Readings in Planning Theory

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It is a truism to say that we all plan. But planning as a profession has a much more restricted domain. Fight as they might for some other rationale for their existence, professional planners find themselves confined, for the most part, to the task of defining and attempting to achieve a "successful" ordering of the built environment. In the ultimate instance the planner is concerned with the "proper" location, the appropriate mix of activities in space of all the diverse elements that make up the totality of physical structures—the houses, roads, factories, offices, water and sewage disposal facilities, hospitals, schools, and the like—that constitute the built environment. From time to time the spatial ordering of the built environment is treated as an end sufficient unto itself, and some form of environmental determinism takes hold. At other times this ordering is seen as a reflection rather than a determinant of social relations, and planning is seen as a process rather than as a plan—and so the planner heaves himself away from the drawing board to attend meetings with bankers, community groups, land developers, and the like, in the hope that a timely intervention here or a preventive measure there may achieve a "better" overall result. But "better" assumes some purpose, which is easy enough to specify in general but more difficult to particularize about. As a physical resource complex created out of human labor and ingenuity, the built environment must primarily function to be useful for production, circulation, exchange, and consumption. It is the job of the planner to ensure its proper management and maintenance. But this immediately poses the question, useful or better for what and to whom?

Planning and the Reproduction of the Social Order

It would be easy to jump from these initial questions straight away into some pluralistic model of society in which the planner acts either as an arbitrator or as a corrective weight in the conflicts amongst a diversity of interest groups, each of which strives to get a piece of the pie. Such a jump leaves out a crucial step. Society works, after all, on the basic principle that the most important activity is that which contributes to its own reproduction. We do not have to inquire far to find out what this activity entails. Consider, for example, the various conceptions of the city as "workshops of industrial civilization," as "nerve centers for the economic, social, cultural and political life" of society, as centers for innovation, exchange, and communication, and as living environments for people. All of these—and more—are common enough conceptions. And if we accept one or all of them, then the role of the planner can simply be defined as ensuring that the built environment comprises those necessary physical infrastructures that serve the processes we have in mind. If the "workshop" dissolves into a chaos of disorganization, if the "nerve center" loses its coherence, if innovation is stymied, if communication and exchange processes become garbled, if the living conditions become intolerable, then the reproduction of the social order is in doubt. We can push this argument farther. We live, after all, in a society that, for want of a better phrase, is founded on capitalist principles of private property and market exchange, a society that presupposes certain basic social relationships with respect to production, distribution, and consumption, which themselves must be reproduced if the social order is to survive. And so we arrive at what may appear a rather cosmic question: What is the role of the urban-regional planner in the context of these overall processes of social reproduction? Critical analysis should reveal the answers. Yet it is a measure of the failings of contemporary social science (from which the planning literature draws much of its inspiration) that we have to approach answers with circumspection as well as tact should we dare to depart from the traditional canons as to what may or may not be said. For this reason I shall begin with a brief digression in order to open up new vistas for discussion.

When we consider the economic system, most of us feel at home with analyses based on the categories of land, labor, and capital as "factors" of production. We recognize that social reproduction depends upon the perpetual combination of these elements and that growth requires
the recombination of these factors into new configurations that are in some sense more productive. These categories, we often admit, are rather too abstract, and from time to time we break them down to take account of the fact that neither land nor labor is homogeneous and that capital can take productive (physical) or liquid (money) form. Nevertheless, we seem prepared to accept a high level of abstraction, without too much questioning as to the validity or efficacy of the concepts employed. Yet most of us blank when faced with a sociological description of society that appeals to the concept of class relations between landlords, laborers, and capitalists. If we write in such terms, we will likely be dismissed as too simplistic or as engaging in levels of abstraction that make no sense. At worst, such concepts will be regarded as offensive and ideological compared to the supposedly nonideological concepts of land, labor, and capital. Why and on what ground -- philosophical, practical, or otherwise -- was it decided that one form of abstraction made sense and was appropriate, while the other was out of order? Does it not make reasonable sense to connect our sociological thinking with our economics, albeit in a rather simplistic and primitive way? Does it make sense even to tell the inner-city tenant that the rent paid to the landlord is not really a payment to that man who drives a big car and lives in the suburbs but a payment to a scarce factor of production? The "scientization" of social science seems to have been accomplished by masking real social relationships -- by representing the social relations between people and groups of people as relations between things. The reification implied by this tactic is plain enough to see, and the dangers of reification are well known. Yet we seem to be at ease with the reifications and to accept them uncritically, even though the possibility exists that in so doing we destroy our capacity to understand, manage, control, and alter the social order in ways favorable to our individual or collective purposes. In this chapter, therefore, I seek to place the planner in the context of a sociological description of society that sees class relations as fundamental.

Class Relations and the Built Environment

In any society the actual class relations that exist are bound to be complex and fluid. This is particularly true in a society such as ours. The class categories we use are not regarded as immutable. And in the same way that we can disaggregate land, labor, and capital as factors of production, so we can produce a finer mesh of categories to describe the class structure. We know that land and property ownership comprises residual feudal institutions (the church, for example), large property companies, part-time landlords, homeowners, and so on. We know also that the interests of rentier “money capitalists” may diverge substantially from

the interests of producers in industry and agriculture and that the laboring class is not homogeneous because of the stratifications and differentials generated according to the hierarchical division of labor and various wage rates. But in a short chapter of this sort I must perforce stick to the simplest categories that help us to understand the planner’s role within the social structure. So let us proceed with the simplest conception we can devise and consider, in turn, how each class or fraction of a class relates to the built environment, which is the primary concern of the planner.

1. The class of laborers is made up of all of those individuals who sell a commodity -- labor power -- on the market in return for a wage or salary. The consumption requirements of labor -- which are in practice highly differentiated -- will in part be met by work within the household and in part be procured by exchanges of wages earned against commodities produced. The commodity requirements of labor depend upon the balance between domestic economy products and market purchases as well as upon the environmental, historical, and cultural considerations that fix the standard of living of labor. Labor looks to the built environment as a means of consumption and as a means for its own reproduction and, perhaps, expansion. Labor is sensitive to both the cost and the spatial disposition (access) of the various items in the built environment -- housing, educational and recreational facilities, services of all kinds, and so on -- that facilitate survival and reproduction at a given standard of living.

2. We can define capitalists as all those who engage in entrepreneurial functions of any kind with the intent of obtaining a profit. As a class, capitalists are primarily concerned with accumulation, and their activities form, in our kind of society, the primary engine for economic development and growth. Capital “in general” -- which is a handy term for the capitalist class as a whole -- looks to the built environment for two reasons. First, the built environment functions as a set of use values for enhancing the production and accumulation of capital. The physical infrastructures form a kind of fixed capital -- much of which is collectively provided and used -- which can be used as a means of production, of exchange, or of circulation. Second, the production of the built environment forms a substantial market for commodities (such as structural steel) and services (such as legal and administrative services) and therefore contributes to the total effective demand for the products that capitalists themselves produce. On occasion the built environment can become a kind of “dumping ground” for surplus money capital or idle productive capacity (sometimes by design, as in the public works programs of the 1930s), with the result that there are periodic bouts of overproduction and subsequent devaluation of the assets embedded in the built environment itself. The “wavelike” pattern of investment in the built environment is a very noticeable feature in the economic history of capitalist societies.

3. A particular faction of capital seeks a rate of return on its capital by constructing new elements in the built environment. This faction -- the construction interest -- engages in a particular kind of commodity production under rather peculiar conditions. Much of what happens in the way of construction activity
has to be understood in terms of the technical, economic, and political organization of the construction interest.

4 We can define landlords as those who, by virtue of their ownership of land and property, can extract a rent (actual or imputed) for the use of the resources they control. In societies dominated by feudal residuals, the landlord interest may be quite distinct from that of capital; but in the United States, ownership in land and property became a very important form of investment from the eighteenth century onward. Under these conditions the "land and property interest" is simply reduced to a faction of capital (usually the money capitalists and the rentiers) investing in the appropriation of rent. This brings us to consider the important role of property companies, developers, banks, and other financial intermediaries (insurance companies, pension funds, savings and loan associations, etc.) in the land and property market. And I should also add that "homeownership" does not quite mean what it says, because most homeowners actually share equity with a financial institution and do not possess title to the property. In the United States, therefore, we have to think of the land and property interest primarily as a faction of capital investing in rental appropriation.

I shall assume for purposes of analytic convenience that a clear distinction exists between these classes and factions and that each pursues its own interests single-mindedly. In a capitalist society, of course, the whole structure of social relations is founded on the domination of capitalists over laborers. To put it this way is simply to acknowledge that the capitalists make the investment decisions, create the jobs and commodities, and function as the catalytic agents in capitalist growth. We cannot hold, on the one hand, that America was created by the efforts of private entrepreneurs and deny, on the other, that capital dominates labor. Labor is not passive, of course, but its actions are defensive and at best confined to gaining a reasonable share of the national product. But if labor controlled the investment decisions, then we would not be justified any longer in describing our society as capitalist. Our interest here is not so much to focus on this primary antagonism but to examine the myriad secondary forms of conflict that can spin off from it to weave a complex web of arguments over the production and use of the built environment. Appropriators (landlords and property owners) may be in conflict with construction interests, capitalists may be dissatisfied with the activities of both factions, and labor may be at odds with all of the others. And if the transport system or the sewage system does not work, then both labor and capital will be equally put out. Let us consider two examples that, in spite of their hypothetical nature, illustrate the complex alliances that can form and shed some light on the kinds of problems urban planners typically face.

I start with the proposition that the price of existing resources in the built environment — and, hence, the rate of rental appropriation — is highly sensitive to the costs and rate of new construction. Suppose the construction interests are badly organized, in a slump, or unable to gain easy access to cheap land and that the rate of new construction is low and the costs high. Under these conditions, those seeking the appropriation of rent possess the power to increase their rate of return by raising rental on, say, housing. Labor may resist: tenant organizations may spring up and seek to control the rate of rental appropriation and to keep the cost of living down. If they succeed, tenant organizations may even drive the rate of return on existing resources downward to the point where investment withdraws entirely (perhaps producing abandonment). If labor lacks organization and power in the community but is well organized and powerful in the workplace, a rising rate of appropriation may result in the pursuit of higher wages, which, if granted, may lower the rate of profit and accumulation. A rational response of the capitalist class under these conditions is to seek an alliance with labor to curb excessive rental appropriations, to free land for new construction, and to see to it that cheap (perhaps even subsidized) housing is built for the laboring class. We can see this sort of coalition in action when large corporate interests in suburban locations join with civil rights groups in trying to break suburban zoning restrictions that exclude low-wage populations from the suburbs. An exploration of this dimension of conflict can tell us much about the structure of contemporary urban problems.

The second case I shall consider arises out of the general dynamic of capitalist accumulation, which from time to time generates chronic overproduction, surplus real productive capacity, and idle money capital desperately in need of productive outlets. In such a situation, money is easily come by to produce long-term investments in the built environment, and a vast investment wave flows into the production of the built environment, which serves as a vent for surplus capital — such as the boom experienced from 1970 to 1973. But at some point the existence of overproduction becomes plain to see — be it office space in Manhattan or housing in Detroit — and the property boom collapses in a wave of bankruptcies and "refinancings" (consider, for example, the fall of the secondary banks associated with the London property market in 1973 and the dismal performance of the Real Estate Investment Trusts in the United States, which has $11 billion in assets, half of them currently earning no rate of return at all). What becomes evident in this case is that excessive investment brings in its wake disinvestment and devaluation of capital for at least some segment of the landed interest. The construction interest is also faced with an extremely difficult pattern of booms and slumps, which militates against the creation of a viable long-term organization for the coherent production of the built environment. If labor sinks part of its equity into the property market, then it, too, may find its savings devalued by such processes; and through community organization and political action, it may seek to protect itself as well as it can.
this case also, we can discern a structure to our urban problems that is explicable in terms of the conflicting requirements of the various classes and factions as they face up to the problems created by the use of the built environment as a vent for surplus capital in a period of over-accumulation.

These dimensions of conflict are cut across, however, by a completely different set of considerations, which arise out of the fact that the built environment is composed of assets that are typically both long-lived and fixed in space. This means that we are dealing with commodities that must be produced and used under conditions of “natural monopoly” in space. It also happens that, since the built environment is to be conceived of as a complex composite commodity, the individual elements have strong “externality” effects on other elements. We thus find that competition for use of resources is monopolistic competition in space – that capitalists can compete with capitalists for advantageously positioned resources, that laborers can compete with laborers for survival chances, access, and the like, and that land and property owners seek to influence the positioning of new elements in the built environment (particularly transport facilities) so as to gain indirect benefits. The basic structure of class and factional conflicts is therefore modified, and in some instances totally transformed, into a structure of geographical conflict that pits laborers in the suburbs against laborers in the city, capitalists in the industrial Northeast against capitalists in the Sun Belt, and so on.

The distinctive role and tasks of the planner have to be understood against the background of the strong currents of both interclass and factional conflict on the one hand and the geographical competition that natural monopolies in space inevitably generate on the other.

The Production, Maintenance, and Management of the Built Environment

The built environment must incorporate the necessary use values to facilitate social reproduction and growth. Its overall efficiency and rationality can be tested and measured in terms of how well it functions in relationship to these tasks. The sophisticated model builders within the planning fraternity have long sought to translate this conception into a search for some idealized optimum optimumum for the city or for regional structure. Such a search can be entertaining and can generate insights into certain typical characteristics of urban structure, but as an enterprise it is utopian, idealized, and fruitless. A more down-to-earth analysis suggests that the indications of failure of the built environment to provide the necessary use values are not too hard to spot. The evidence of crisis and of failure to reproduce effectively or to grow at a steady rate of accumulation is a clear indicator of a lack of balance that requires some kind of corrective action.

Unfortunately, crisis is a much overused word. Anybody who wants anything in this society is forced to shout “crisis” as loudly as possible in order to get anything done. For the underprivileged and the poor, the crisis is permanent and endemic. I shall take a narrower view and define a crisis as a particular conjuncture in which the reproduction of capitalist society is in jeopardy. The main signals are falling rates of profit; soaring unemployment and inflation; idle productive capacity and idle money capital lacking profitable employment; and financial, institutional, and political chaos and civil strife. And we can identify three wellsprings out of which crises in capitalist society typically flow. First, an imbalanced outcome of the struggle between the classes or factions of classes may permit one class or faction to acquire excessive power and so destabilize the system (well-organized workers can force the wage rate up and the accumulation rate down; finance capital may dominate all other factions of capital and engage in uncontrolled speculative binges, and so forth). Second, accumulation pushes growth beyond the capacity of the sustaining natural resource base at the same time as technological innovation slackens. Third, a tendency toward overaccumulation and overproduction is omnipresent in capitalist societies because individual entrepreneurs, pursuing their own individual self-interest, collectively push the dynamic of aggregative accumulation away from a balanced growth path.

The particular role of the built environment in all of this is complex in its details but simple in principle. Failure to invest in those elements in the built environment that contribute to accumulation is no different in principle than the failure of entrepreneurs to invest and reinvest in fixed capital equipment. The problem with the built environment is that much of it functions as collective fixed capital (transport, sewage, and disposal systems, etc.). Some way has to be found, therefore, to ensure a flow of investment into the built environment and to ensure that individual investment decisions are coordinated in both time and space so that the aggregative needs of capitalist producers are met. By the same token, failure to invest in the means of consumption for labor may raise the wage rate, generate civil strife, or (in the worst kind of eventuality) physically diminish the supply of labor. In both cases, failure to invest in the right quantities, at the right times, and in the right places can be a progenitor of a crisis of accumulation and growth.

Overinvestment in the built environment is, in contrast, simply a devaluation of capital that nobody, surely, welcomes. And so we arrive at the general conception of the potential for a harmonious, balanced investment process in the built environment. Any departure from this path will entail either underinvestment (and a constraint upon accumulation) or overinvestment (and the devaluation of capital). The problem is to find
some way to ensure that such a potentiality for balanced growth is realized under the conditions of a capitalist investment process.

The built environment is long-lived; fixed in space; and a complex, composite commodity, the individual elements of which may be produced, maintained, managed, and owned by quite diverse interests. Plainly, there is a problem of coordination, because mistakes are very difficult to recoup and individual producers may not always act to produce the proper mix of elements in space. The time stream of benefits to be derived also poses some peculiar problems. The physical landscape created at one point in time may be suited to the needs of society at that point but become antagonistic later as the dynamics of accumulation and societal growth alter the use value requirements of both capital and labor. Tensions may then arise because the long-lived use values embedded in the built environment cannot easily be altered on a grand scale – witness the problems endemic to many of the older industrial and commercial cities in the industrial Northeast of the United States at the present time.

Investment in the built environment can be coordinated with general social requirements in one way, or in a mix of three:

1. Allocations can be arrived at through market mechanisms. Elements that can be privately appropriated under the legal relations of private property – houses, factories, offices, stores, warehouses, etc. – can be rented and traded. This sets up the price signals that, under pure competitive bidding, will allocate land and plant to the best-paying uses. The price signals also make it possible to calculate a rate of return on new investments, which usually generates a flow of new investment to wherever the rate of return is above that to be had, given similar risks, in other sectors of the capital market. But the innumerable externality effects and the importance of “public goods” items that cannot be privately appropriated – streets, sidewalks, and so on – generate frequent market failures and imperfections so that in no country is investment in the built environment left entirely to competitive market mechanisms.

2. Allocations may be arrived at under the auspices of some hegemonic controlling interest – a land or developer monopoly, controlling financial interests, and the like. This is not an irrational move, because a large-scale enterprise coordinating investments of many different types can “internalize the externalities” and thereby make more rational decisions from the investor standpoint – the land grant railroads provide an excellent historical example of such monopolistic control, while Rouse’s Columbia provides a contemporary example. The trouble with monopolization and hegemonic control is that the pricing system becomes artificial (and this can lead to misallocations), while there is nothing to ensure that monopoly power is not abused.

3. State intervention is an omnipresent feature in the production, maintenance, and management of the built environment. The transport system – prime example of a “natural monopoly” in space – has always posed the problem of private gain versus public social benefit, private property rights versus aggregative social needs. The abuse of monopoly power (which it is all too easy to accumulate in spatial terms) has ever brought forth state regulation as a response. The pervasive externality effects have in all countries led to state regulation of the spatial order to reduce the risks that attach to long-term investment decisions. And the “public goods” elements in the built environment – the streets, sidewalks, sewer and drainage systems, and so on – which cannot feasibly be privately appropriated have always been created by direct investment on the part of the agencies of the state. The theme of “public improvement” has been writ large in the history of all American cities.

The exact mix of private market, monopolistic control, and state intervention and provision has varied with time as well as from place to place. Which mix is chosen or, more likely, arrived at by a complex historical process is not that important. What is important is that it should ensure the creation of a built environment that serves the purpose of social reproduction and that it should do so in such a manner that crises are avoided as far as is possible.

Urban Planning as Part of the Instrumentalities of State

The proper conception of the role of the state in capitalist society is controversial. I shall simply take the view that state institutions and the processes whereby state powers are exercised must be so fashioned that they too contribute, insofar as they can, to the reproduction and growth of the social system. Under this conception we can derive certain basic functions of the capitalist state. It should

1. help to stabilize an otherwise rather erratic economic and social system by acting as a “crisis manager”;
2. strive to create the conditions for “balanced growth” and a smooth process of accumulation;
3. contain civil strife and factional struggles by repression (police power), co-optation (buying off politically or economically), or integration (trying to harmonize the demands of warring classes or factions).

The state can effectively perform all of these functions only if it succeeds in internalizing within its processes the conflicting interests of classes, factions, diverse geographical groupings, and so on. A state that is entirely controlled by one and only one faction, that can operate only repressively and never through integration or co-optation, will likely be unstable and will likely survive only under conditions that are, in any
case, chronically unstable. The social democratic state is one that can internalize diverse conflicting interests and that, by means of the checks and balances it contains, can prevent any one faction or class from seizing direct control of all of the instrumentalities of government and putting them to its own direct use. Yet the social democratic state is still a capitalist state in the sense that it is a capitalist social order that is helping to reproduce. If the instrumentalities of state power are turned against the existing social order, then we see a crisis of the state, the outcome of which will determine whether the social order changes or whether the organization of the state reverts to its basic role of serving societal reproduction.

The urban planner occupies just one niche within the total complex of the instrumentalities of state power. The internalization of conflicting interests and needs within the state typically puts one branch of the bureaucracy at loggerheads with another, one level or branch of government against another, and even different departments at odds with one another within the same bureaucracy. In what follows, however, I shall lay aside these diverse cross-currents of conflict and seek to abstract some sense of the real limitations placed upon the urban planner by virtue of his or her role and thereby come to identify more clearly the nature of the role itself. To hasten the argument along, I shall simply suggest that the planner’s task is to contribute to the processes of social reproduction and that in so doing the planner is equipped with powers vis-à-vis the production, maintenance, and management of the built environment that permit him or her to intervene in order to stabilize, to create the conditions for “balanced growth,” to contain civil strife and factional struggles by repression, cooptation, or integration. And to fulfill these goals successfully, the planning process as a whole (in which the planner fulfills only one set of tasks) must be relatively open. This conception may appear unduly simplistic, but a down-to-earth analysis of what planners actually do, as opposed to what they or the mandarins of the planning fraternity think they do, suggests that the conception is not far from the mark. And the history of those who seek to depart radically from this fairly circumscribed path suggests that they either encounter frustration or else give up the role of planner entirely.¹

The Planner’s Knowledge and Implied World View

In order to perform the necessary task effectively, the planner needs to acquire an understanding of how the built environment works in relationship to social reproduction and how the various facets of competitive, monopolistic, and state production of the built environment relate to one another in the context of often conflicting class and factional requirements. Planners are therefore taught to appreciate how everything relates to everything else in an urban system, to think in terms of costs and benefits (although they may not necessarily resort to techniques of cost-benefit analysis), and to have some sympathetic understanding of the problems that face the private producers of the built environment, the landlord interest, the urban poor, the managers of financial institutions, the downtown business interests, and so on. The accumulation of planning knowledge arises through incremental understandings of what would be the “best” configuration of investment (both spatial and in terms of quantitative balance) to facilitate social reproduction. But the most important shifts in understanding come in the course of those crises in which something obviously must be done because social reproduction is in jeopardy.

The planner requires something else as well as a basic understanding of how the system works from a purely technical standpoint. In resorting to tools of repression, cooptation, and integration, the planner requires justification and legitimation, a set of powerful arguments with which to confront warring factional interests and class antagonisms. In striving to affect reconciliation, the planner must perform resort to the idea of the potentiality for harmonious balance in society. And it is on this fundamental notion of social harmony that the ideology of planning is built. The planner seeks to intervene to restore “balance,” but the “balance” implied is that which is necessary to reduce civil strife and to maintain the requisite conditions for the steady accumulation of capital. From time to time, of course, planners may be captured (by corruption, political patronage, or even radical arguments) by one class/faction or another and thereby lose the capacity to act as stabilizers and harmonizers—but such a condition, though endemic, is inherently unstable, and the inevitable reform movement will most probably sweep it away when it is no longer consistent with the requirements of the social order. The role of the planner, then, ultimately derives its justification and legitimacy from intervening to restore that balance that perpetuates the existing social order. And the planner fashions an ideology appropriate to the role.

This does not necessarily mean that the planner is a mere defender of the status quo. The dynamics of accumulation and of societal growth are such as to create endemic tensions between the built environment as is and as it should be, while the evils that stem from the abuse of spatial monopoly can quickly become widespread and dangerous for social reproduction. Part of the planner’s task is to spot both present and future dangers and to head off, if possible, an incipient crisis of the built environment. In fact, the whole tradition of planning is progressive in the sense that the planner’s commitment to the ideology of social harmony—unless it is perverted or corrupted in some way—always puts the planner in the role of “righter of wrongs,” “corrector of imbalances,” and “defender of
the public interest.” The limits of this progressive stance are clearly set, however, by the fact that the definitions of the public interest, of imbalance, and of inequity are set according to the requirements for the reproduction of the social order, which is, whether we like the term or not, a distinctively capitalist social order.

The planner’s knowledge of the world cannot be separated from this necessary ideological commitment. Existing and planned orderings of the built environment are evaluated against some notion of a “rational” socio-spatial ordering. But it is the capitalist definition of rationality to which we appeal (Godelier 1972). The principle of rationality is an ideal — the central core of a pervasive ideology — which itself depends upon the notion of harmonious processes of social reproduction under capitalism. The limits of the planner’s understanding of the world are set by this underlying ideological commitment. In the reverse direction, the planner’s knowledge is used ideologically, as both legitimation and justification for certain forms of action. Political struggles and arguments may, under the planner’s influence, be reduced to technical arguments for which a “rational” solution can easily be found. Those who do not accept such a solution are then open to attack as “unreasonable” and “irrational.” In this manner both the real understanding of the world and the prevailing ideology fuse into a world view. I do not mean to imply that all planners subscribe to the same world view — they manifestly do not, and it would be dysfunctional were they to do so. Some planners appear very technocratic and seek to translate all political issues into technical problems, while other planners take a much more political stance. But whatever their position, the fusion of technical understandings with a necessary ideology produces a complex mix within the planning fraternity of capacity to understand and to intervene in a realistic and advantageous way and capacity to repress, coopt, and integrate in a way that appears justifiable and legitimate.

Civil Strife, Crisis of Accumulation, and Shifts in the Planner’s World View

The planner’s world view, defined as the necessary knowledge for appropriate intervention and the necessary ideology to justify and legitimate action, has altered with changing circumstances. But knowledge and ideology do not change overnight. The concepts, categories, relationships, and images through which we interpret the world are, so to speak, the fixed capital of our intellectual world and are no more easily transformed than the physical infrastructures of the city itself. It usually takes a crisis, a rush of ideas pouring forth under the pressure of events, radically to change the planner’s world view, and even then radical change comes but slowly. And while the fundamentals of ideology — the notion of social harmony — may stay intact, the meanings attached must change according to whatever it is that is out of balance. The history of capitalistic societies these last two hundred years suggests, however, that certain problems are endemic, and simply will not go away no matter how hard we try. Consequently we find that the shifting world view of the planner exhibits an accumulation of technical understandings combined with a mere swaying from side to side in ideological stance from which the planner appears to learn little or nothing. Let me illustrate.

The capitalist growth process has been punctuated, at quite regular intervals, by phases of acute social tension and civil strife. These phases are not historical accidents but can be traced back to the fundamental characteristics of capitalistic societies and the growth processes entailed. I have not space to elaborate on this theme here, but it is important to note that the organization of work under capitalism is predicated on a separation between “working” and “living.” On control of work by the capitalist and alienated labor for the employee, and on a dynamic relation between the wage rate and the rate of profit, which is founded on the social necessity for a surplus of labor that may vary quantitatively according to time and place. Generally speaking, it is the concentration of low-wage populations and unemployment in either time or space that sets the stage for civil strife.

The response is some mixture of repression, cooptation, and integration. The urban planner’s role in all of this is to define policies that facilitate social control and that serve to reestablish social harmony through cooptation and integration. Consider, for example, the spatial distribution of the population, particularly of the unemployed and low-wage earners. The revolutions of 1848, the Paris Commune of 1871, the urban violence that accompanied the railroad strikes of 1877 in the United States, and Chicago’s celebrated “Haymarket affair” of 1886 demonstrated the revolutionary dangers associated with high concentrations of what Charles Loring Brace (1889) called, in the 1870s, the “dangerous classes” of society. The problem could be dealt with by a policy of dispersal, which meant that ways had to be found to permit the poor and the unemployed to escape their chronic entrapment in space. The urban working class had to be dispersed and subjected to what reformers on both sides of the Atlantic called “the moral influence” of the suburbs (Tarr 1973). Suburbanization facilitated by cheap communication was seen as part of the solution. The urban planners and reformers of the time pressed hard for policies of dispersal via mass transit facilities such as those provided under the Cheap Trains Act of 1882 in Britain and the streetcars in the United States, while the search for cheap housing and means to promote social stability through working-class homeownership began in earnest. In much the same way, planners in the 1960s responded to the urban riots by seeking ways to
disperse the ghetto by improved transport relations, promoting homeownership, and opening up housing opportunities in the suburbs (although this time round, the Victorian rhetoric of “moral influence” was replaced by the more “rational” appeal of “social stability”). In the process, the laboring classes undoubtedly gain in real living standards while the planner acts as advocate for the poor and the underprivileged, raises the cry of social justice and equity, expresses moral outrage at the conditions of life of the urban poor, and reaches for ways to restore social harmony.

The alternative to dispersal is what we now call “gilding the ghetto,” and this, too, is a well-tossed tactic in the struggle to control civil strife in urban areas. As early as 1812, the Reverend Thomas Chalmers raised the specter of a tide of revolutionary violence sweeping Britain as working-class populations steadily concentrated in large urban areas. Chalmers saw “the principle of community” as the main bulwark of defense against this revolutionary tide—a principle that sought to establish harmony between the classes around the basic institutions of community. The principle also entailed a commitment to community improvement, the attempt to instill some sense of civic or community pride capable of transgressing class boundaries. The church was then the most important institution, but we now think of other instrumentations also—political inclusion, citizen participation, and community commitment to educational, recreational, and other services as well as the sense of pride in neighborhood that inevitably means a “better” quality of built environment. From Chalmers through Octavia Hill and Jane Addams, to Model Cities and citizen participation, we have a continuous thread of an argument that suggests social stability can be restored in periods of social unrest by an active pursuit of “the principle of community” and all that this means in the way of community betterment and social improvement—and again, the planner typically acts as advocate, as catalyst in promoting the spirit of community improvement.

One dimension of this idea of “improvement” is that of environmental quality. Olmsted was perhaps the first fully to recognize that the efficiency of labor might be enhanced by providing a compensatory sense of harmony with nature in the living place, although it is important to recognize that Olmsted was building on a rather older tradition. At issue here is the relation to nature in a most fundamental sense. Industrial capitalism, armed with the factory system, organized a work process that transformed the relation between worker and nature into a travesty of its older artisan self. Reduced to a thing, a commodity, a mere “factor” of production, the worker became alienated from the product of work, the process of production, and ultimately from pure nature itself, particularly in the industrial city, where, as Dickens (1961) puts it, “Nature was as strongly bricked out as killing airs and gases were bricked in.” The romantic reaction against the new industrial order ultimately led in the practice of urban design and planning to the attempt to counter in the sphere of consumption for what had been lost in the sphere of production. The attempt to “bring nature back into the living environments” within the city has been a consistent theme in planning since Olmsted’s time. Yet it is, in the final analysis, an attempt based on what Raymond Williams (1973) calls “an effective and imposing mystification,” for there is something in the relation to nature in the work process that can never be compensated for in the consumption sphere. The planner, armed with concepts of ecological balance and the notion of harmony with nature, acts once more as advocate and brings real gains. But the real solutions to these problems lie elsewhere, in the work process itself.

Civil strife and social discontent provide only one set of problems that the planner must address. The dynamic of accumulation, with its periodic crises of overaccumulation, poses an entirely different set. The crises are not accidental. They are to be viewed, rather, as major periods of “rationalization,” of “shake-outs and shake-downs” that restore balance to an economic system temporarily gone mad. The fact that crises perform this rationalizing function is no comfort to those caught in their midst. And at such conjunctures planners must either simply administer the budget cuts and plan the shrinkage according to the strict requirements of an externally imposed fiscal logic of the sort recently applied to New York or seek to bring about a movement for a forced rationalization of the urban system. The pursuit of the City Beautiful is replaced by the search for the city efficient; the cry of social justice is replaced by the slogan “efficiency in government”; and those planners armed with a ruthless cost-benefit calculus, a rational and technocratic commitment to efficiency for efficiency’s sake, come into their own.

“Rationalization” means, of course, doing whatever must be done to reestablish the conditions for a positive rate of accumulation. When economic growth goes negative—as it did, for example, in 1893, in the early 1930s, or in 1970 and 1974, then the reproduction of the social order is plainly in doubt. The task at such conjunctures is to find out what is wrong and to right it. The physical infrastructure of the city may be congested, inefficient, and too costly to use for purposes of production and exchange. Such barriers (which were obvious to all in the Progressive Era, for example) must be removed, and if the planner does not willingly help to do so, then the escalating competition between jurisdictions for “development” at times of general decline will force the planner into action if he or she values the tax base (this kind of competitive pressure often leads communities to subsidize profits). If the problem lies in the consumption sphere—underconsumption or erratic movements in aggregate personal behaviors—then the state may seek to manage consumption either by fiscal devices or through collectivization. The management of collective consumption by means of the built environment at such points becomes a crucial part of the planner’s task.
problem lies in lack or excess of investment in the built environment, then the planner must perform set to work to stimulate investment or to manage and rationalize devaluation with techniques of “planned shrinkage,” urban renewal, and even the production of “planning blight” (which amounts to nothing more than earmarking certain areas for devaluation).

I list these various possibilities because it is not always self-evident what must be done in the heat of a crisis of accumulation. At such conjunctures our knowledge of the system and how it works is crucial for action, unless we are to be led dangerously near the precipice of cataclysmic depression. And it is exactly at such points that the world view of the planner, restricted as it is by an ideological commitment, appears most defective, while the ideological stance of the planner may have to shift under the pressure of events from advocacy for the urban poor to one dedicated to business rationality and efficiency in government.

But ideologies, I have argued, do not change that easily, nor does our knowledge of the world. And so we find, at each of the major turning points in our history, a crisis of ideology. Past commitments must obviously be abandoned because they hinder our power to understand and most certainly lose their power to legitimate and justify (imagine trying to justify what happened to New York City’s budget in the mid-1970s by appealing to concepts of social justice). And as the pillars of the planner’s world view slowly crumble, so the search begins for a new scaffolding for the future. At such a juncture, it becomes necessary to plan the ideology of planning.

Planning the Ideology of Planning

By the mid-1970s it became clear that the planning inspirations of the 1960s had faded and that our main task was to define new horizons for planning into the 1980s – new technologies, new instrumentalities, new goals . . . new everything, in fact, except a new ideology. Yet if my analysis is correct, the real task was to plan the ideology of planning to fit the new economic realities rather than to meet the social unrest and civil strife of the 1960s.

Since many of those who inspired us in the 1960s are still active, it is useful to ask what, if anything, went wrong. The crucial problem of the 1960s was civil strife and in particular the concentrated form of it associated with the urban riots in central city areas. That strife had to be contained by repression, cooption, and integration. In this the planner, armed with diverse ideologies and a variety of world views, played a crucial role. The dissenters were encouraged to go through “channels,” to adhere to “procedures laid down,” and somewhere down that path the planner lay in wait with a seemingly sophisticated technology and an intricate understanding of the world, through which political questions could be translated into technical questions that the mass of the population found hard to understand. But discontent cannot so easily be controlled, and so the other string to the planner’s bow was to find ways to disperse the urban poor, to divide and control them and to ameliorate their conditions of life (Piven and Cloward 1971; Cloward and Piven 1974). The management of this process fell very much within the domain of urban planning, and it generated conflicting ideological stances and world views within the planning profession itself. At first sight (and indeed at the time) it seemed as if planning theory was fragmented in the 1960s as different segments of the planning fraternity moved according to their position or inclination to one or the other pole of the ideological spectrum. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that this process was nothing more than the internalization within the planning apparatus of conflicting social pressures and positions. And this internalization and the oppositions that it provoked proved functional, no matter what individuals thought or did. The technocrats helped to define the outer bounds of what could be done at the same time as they sought for new instrumentalities to accomplish dispersal and to establish social control. The advocates for the urban poor and the instrumentalities that they devised provided the channels for cooption and integration at the same time as they pushed the system to provide whatever could be provided, being careful to stop short at the boundaries that the technocrats and “fiscal conservatives” helped to define. Those who pushed advocacy too far were either forced out or deserted planning altogether and became activists and political organizers.

Judged in terms of their own ideological rhetoric, the pursuers of social justice failed, much as they did in the Progressive Era, to accomplish what they set out to do, although the position of the “dangerous classes” in society undoubtedly improved somewhat in the late 1960s. But judged in relation to the reduction of civil strife, the reestablishment of social control, and the “saving” of the capitalist social order, the planning techniques and ideologies of the 1960s were highly successful. Those who inspired us in the 1960s can congratulate themselves on a job well done.

But conditions changed quite radically in 1969–70. Stagflation emerged as the most serious problem, and the negative growth rate of 1970 indicated that the fundamental processes of accumulation were in deep trouble. A loose monetary policy – the most potent tool in the management of the “political business cycle” – saw us through the election of 1972. But the boom was speculative and heavily dependent upon a massive overinvestment in the land, property, and construction sectors that easy money typically encourages. By the end of 1973 it was plain that the built environment could absorb no more in the way of surplus capital, and the rapid decline in property and construction, together with financial instability, triggered the subsequent depression.
Unemployment doubled, real wages began to move downward under the impact of severe “labor-disciplining” policies, social programs began to be savagely cut, and all of the gains made after a decade of struggle in the 1960s by the poor and underprivileged were rolled back almost within the space of a year. The underlying logic of capitalist accumulation asserted itself in the form of a crisis in which real wages diminished in order that inflation be stabilized and appropriate conditions for accumulation be reestablished.

The pressure from this underlying logic was felt in all spheres. Local budgets had to shift toward fiscal conservatism and had to alter priorities from social programs to programs to stimulate and encourage development (often by subsidies and tax benefits). Planners talked grimly of the “hard, tough decisions” that lay ahead. Those who sought social justice as an end in itself in the 1960s gradually shifted their ground as they began to argue that social justice could best be achieved by ensuring efficiency in government. Those who sought ecological balance and conservation in its own right in the 1960s began to appeal to principles of rational and efficient management of our resources. The technocrats began the search for ways to define more rational patterns of investment in the built environment, to calculate costs and benefits more finely than ever. The gospel of efficiency came to reign supreme.

All of this presupposes the capacity to accomplish a transformation of ideological balance within the planning fraternity—a transformation that turns out to be almost identical to that which was successfully accomplished during the Progressive Era. It can, of course, be done. But it takes effort and fairly sophisticated argument to do it. And the transformation is made that much easier because the fundamentals of ideology remain intact. The commitment to the ideology of harmony within the capitalist social order remains the still point upon which the gyrations of planning ideology turn.

But if we step aside and reflect awhile upon the tortuous twists and turns in our history, a shadow of doubt might cross our minds. Perhaps the most imposing and effective mystification of all lies in the presupposition of harmony at the still point of the turning capitalist world. Perhaps there lies at the fulcrum of capitalist history not harmony but a social relation of domination of capital over labor. And if we pursue this possibility, we might come to understand why the planner seems doomed to a life of perpetual frustration, why the high-sounding ideals of planning theory are so frequently translated into grubby practices on the ground, how the shifts in world view and in ideological stance are social products rather than freely chosen. And we might even come to see that it is the commitment to an alien ideology that chains our thought and understanding in order to legitimate a social practice that preserves, in a deep sense, the domination of capital over labor. Should we reach that conclusion, then we would surely witness a markedly different reconstruction of the planner’s world view than we are currently seeing. We might even begin to plan the reconstruction of society, instead of merely planning the ideology of planning.

Notes

1 These various conceptions of the city can be found, for example, L. Mumford (1961); J. Jacobs (1969); L. Wirth (1964); National Resources Committee (of the United States) (1937); and R. Meier (1962).

2 Economic cycles and in particular those associated with investment in the various components of the built environment are discussed in B. Thomas (1972); M. Abramovitz (1964); S. Kuznets (1961); and E. Mandel (1977).

3 Some idea of the extent of hegemonic control exercised by finance capital over the land and property market can be gained from L. Downie (1974); G. Barker, J. Penney, and W. Secombe (1973); and P. Ambrose and R. Colenutt (1975).

4 The French urbanists have worked on this aspect most carefully as in M. Castells and F. Godard (1973) and C. G. Pickvance (1976). See also the various essays in Antipode 7, no. 4—a special issue entitled The Political Economy of Urbanism—and D. Harvey (1975).

5 See, for example, E. Altovater (1973), 1:96-108 and 3:76-83; R. Miliband (1968); N. Poulantzas (1973); and J. O’Connor (1973).

6 A good example of how planners might move down such a path is written up in R. Goodman (1971).

7 See, for example, T. Bender (1975) and R. A. Walker (1976).

8 Again, the French urbanists have discussed this idea at length in, for example, E. Preteceille (1975) and M. Castells (1975).

9 There is an important connection between crises in ideology and legitimation—see, for example, J. Habermas (1975); for a history of shifting ideology in urban development, see R. A. Walker (1976).

References

Works by Marx


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