basic organizational and, by implication, planning experiences. Nietzsche, who characterized himself as a "psychologist," said "*We have need of lies* in order to conquer this reality, this 'truth,' [that is, the false and cruel world] that is, in order to *live*." Similarly, Baum uses "[p]sychological interpretation" to "make sense of the data" and concludes that the reality of planners and planning theorists may be "too painful to recognize." In Baum's analysis, this may explain both the collective amnesia among planning theorists regarding the real politics of planning and the abundance of normative rational models, be they cognitive or communicative, "as if devotion to [such models] could magically deny everyday reality and substitute something reassuring." These models, then—together with the talk about planners as noble individuals with "good manners," of which Ferraro and Throgmorton have given us examples—are seen as the Nietzschean lies of planning theorists, according to this interpretation.

Baum's incorporation of deception into his "ambivalent planning theory" is most illuminating. In line with my advocacy of a focus on *Realrationalität*, however, I would have liked to see the theory supplemented by rich case stories about real planners and real planning theorists at work, deceiving others and themselves. Again, the space of a book chapter hardly allows for in-depth case studies. This, however, does not alter the fact that we very much need such studies of the phenomena Baum theorizes. I suggest more planning theorists become planning researchers and start working on such studies.

Despite the strengths of Baum's analysis, his emphasis on psychological interpretation results in an idealistic weakness in his theory. According to

Baum's theory, planners and planning theorists deceive because reality is "too painful to recognize." Psychological explanations of deception carry some weight, but they miss out on the political economy of the phenomenon under study. If knowledge is power, then deception influences the distribution of power. It adds to the power of the deceiver, and reduces the power of the deceived. My own research on planning practices confirms Bok's comment (1979, 183, 258) that "most observers would agree that deception is part and parcel of many everyday decisions in government," and, further, that "[t]he social incentives to deceit are at present very powerful; the controls, often weak." Deception, then, is part and parcel of many of the decisions planners are involved in, and the incentives for planners to deceive others are strong. This aspect of planners' activities needs to be included in any descriptive-explanatory-interpretive theory of planning, just as how to curb deception, which in a democratic society will be the purpose of studying deception, should be part of any normative theory; and a general appeal to planners to "speak truthfully" or to have "good manners" will just not do.

The logic of Baum's theory implies that theories and studies of real deception will not see the light of day since the issue is too painful to work with. In my experience this need not be the case. Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and Foucault are examples of outstanding students of deception. Nietzsche (1974) even developed a term for the research needed that says it all: "the gay [*fröhliche*] science." And, indeed, it can be great fun, if hard work, to track and study real deception at work. Certainly it is interesting, in the way real-lived life is always interesting. Finally, in my view planning theorists are not worth their money—or their words—if they refuse to or are incapable of working with central phenomena like power and politics, lying and deception. Baum will have us believe that this is the case, but his own work excellently disproves him on this point.

### TO BE ABSOLUTELY MODERN

To be absolutely modern, Milan Kundera writes in *Immortality*, means never to question the content of modernity. It means to be forever hopeful about the grand ideas of modernity and not to look at modernity as it is lived in actual detail. Planning, and certainly planning theory, seems to me to be absolutely modern in this sense. In *The Prince*, Machiavelli (1984, 91) spells out in no uncertain terms the dangers of the normative attitude when he says "a man who neglects what is actually done for what should be done learns the way to self-destruction." The focus of modernity and of

planning theory is on "what should be done." I suggest a reorientation toward the first half of Machiavelli's dictum, "what is actually done," toward *verita effettuale*. In this way, we may gain a better grasp—less idealistic, more grounded—of what planning is and what the strategies and tactics are that may help change it for the better.

### Notes

1. By "modernity" I mean the tradition, from the Reformation and the Enlightenment, as it is expressed in attempts to strengthen the domains of cognitive rationality, moral autonomy, and social and political self-determination.

2. Bok (1979, 65), whose view on deception I quote below, also notes the link between deception and humor.

3. The Aalborg study is described in Flyvbjerg (1991a and 1991b); the methodology employed in the study, in Flyvbjerg (1993a). Comments on the methodology can be found in Peattie (1994), Moroni (1993), and Flyvbjerg (1993b).

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