

## WORKING PAPER 1: WHY TEACH PLANNING THEORY?

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### Abstract

This working paper has been written as part of my Adjunktpædagogikum at Aalborg University. The paper represents the first paper in a series of papers that explore that question of 'how to teach planning theory'. This paper presents a literature review on the question of 'why teach planning theory?'. The paper is divided into four sections discussing: i) what planning theory is, ii) the main critiques of planning theory, iii) the relevance of planning theory, and iv) the myth of planning theory as an unpopular subject amongst students.

### What is planning theory?

'Planning theory' as an academic subject has been widely debated within planning academia. Friedmann (1998) notes, how after six decades of theorising on planning, it remains impossible for scholars engaged in 'planning theory' to agree on a formal definition of their subject. There seems to be no consensus on what constitutes 'planning theory', or how you go about theorising within the field of planning (Friedmann, 1998, 2003). Nevertheless, the subject of 'planning theory' has developed into a major academic enterprise with dedicated journals such as *Planning Theory* and *Planning Theory and Practice* (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012), specific courses on planning theory are taught in many planning schools across the US and Europe (Frank, 2002; Klosterman, 2011), and several collections of readings on 'planning theory' have been produced to assist lecturers on the subject (see for example Allmendinger, 2009; Campbell and Fainstein, 2012; Hillier and Healey, 2010; Mandelbaum et al., 1996).

The variety of readings in these collections is vast, mirroring the broad spectrum of ideas within planning theory. Although a few papers are regarded as 'iconic', Klosterman's (1981, 1992, 2011) surveys of planning theory curriculums over three decades confirm that there is no consensus on what constitute the core texts (or themes) in planning theory courses. In his 1979-survey, Klosterman (1981) found more than 1,500 unique readings for fifty courses – a number that has been reduced to

just above 1,000 in 2009 (Klosterman, 2011). There is thus great variety in what is considered important content in planning theory courses.

When it comes to defining or at least clarifying what is meant by ‘planning theory’, authors often distinguish between three types of theorisations within the field of planning (Friedmann, 1998, 2003). These are: i) Theories in planning, which relate to the specific specialisations within the planning field such as land use, transport, urban design, regional planning, environment management etc. These theories are concerned with prescribing how to do planning or go about it (Allmendinger, 2009; Friedmann, 2003). ii) Theories of planning, which address what is common to all these theories, that is, why planning exists and what it does (or ought to do) (Allmendinger, 2009; Friedmann, 2003). iii) Finally, there are theories about planning, which critically investigate how planning is carried out in practice in an explanatory manner (Friedmann, 2003; Sager, 1995). Whilst theories *in* planning can be characterised as prescriptive theories, the two latter types of planning theories falls within the category of normative theories (Allmendinger, 2009),<sup>1</sup> or as Friedmann (1995, p.157) suggests ‘normative modes of theorizing’. It is these normative theories *of/about* planning that are subject of significant debate within planning academia, and it is the spectrum between these theories that is regarded as constituting the field of ‘planning theory’ in this paper.

## Critiques of planning theory

It might be obvious why there is a need for theories *in* planning, or how planning practice can learn from critical planning studies associated with theories *about* planning. Often it is less obvious why and how theories *of* planning might be of relevance to planning students and practitioners (Friedmann, 2003). Indeed, the relevance of ‘planning theory’ to practitioners (including planning students) is a much-debated issue within planning academia. In 1995, the *Journal of Planning Education and Research* devoted a special issue to the topic. In this special issue, Beauregard (1995, p.163) argued provocatively that:

“Practitioners have little use for it [planning theory], students (for the most part) find it a diversion from learning how to do planning and a requirement to be endured, and

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<sup>1</sup> Allmendinger (2009) notes that this preposition is not always helpful as it ignores that all theories (including prescriptive theories) are to greater or lesser extent all normative.

planning academics, on average, tolerate it. Within academia, planning theory is marginalized; within practice, it is virtually ignored.”

Others have highlighted how planning theorists tend to write for each other (Friedmann, 1998), often resulting in a language that is unnecessarily obscure, and gives the impression of “a small tribe of experts speaking to each other in strange tongues” (Thompson, 2000, p.132). It is therefore not without reason that the planning literature often refers to ‘planning theory’ as a highly abstract and thus unpopular subject amongst students (Frank, 2002), a topic I will return to later in this paper. It has therefore been questioned whether planning theory should be taught at all in planning schools (Fischler, 1995).

On a more practical level, Sanyal (2002) finds that practitioners develop their own guidelines for action through ‘learning by doing’ processes rather than taking inspiration from planning theories. Sanyal concludes therefore that planning theory has little practical usage. However, here Sanyal assumes a direct relationship between theory and practical usage (reflecting a technical rationality). While such a relationship might be expected between theories *in* planning and practical usage, it cannot be assumed when it comes to theories *of* planning. In fact, the key argument of this paper is that the ‘learning by doing’ practices that Sanyal (2002) finds in his study are closely related to Schön’s (1983) concept of ‘knowing-in-action’, which characterises ‘the reflective practitioner’. It is exactly this reflective praxis that many planning theorists hope to motivate by introducing students to planning theory (see e.g. Friedmann, 1995).

## **The relevance of planning theory**

If we, as Friedmann (1995), understand planning theory as theorising about good practice, its usage might become more obvious. Planning theory does not lay down universal principles for good practice, but it does “involve us in a critical discourse about planning” (Friedmann, 1995, p.161). Therefore planning theory does not have

“bottom-line prescriptions or simple models for how to proceed, but it has helped students and academics to see planning, and has helped planners to see themselves.”  
(Innes, 1995, p.183)

Planning theory enables us to move beyond simplistic planning formulas, with the ultimate purpose of helping students to become ‘reflective practitioners’ (Friedmann, 1995; Schön, 1983). A planning theory course aims at introducing students to “the complexities of their chosen profession and provide them with a framework useful for their own thinking about planning” Friedmann’s (1995, pp.157-

158), or in Innes' (1995, p.188) wording "give them tools or lenses through which they can see planning and understand how it works."<sup>2</sup>

The paradox seems to be that knowledge about planning theory does not make planning any easier. On the contrary, a course in planning theory often helps to make the planner's limited power more apparent to students. In this sense, "planning theory makes practice harder, not easier" (Beauregard, 1995, p.164). Here, Schön's (1983, p.42) discussion of the rigor/relevance dilemma provides a helpful framework for understanding this paradox:

"This dilemma of 'rigor or relevance' arises more acutely in some areas of practice than in others. In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations are confusing 'messes'<sup>3</sup> incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or to the larger society, while in the swamp are the problems of greatest human concern. Shall the practitioner stay on the high, hard ground where he can practice rigorously, as he understands rigor, but where he is constrained to deal with problems of relatively little social importance? Or shall he descend to the swamp where he can engage the most important and challenging problems if he is willing to forsake technical rigor?"

What planning theory does is to expose students to the swampy lowlands of 'messes', where theory cannot be used for problem solving (as Sanyal suggests). Instead, theory plays here an important role for understanding and framing problems, that is, for problem-setting (Schön, 1983). The aim of planning theory then becomes to enable students to see the 'right' (and often difficult) problems, instead of just being preoccupied with the easy problems to solve (Verma, 1995).

Here, students do not only see planning as a technical discipline, but also as a social and political phenomenon (Fischler, 1995). As Forester (1999, p.176) underlines the importance of, students learn

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<sup>2</sup> For a critique of planning theory's ability to 'produce' reflective practitioners see Beauregard (1995) and Fischler (1995)

<sup>3</sup> The point here is that problems do not exist independently, but are abstractions extracted from 'messes' by analysis. Here 'messes' refer to dynamic situations consisting of complex systems of changing problems interacting with each other. As Russel Ackoff suggests 'managers do not solve problems, they manage messes.'

to “anticipate and respond reflectively to the pressures of political power and the challenges of working with value differences.” If students are to be successful practitioners, they have to learn how to navigate and make sense of the complexities of planning practice. They must be able to challenge assumptions and the power relations hidden within them to achieve what Innes’ (1995) refer to as ‘emancipatory knowledge’. Planners are, as Innes (1995, p.186) notes ‘reformer at heart’, and these forms of knowledge are valuable to planners, because

“rather than forcing them to try for a value-neutral, expert role in which they do not believe, they offer planners the possibility of an ethical stance within the world as they experience it.”

On a more practical level, Thompson (2000), who has been involved in both planning practice and teaching, suggests that planning theory is helpful for practitioners in order to grasp changing ideas in society and their potential implications for planning:

“It [planning theory] offers a means by which the regular infusion of new ideas can be understood by practice. Theory can be an early warning system preparing planners for new influences. It can also help to consider how these new influences can be absorbed into current practice, what the consequences could be, and what alternative responses are available.” (Thompson, 2000, p.130)

### **Planning theory as a unpopular subject**

As already mentioned, students might have very little tolerance for abstract discourses of planning theory (Friedmann, 1995). Much of the literature on teaching planning theory stresses also the challenge of teaching a subject that largely remains unpopular amongst students (Beauregard, 1995; Frank, 2002).<sup>4</sup> As the relevance of planning theory is not straightforward, and indeed is a much-debated subject within academic circles, it is perhaps not surprising that students tend to prioritise more ‘usable’ courses with a well-defined set of technical skills (Friedmann, 1995). Many students do

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<sup>4</sup> My own experience with teaching planning theory contradicts this gloomy picture. In my courses, I have found that students, despite occasional struggles with the abstract language, are very engaged in planning theory discussions, in particular when these are linked to their future role as planners. I wish therefore to question the myth that planning theory is an unpopular subject in planning education.

not regard planning as an ‘intellectual’ area of study (Thompson, 2000). Returning to Schön’s (1983) rigor/relevance dilemma, students prefer to stay on the safe, high, hard ground with little curiosity for what goes on below.

As highlighted in the previous section, such a narrow understanding of the planning profession might be highly problematic. Unfortunately, the general development trends in society do not seem to discourage students from selecting this path. The current development trends towards a performance culture rooted in a New Public Management paradigm seems to reinforce a demand for technical expertise and not necessarily reflectivity. As various forms of outputs (and the monitoring of these) steps into the centre of the practitioners work life, less and less time seems to remain for reflection. The time when practitioners would have time to go to the departmental library to read and do research seems to belong to a past era (Thompson, 2000).

The question then remains; how do you convince students that planning theory is a worthy subject to study as part of their planning education? How do you make students see the value of becoming reflective practitioners? Perhaps we might ask the ‘real’ reflective practitioners for help, and hopefully that would reply in the same vein as Thompson (2000, p.132):

“I much prefer graduates to be equipped with learning and transferable skills rather than hatched as fully-fledged experts with specific skills but not capacity for intellectual inquiry.”

## Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to discuss the relevance of ‘planning theory’ as a subject in planning education. On the contrary to theories *in* planning, the relevance of planning theory for practitioners and planning students is not straightforward. Instead, knowledge about planning theory (or different planning theories) should be understood as playing an important role in shaping ‘the reflective practitioner’ by highlighting the social, political, ethical and power related dimensions of planning, which make up the complexities of planning practice. Planning theory will not necessarily make planning practice easier, but it will hopefully enable practitioners to chose more important problem-settings, and deal with the ‘right’ planning issues.

Planning theory can therefore be a difficult subject for students to grasp, especially when the aims of the course are not clearly specified. There is a risk that students might find planning theory abstract and too theoretical, and as a consequence planning theory might become an unpopular subject, as

some lecturers have experienced. However, I would suggest that the stigmatisation of planning theory as an unpopular subject has more to do with how the subject is taught than the general nature of the subject. There is just a need to address the question of 'how to teach planning theory' in more detail. This will be the aim of the next working paper in this series.

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