

PLANNING AS SOCIAL LEARNING

John Friedmann

Working Paper 343

February 1981

INSTITUTE OF URBAN AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT
University of California
Berkeley, California 94720

PLANNING AS SOCIAL LEARNING*

John Friedmann

Ideas about planning have changed so much in recent years that one is tempted to speak of a genuine shift in paradigm.¹ Specifically, the change was from a "blueprint" model of planning to a social learning approach. Blueprinting means to devise a design for the future that is carried out by a central authority according to a specific program. Formal deviations from the design are permitted but must be duly noted in the plan itself which, in its remaining parts, is then adjusted to preserve its structure as an integrated whole. Essentially a form of advance decision-making, blueprinting involves a central determination of the public purpose. It must be comprehensive in its coverage and rational in the disposition of its instruments.²

Although it serves as the pattern for formal planning in American local government, sceptics have always questioned the model. If it survived as an ideal, it was because of the strong simplicity of its conception, and because it legitimated and confirmed state power. Planners, whose background placed them in an intellectual tradition that conceived of planning as physical design writ large, sustained it. Propped up by an advanced professional degree, they were comfortable with the thought that they might be entrusted with the task of giving physical form to what they claimed to be the common will of the community. They conceived of planning, like any other activity, as being subject to the division of labor and, in this division, they meant to be the artisans of plans.³

Towards the end of the 1960s, this conception was badly shaken. Whatever theorists might say, historical events had cast serious doubt on the ability of the blueprint model to come successfully to grips with the major problems besetting American cities. The "best and the finest" had mired the country in the debacle of Vietnam; the cities were in crisis; faith in the liberal state had spent itself. As far as planners were con-

cerned, these were the stirring times of "advocacy" and citizen participation (Heskin, 1980). The cry was for Power to the People, and even Richard Milhous Nixon would flash the fist salute. Senator Moynihan would later call it the "maximum feasible misunderstanding" (Moynihan, 1969).

Technocratic *hubris* had fallen out of step with the times. Instead of planning *for* people, planners now talked of planning *with* them. Though practice might not always be in line with rhetoric, the intention was clear. People were beginning to take charge of their lives within their own communities. In the 1960s, the struggle had been over poverty; in the 1970s, it was increasingly over questions of environmental quality, housing, and consumer rights. The effort was called the community movement (Perlman, 1979; Boyte, 1980), and congenial books, such as E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* (1973) and Ivan Illich's *Tools for Conviviality* (1975) turned instant classics. As a metaphor for this movement, blueprinting was clearly inappropriate. At the same time, it was by no means certain what planning notions might replace it. And until a substitute could be found, the old beliefs and practices would linger on.

Retracking America was written in search of a new paradigm. Most of the chapters were completed in the Summer of 1970, during a stay in Chile at the Center for Urban Studies of the Catholic University. To write it, I dipped into my own experiences as an advisor to the governments of Brazil, South Korea, Venezuela, and Chile. In the course of my work, I had discovered that planning was not so much concerned with the making of plans as with "mutual learning," was less centered on documents than dialogue, and was more dependent for its results on the transactions of individual persons in specific settings than on abstract institutions. I called this planning style *transactive*, and the underlying model *social learning*.

Social learning had been foreshadowed in the work of two American philosophers who had been deeply concerned with ques-

*Introduction to the re-issue of *Retracking America: A Theory of Transactive Planning* (Anchor, 1973; Rodale Press, 1981).

tions of guided social change: John Dewey and Lewis Mumford. In several works (1927; 1935; 1938), Dewey had advocated a scientific, open-ended approach to planned social change. Yet though his overall vision was persuasive, he remained vague on who precisely would conduct social experiments and who would ultimately be the learners. Would it be scholars? planners? the state? particular publics? the people as a whole? Dewey refused to say. Mumford, for his part, was more specific. In his major work, *The Culture of Cities* (1938), he championed social surveys as an instrument of regional planning, but envisioned them as being carried out, not by planning professionals but by the region's inhabitants themselves. For Lewis Mumford, planning was to be a form of civic action in which small groups, contributing their labor voluntarily, and assisted in their work by "experts," would learn about their habitat and then appropriately act upon this knowledge. For Mumford, planning was to be a form of human liberation; it was to be a way for the repoliticization of the Republic.

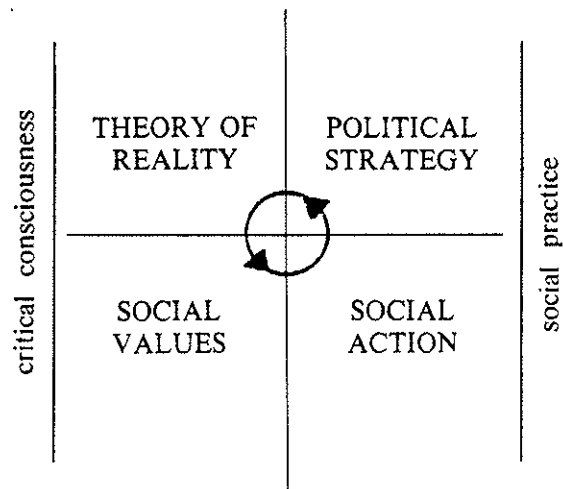
After a generation's lapse, during which these ideas failed to penetrate American consciousness, a new group of social learning theorists emerged. The first to employ the model (though he did not call it social learning) was Edgar H. Schein (1969). His little book, *Process Consultation*, had grown out of his work as a business consultant. In it, he stressed the importance of a problem diagnosis that would jointly involve client and consultant in a process of mutual learning. Coming out of the same business background but with stronger theoretical grounding, Charles Hampden-Turner's *Radical Man: The Process of Psycho-Social Development* (1971) argued the case for an interactive, cellular organization as the structure most conducive to achieving the apparently contradictory aims of corporate purpose and human development.

In the same year as *Radical Man*, the concept of social learning was explicitly introduced into the discussion about planned change by Edgar S. Dunn, a resource economist with the Ford Foundation (Dunn, 1971). Dunn succeeded in linking Dewey's experimentalism (with its strongly instrumental and pragmatic bias) to evolutionary

theory, and posited dialogic interaction as the core of socially adaptive behavior. As virtually all other writers had done before him, Dunn stressed the importance of the small learning group (or "cell") as the setting for experimental, innovative practice.

A number of works supported and sustained the emerging paradigm (Schon, 1971; Michael, 1973; Friedmann and Hudson, 1974; Argyris and Schon, 1975; 1978).⁴ In these studies, social learning was loosely used as a metaphor to suggest a cybernetic process by which organizations might adapt themselves to rapidly changing, "turbulent" environments.⁵ Basic questions, such as who would learn and to what end were not yet being asked. To do so would have required a specific context, and during the early stages of the emerging paradigm, most writers were content to indicate its nature and to praise its virtues.

In social planning, the general context is given by society. But to think productively about planning in the public domain further requires that we carefully define the object of our thinking. The problem is to devise a definition that will open up new areas of theoretical inquiry. One such definition, proposed in *Retracking America*, is the process by which scientific and technical knowledge is joined to organized action (p. 246). This formulation made it possible to describe social learning as an approach to planning in which practice would be joined to theory within a single movement involving four intersecting dimensions (Friedmann and Abonyi, 1976; Friedmann, 1978a; 1978b; 1979):



In this conception, social action was treated as the primary phenomenon in the sense that theory responds to practice and is shaped by practice even as it serves to inform it.⁶ If the currently held images of the world support success, then all is well. But if the results are negative and unexpected, as they often are, further inquiry must be conducted. Initially, this may lead only to questions about strategy, but eventually the theory itself will have to be examined. And finally, it may even become necessary to question the actor's operative values in the situation.

In this model, the characters of actor, inquirer, and planner-theorist are intermixed, and the process of "planning" comes to be embedded in the undifferentiated process of the action itself (Korten 1980, 499). It is also fairly obvious that what is referred to here as social practice is problematical with regard to both the choice of means or strategy and outcomes; it is specifically an *innovative* practice to which the expertise of planning comes to be joined. Allocative planning, solely concerned with the distribution of finite resources among competing uses, is excluded from this model. In contrast to innovative practice, it is central in conception, comprehensive in scope, quantitative in expression, and functionally rational. Although in some large organizations some sort of allocative planning is probably inevitable, the meaning of planning is far from being exhausted by allocative processes. Especially in times of social crisis, innovative practice is not only typically more prevalent, it is also considerably more important than central allocation.

If it is granted that learning processes are primarily related to innovative social practice, we may further argue that it is thereby linked to a *political struggle* in which significant innovation is asserted and must prevail against an opposition. This struggle will be especially hard in times of resource shortage (of slow or negative economic growth, for example) when attempted innovations clash with the existing powers, because they are part of a zero-sum game in which resources are reallocated to the winner.

Social learning, then, is the consequence of an innovative practice that charac-

teristically takes the form of a political struggle to overcome the *status quo*. If we now look further at this practice-based learning, we find that it relies on a process that, by combining two kinds of knowledge—personal and theoretical or "processed" knowledge—yields an understanding greater than either could have produced by itself. Personal knowledge is the intimate knowing we have about our daily lives. Much of this knowledge is subliminal or "tacit" (Polanyi, 1967). Even though we continuously use it, we are scarcely aware of it and are generally unable to articulate it in any other form than anecdotal. Personal knowledge is nevertheless vital to human undertakings.

The process of grafting personal on processed knowledge may be called *mutual learning*, because it generally involves people with different abilities and skills who decide to work together on a common problem-solving task. Insofar as they do this, they learn from each other and from the situation so that the cognitive maps of both are in the end transformed.

In a task-related effort, mutual learning is most effective when it is carried out through *dialogue* which involves a trusting relationship between two or more dyadic pairs (Friedmann, 1979). Dialogue is a process of communication that flourishes in small groups. This is why virtually all social learning theorists insist on the importance of a cellular structure for organizations intent on pursuing innovative practice. The optimally-sized group is surprisingly small, numbering from seven to nine members (*ibid.*, 112-119). In such groups, everybody's contribution counts.

Planners appear as facilitators and mediators of group-based practices; they use their special skills in the service of the common task. In a way, then, they must not only share the abstract purposes of client groups but align themselves in ways that will abolish (or at least minimize) status differences arising from command of different kinds of knowledge. To do so means to risk oneself, countenancing the possibility of personal and/or collective failure. On the part of the planner, it means to make a serious value-commitment.

For generations, social scientists have

been told that scientific knowledge is "objective," and that value commitments have no place in planning, which is to be based on calculated choice alone. This belief persists despite challenges to it, most recently on epistemological grounds by Paul K. Feyerabend (1975). It persists to the point where rationality is denied to any action based on committed ways of knowing. Economists are among the more conspicuous perpetrators of this myth. If they understood that every action is a risk not only in the mathematical sense of uncertainty, but *existentially*, they would understand as well that action is impossible without a personal commitment of some sort.⁷

Markets and other institutions do not "act" of themselves; at best they can be said to behave. Every action requires an actor, and actors assume risks for which there is no economic compensation. Yet it would be strange, indeed, if risk-taking and commitment precluded "rational" thinking. On the contrary, both point to the wider rationality in which ends are no less carefully examined than the means and in which, immediate ends often emerge in the course of the action itself.

The blueprint model, surviving in the form of allocative planning, is typically adapted to the requirements and predilections of bureaucratic entities, such as the state. Here, planning tends to be separated from action and, at least short-range plans (such as program budgets), are claimed to have a binding character on subordinate actors who, by working through the machinery of the state "from above," attempt to give reality and substance to the plan. Innovative practice may, of course, also take place within the state's domain; more often, it will be found in civil society, asserting the will of citizens against the powers. The social learning approach is a model of politicized planning.

It is also a model of how to bring about innovative changes "from below." Decentralized, uncoordinated, and often with only minimal financial support, innovative social practice may seem peculiarly weak and ineffective. Yet it would be quite wrong to dismiss it on these grounds and to argue the alternative position that all significant social change originates with the state "from

above." Cellular organization encourages the formation of *networks*, *social movements*, and *loose coalitions* which can be very potent forces in the struggle for structural change in basic institutional arrangements, including governance. In the United States, the best recent example is the feminist movement which, even as it retains a decentralized, cellular form, is able, when it is needed, to bring about concerted action (*e.g.*, in lobbying for the Equal Rights Amendment). The environmental movement is yet another well-known instance.

This completes the summary account of the essential elements of the social learning paradigm. In the final chapters of *Retracking America*, I went beyond this model to investigate what it would take to maximize social learning within society as a whole. This question took me into a utopian realm, since the formal changes in the structure of governance that were to establish the optimal setting appeared to bear no relation to present possibilities in the United States (see Chapter 8). I subsequently applied the model to rural development in Third World countries where its immediate relevance was perhaps more obvious (Friedmann, 1981a; 1981b). Whatever the outcome, this exercise helped me to pose more sharply a major issue in planning theory: how in formal (*i.e.*, allocative) planning, the inherent conflict between local community and central state might be resolved. Traditionally, the problem had been handled either by ignoring its existence or in imposing the state's priorities by force. In very few instances has the conflict problem between center and locality been squarely faced. A notable exception is Yugoslavia. Here, the structure of governance has been so arranged that a lively planning "from below," expressive of territorial interests, is articulated with planning "from above" in ways that begin to resolve the vexing problem of the relation between parts and wholes, not on the basis of false consciousness or coercion, but by allowing for a political process to overcome the inherent contradictions (Dubey, 1975; Schrenk, 1979).

Because the formal character of planning is assumed, innovative practice (as previously defined) would be left out, since structure and routine tend to inhibit innova-

tion. Planning by the state, being chiefly concerned with allocation, is powerful enough to set the agenda for local planning (Dear and Clark, 1980). The possibilities of innovation from within the system must therefore be adapted to the requirements of allocation. Still, by politicizing the central planning process, scope remains for innovation, especially if politics are broadly based in neighborhood community and place of work (Friedmann, 1980).

States have almost always feared a genuine grassroots politics; the preferred term is participation, not empowerment. But

a politicized planning requires a community that is active, that exercises some control over the conditions of its livelihood, and that can hold the state accountable. Regarded in this light, it is indeed a utopian project, but a project nonetheless, and as such an object of struggle. The social learning approach to planning can make its greatest contribution here, as it works towards the transformation of the structures of political governance. The ultimate terms of this struggle would be this: that planning "from below" might accurately reflect the genuine interests of the people engaged in the social production of their lives.

FOOTNOTES

¹The term paradigm-shift refers to a radical break with the reigning conventional wisdom that informs the accepted practice of science. See Kuhn (1970) and the discussion in Lakatos and Musgrave (1970).

²The most complete American formulation of the blueprint model of planning is found in Rexford Tugwell's writings (Padilla 1975).

³National planning conforms to this model only in the instance of socialist economies where central planning has replaced markets, and in countries of mixed economy, chiefly in the Third World, where national investment planning has been instituted. For trenchant critiques of central economic planning, see Bahro (1979) and Lindblom (1977).

⁴The first case studies of social learning were published only in 1980. See Korten (1980).

⁵The best account of planning as a cybernetic process adapted to "turbulent" environments is by Maruyama (1978). See also Lawrence and Lorsch (1967).

⁶Few planners are familiar with Mao Tse-tung's theoretical writings in which special prominence is given to the relation of theory to practice in the transformation of society. See his essay "On Practice" in Mao Tse-tung (1968).

⁷The social function of claims to rationality is to ignore the broader value implications of planning. It places planning, and specifically allocative planning, at the service of dominant business interests, a value commitment that remains invisible behind the screen of scientific objectivity (Kuklick, 1980).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Argyris, Chris, and Donald Schon. 1975. *Theory in Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Argyris, Chris, and Donald Schon. 1978. *Organizational Learning*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
- Bahro, Rudolf. 1979. *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*. London: NLB.
- Boyte, Harry C. 1980. *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Dear, Michael, and Gordon L. Clark. 1980. "Dimensions of Local State Autonomy," mimeo.
- Dewey, John. 1927. *The Public and Its Problems*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Dewey, John. 1935. *Liberalism and Social Action*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Dewey, John. 1938. *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier.
- Dubey, Vinod. 1975. *Yugoslavia: Development in the Decentralization*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dunn, Edgar S. 1971. *Economic and Social Development: A Process of Social Learning*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Feyerabend, Paul K. 1975. *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*. London: NLB.
- Friedmann, John. 1978a. "Innovation, Flexible Response, and Social Learning: A Problem in the Theory of Meta-Planning," in R. W. Burchell and G. Sternlieb, eds., *Planning Theory in the 1980s: A Search for Future Directions*. Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 163-178.
- Friedmann, John. 1978. "The Epistemology of Social Practice: A Critique of Objective Knowledge," *Theory and Society*, 6, 1 (July), 75-92.
- Friedmann, John. 1979. *The Good Society*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
- Friedmann, John. 1980. "Urban Communes, Self-Management, and the Reconstruction of the Local State," Working Paper, School of Architecture and Urban Planning, UCLA.
- Friedmann, John. 1981a. "Regional Planning for Rural Mobilization in Africa," forthcoming in *Rural Africana*.
- Friedmann, John. 1981b. "The Active Community: Towards a Political-Territorial Framework for Rural Development in Asia," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, (January).
- Friedmann, John, and George Abonyi. 1976. "Social Learning: A New Model for Policy Research," *Environmental Planning A*, 8, 4 (December), 927-40.
- Friedmann, John, and Barclay Hudson. 1974. "Knowledge and Action: A Guide to Planning Theory," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, XL, 1 (January), 2-16.
- Hampden-Turner, Charles. 1971. *Radical Man: The Process of Psycho-Social Development*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor.
- Heskin, Allen. 1980. "Crisis and Response: An Historical Perspective on Advocacy Planning," *Journal of the American Planning Association*,
- Illich, Ivan. 1975. *Tools for Conviviality*. London: Fontana/Collins.
- Korten, David C. 1980. "Community Organization and Rural Development: A Learning Process Approach," *Public Administration Review*, 40, 5 (September/October), 480-512.
- Kuhn, Thomas S. 1970. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 2nd edition, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Kuklick, Henrika. 1980. "Chicago Sociology and Urban Planning Policy," *Theory and Society*, 9,6 (November 1980), 821-846.
- Lakatos, Imre, and Alan Musgrave, editors. 1970. *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Lawrence, Paul R., and Jay W. Lorsch. 1967. *Organization and Environment: Managing Differentiation and Integra-*

- tion. Boston: Harvard University Graduate School of Management.
- Lindblom, Charles. 1977. *Politics and Markets: The World's Political-Economic Systems*. New York: Basic Books.
- Mao Tse-tung. 1968. *Four Essays in Philosophy*. Peking: Foreign Language Press.
- Maruyama, Magoroh. 1978. "Heterogenetics and Morphogenetics: Towards a New Concept of the Scientific," *Theory and Society*, 5, 4 (January), 75-96.
- Michael, Donald. 1973. *On Learning to Plan and Planning to Learn*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Moynihan, Daniel P. 1969. *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty*. New York: Free Press.
- Mumford, Lewis. 1938. *The Culture of Cities*. New York: Harcourt, Brace.
- Padilla, Salvador M., editor. 1975. *Tugwell's Thoughts on Planning*. Puerto Rico: University of Puerto Rico Press.
- Perlman, Janice. 1979. "The Neighborhood Movement in the 1970s: Grassroots Empowerment and Government Response," *Social Policy*, (Sept./Oct.).
- Polanyi, Michael. 1967. *The Tacit Dimension*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor.
- Schein, Edgar H. 1969. *Process Consultation*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.
- Schon, Donald. 1971. *Beyond the Stable State*. New York: Random House.
- Schrenk, Martin. 1979. *Yugoslavia: Self-Management Socialism and the Challenges of Development*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Schumacher, E. F. 1973. *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*. New York: Harper and Row.