Fantasies? An Exploration of a Potential Lacanian Framework for Understanding Development Assessment Planning

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Planning Theory 2003; 2; 225
DOI: 10.1177/147309520323005

The online version of this article can be found at: http://plt.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/2/3/225
PLANNING FANTASIES?
AN EXPLORATION OF A POTENTIAL
LACANIAN FRAMEWORK FOR
UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT
ASSESSMENT PLANNING

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Abstract  This article examines Lacan’s psychoanalytically derived social theory as to its appropriateness for understanding aspects of planning practice. Lacan theorized not only about language and culture, but also about that which resides outside of symbolization and underlies human desire, to provide an understanding of human subjectivity, identity and motivation. We discuss how a Lacanian critical social theoretical approach could be pertinent to analysis of the complex mixture of hybrid processes – technical, collaborative and political – that comprise planning development assessment. We outline key Lacanian concepts including the mirror-stage, jouissance, the Four Discourses and the ‘big Other’ and their applicability to understanding development assessment and regulation.

Keywords  development approval planning, discourse, Lacan, planning theory, psychoanalysis
Planning depends on taking people, organisations and communities seriously, analysing not only what they say, but what they feel, what they fear, what they desire, and how they act. (Baum, 1994: 262)

Introduction

Planning praxis concerns the organization of hope (Forester, 1989: 20), or what Chantal Mouffe terms ‘the horizon of expectation’ (Zournazi, 2002: 123). ‘Cities are features of the imagination and they affect the ability to imagine’ (Bridge and Watson, 2000: 2). Urban planning is intrinsically concerned with the imagination and desire: what the future city should look like, or the impact of a development proposal on the existing built form, on neighbouring uses and people. As Bridge and Watson (2000: 2) write, such imaginings ‘are not just cognitive and creative but unconscious and uncanny.’

Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones (2002: xi) commence their edited collection with the statement that ‘planning theory is currently in a confused state’. We would prefer to suggest that the range of theoretical material being developed at the beginning of the 21st century offers a rich basis for understanding planning practice not previously available. There is a strong and coherent thread across current theoretical work of discourse, language and meaning, of dialogue and communication, as well as an awareness of the significance of power. In this article we hope to broaden and strengthen this thread by presenting a selection of key aspects from the teachings of Jacques Lacan, which, we believe, have the potential to offer additional insight into the praxis of planning.

In what follows we locate Lacanian theory in a context of the recent communicative turn in planning theory and the turn to psychogeography. We then discuss why a Lacanian approach could be regarded as pertinent to analysis of planning decision-making and highlight four areas central to existing planning theory – social action, space, language and power – where Lacan is particularly relevant.

In the central sections of the article we outline several key Lacanian concepts including the mirror-stage, *jouissance*, the Discourses and the ‘big Other’ and their applicability to explanation and understanding of regulatory planning decision-making. We then address critiques of Lacan as non-empirical and phallocentric before summarizing what we believe to be the value of a Lacanian perspective in planning theory. We emphasize that our interests lie in Lacanian psychoanalytic critical *social* theory of knowledge, belief, identity and authority as expanded by the works of Žižek (1989, 1997, 2001), Stavrakakis (1999), Bracher (1993), Laclau (1996, 2000), and many others, rather than in his clinical theory.¹

In conclusion we suggest that in addition to enhancing our understanding of communicative theory and power, Lacan provides a further
dimension for understanding planning. This is an enhanced awareness of the roles that desire and imagination play in constituting the beliefs and practices of planning process. Lacan’s psychoanalytic perspective and focus begin to give light as to why, rather than just how, actors do as they do. Lacan provides a means to explore why we plan and/or resist planning outside of the restrictive framework of utilitarianism. We suggest that this may be of substantial benefit to advancing planning theory and the understanding of planning practice.

Communicative planning theory: a context

Probably the most important influence on the communicative turn in planning theory has been the work of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas examines issues of intersubjective communication and social action from a perspective of communicative rationality. His early critical theory of communicative action draws heavily on the work of the Frankfurt School’s basis in Marx and, importantly for our purpose here, Freud. Habermas (2001: 131) wrote that his ‘point of departure is the assumption that the development of interactive competence regulates the construction of internal behavioural controls’. He regards language as a means of organizing wants and needs that are communicatively structured and subject to interpretation. As such, the concept of reciprocity, or mutual recognition, is important, in which actors define themselves in relation to one another.

Habermas’s general theory of communicative action was partly developed from Freud’s psychoanalytical theory of distorted communication, which Habermas (1972: 314) believed necessarily presupposed non-distorted communication and ‘the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus’. His wider concern was that the state is forced to deal with dysfunctional side effects of the economic process under fairly restrictive conditions. Habermas’s (1979: xxiv) wish is that communicative action might bring about ‘social relations in which mutuality dominates and satisfaction does not mean the triumph of one over the repressed needs of the other’.

Habermas’s ‘wish’ has clearly resonated with the values of planning theorists. His work was developed initially by John Forester (1989, 1993, 1999), conscious of the importance of power in decision-making, a dynamic that Habermas has tended to understate. Judith Innes (1995, 1996) has applied communicative theory in practical consensus-building in the USA, recently extending her work to incorporate consideration of complexity theory, which itself has undergone a new iteration to include a psychoanalytical understanding (Medd, 2002; Stacey, 1996).

Patsy Healey has developed collaborative communicative theory in a context of evaluating processes of governance. She is particularly interested in ‘the qualities of the social relations through which collective activity in
relation to urban management is accomplished’ (Healey et al., 2002: 12), which has led her to explore interrelationships between theories of organizational management and communicative theories in a ‘new institutionalist’ framework (Healey, 1999, 2002, 2003).

Organizational management theories regularly incorporate psychological and behavioural aspects (Haslam, 2001). With regard to planning, Howell Baum (1989, 1991a, 1991b, 1994, 2000) has referred to the work of psychoanalysts, such as Freud, Klein and Bion, with regard to examination of group culture, participatory consensus in planning decision-making, delusion in development partnerships and bureaucratic practice. Tore Sager (1994) has also drawn on Freud’s concept of parapraxis to explain planning dysfunction.

In attempting to build theory that more fully explains planning decision-making practice than does Habermasian communicative action, Jean Hillier (2002, 2003) not only investigates the potential contribution of Michel Foucault, but also traces Chantal Mouffe’s objections to Habermasian theory back to their Lacanian roots. Hillier makes reference to Lacan to explain the impossibility of a complete and comprehensive ‘truth’ and hence agreement or consensus and how agonistic dissensus may be a key constituent of the arenas and forums of planning practice. Michael Gunder (2002, 2003) has also utilized Lacanian theory to expose pernicious elements of planning practices, hegemonic rhetorics and action, as well as to prescribe an agonistic alternative to consensual communicative planning.

Parallel to these developments in planning theory, the turn to psycho-geography in the work of authors such as Steve Pile (1996, 1998, 2000), Ed Soja (1996, 2000), David Gregory (1997), Jane Jacobs and Ken Gelder (1998) and Nigel Thrift (2000a, 2000b), has opened up spaces for analyses of practices of everyday life; microanalyses of what people do, how and why they do it. Pile (2000: 84) suggests that ‘cities are like dreams, for both conceal secret desires and fears, for both are produced according to hidden rules which are only vaguely discernable.’ These ‘rules’ and practices may not be consciously articulated. They reflect practical, experiential, phronetic knowledges generated through ‘the remorseless buildup of small and fleeting detail in speech and objects which “points” towards certain concerns’; ‘the oblique, the transparent, and the haunted: the latent’ (Thrift, 2000a: 404–5). As Thrift (2000a: 405) continues, ‘these are knowledges of what is permitted and prohibited, present and absent’.

In the next section we ask: why consider Lacanian psychologically based analysis and explanation for understanding planning practice? Žižek (1997: 39) suggests that psychoanalysis is located at the intersection of law and its transgression at the nexus of law as ‘the “repressive” scientific gaze, objectifying, cataloguing, classifying’ and a kind of initiatory knowledge about the secrets hidden from the official public gaze. We suggest that psychoanalytical insight may permit us to better understand the place of power in planning decision-making and the behaviours of statutory planners involved
in development assessment or control processes (hereafter referred to as ‘DA officers’ or ‘DA planners’).\textsuperscript{6}

\textbf{Why Lacan?}

A Lacanian approach is particularly applicable to examination of planning decision-making because Lacan constantly dealt with both the abstract and the practical in his writings (Fuery, 1995). We identify below four critical reasons why Lacanian theorizing may be relevant to planning praxis: Lacan taught a critical theory of social action, his theorizing contains a spatial conceptualization, language is central to Lacanian thinking, as is the notion of power.

\textbf{A theory of social action}

Unlike the North American and British ego-psychoanalytical traditions,\textsuperscript{7} French theoretical culture is heavily involved in social and political issues. French-inspired theory moves beyond the consulting room as a theoretical tool to construct a political vision of the subject acting in society, exemplified by the work of Laclau (1994, 2000), Stavrakakis (1999) and Howarth (2000), as discussed and deployed in the planning literature by Gunder (2003).

\textbf{Spatial conceptualization}

Lacan conceptualized many of his psychological ideas spatially. His ‘tactical use of spatial metaphors and analytic deployment of spatial relationships, thereby open[ing] up further possibilities for a psychoanalytically literate account of the production of space’ (Pile, 1996: 122). In this regard, Lefebvre (1991: 36) drew specifically on Lacan to develop his arguments for unconscious and repressed space. Lacan’s understanding of intersubjectivity is spatially grounded, while his conceptualization of meaning as ‘the surface aspect of a zone’ (Lacan, 1991a: 105) of a three-dimensional torus, speaks of the importance of physical space.

Further, ‘Lacan raises serious questions for those critiques which take institutions [for example, urban planning] as social spaces in which already existing antagonisms are played out, interests are denied or fulfilled, values upheld or denigrated’ (Copjec, 1994: 123). As Copjec points out, Lacanian theory can help us highlight the intentions, the failures and successes of those ‘insiders’ (DA officers) who act as doorkeepers of the law and their interrelationships with those actors (development applicants, local residents, etc.) who appear at the outside of the ‘door’ or the ‘other side of the counter’.
The importance of language

This encounter between the outside and the inside is an intersubjective relationship that Lacan suggests must be understood dialectically. It is a relationship of acting subjects and their place in the world. In this regard, an institution is ‘a local discourse that produces a social bond’ (Apollon, 1994: 203). Professional planning associations and DA sections within local authorities may exemplify such institutions. For Lacan, meaning emerges through discourse. It is this connection between linguistic and discursive aspects and psychological structures, at both individual and collective levels, which Bracher (1994a: 5) argues, ‘provides Lacanian theory with an unparalleled power to explain how a given discourse or text affects . . . the human subjects who either produce or receive it.’ Discourses are inherently political, involving the exercise of power.

The importance of power

Lacanian psychoanalysis also emphasizes the centrality of power. There must be a gap (or lack) between power and what it oppresses (Newman, 2001). It is this gap/lack that makes resistance possible. A Lacanian conceptualization of power, therefore, is of its actual constitution through the gap or lack, which limits it. This conception is based on Lacan’s analysis of law in which he argues that the law actively functions only through its transgression or failure. Laws exist to prohibit activities. It is only when actors transgress that the law is invoked, constraints may be applied and enforcement may take place. Yet society continues for the ‘good’ because while everyone knows that the power of the law and of bureaucracy is not absolute, the vast majority of people behave as though it is and thereby perpetuate its power (Badiou, 2001: 74; Žižek, 1989: 36). In the search for security, society craves rules and authority (Caudill, 1997).

The ‘sightlines’ (Pile, 1996) of applicants’ and DA officers’ power and desire, map both the intersubjective relations between applicant and officer and the physical space of the application (Gunder and Mouat, 2002). These relations engage through the function of planning law as, not simply through, a certain culture and language. It is to this culture that we now turn to explain selected aspects of Lacanian theory from a planning practice perspective.

‘Trust Us, We’re Experts’ (Rampton and Stauber, 2002)

In this section we explain Lacan’s theories of identity development, jouissance, the Four Discourses and the ‘big Other’ and their implications for belief, knowledge, identity and ethics. We demonstrate how these theories
may help an understanding of the behaviour, as ‘experts’, of some DA officers, as they implement planning law and augment understandings derived from current communicative, or critical, planning theorizing.

**Through the mirror-stage to self-identity**

If legal processes and institutions provide social roles and identities that are assumed, maintained and reproduced in a cycle of projection of legal authority and the ‘privatization’ of individual desires (Caudill, 1997: 32), it may be useful to understand how this cycle operates. We believe that Lacan’s conception of what he terms the ‘mirror-stage’, ‘imagio (imaginary) stage’ and ‘entry into the Symbolic’, or big Other, and its role in the formation of self-identity, offers a valuable tool in facilitating comprehension of the behaviour of DA officers and related planning practices.

For Lacan (1971) the young child does not have a sense of self that sees itself apart from other objects. Identity as a subject in relationship to other subjects, comprising society, is gained through three stages. First, the ‘mirror-stage’ is where the infant sees its image in the mirror and begins to constitute itself as an emerging subjectivity in its own right. Lacan (1971) suggests that between the age of 6 and 18 months, a child learns to ‘master’ the image of itself in a mirror. Once it realizes that the image is ‘empty’ (Lacan, 1971: 1), the child can play with its specular image, experiencing the relationship between its own gestures and the movements reflected by its image.

The child commences to identify itself as the image in the mirror. Lacan (1971: 2) understands the mirror-stage as a constructed identification: ‘a transformation that takes place in the subject when he [sic] assumes an image’. As Lacan (1971: 5) writes, the mirror-stage is ‘a drama’ for the subject who is caught up in the ‘lure of spatial identification’. It manufactures the succession of ‘phantasies’ that extends from a fragmented body-image to ‘the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject’s entire mental development’. Lacan (1971: 5) further states that ‘the moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates... the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations’.

After the mirror-stage occurs the ‘imaginary stage’ where the subject’s identification with the imaginary ‘other’ in the mirror results in a permanent distinction or split between the self and the image. The subject seeks unification between the two, a tragic desire for wholeness that will continue for life. This fundamental drive for unity with one’s image is what generates all other ‘desires’, including ideals, jealousies and conflicts. As a consequence, Lacan (1971) defines the human subject as a split subject (which he symbolizes as ‘$’).

The third and final stage of subjectivization is that of the ‘symbolic’ when the child is socialized into language, culture and full external identity of a
signifier, as well as all the formal and informal laws in society which say ‘no’. The subject is ‘given a specific identity, a particular signifier to mark it out as an individual’ and is socialized via ‘the word of the Ancestor, the word of God or the rule of an Institution’ (Curtis, 2001: 121).

The mirror-stage may be likened to the new DA officer coming to construct themselves as an expert in planning law, a ‘doorkeeper’ of ‘good’ development; a self, or armour, which they assume when dealing with development applicants or the public. In establishing this ‘self’ the planning officer may devise a set of tactics for self-preservation when faced with the dangers caused by the uncertainties of planning practice (Baum, 1991a, 1994). Pile (1996) suggests that such tactics may include passivity (e.g. avoiding public participation exercises in order to retain one’s ability to judge the output), repression (ignoring potentially ‘dangerous’ material which could cause problems), sublimation (converting unacceptable impulses into acceptable behaviour by circumventing procedures, etc.) and aggression (towards developers, the public and non-DA planning officers). Anxiety about taking responsibility and/or making mistakes may lead planners to retreat from confronting people and/or taking initiatives (Baum, 1989). Furthermore, recent trends in quantification of performance measurement have led to planners’ anxieties about productivity achievement, which tends to result in an emphasis on quantity rather than quality; on case through-put, rewarding minimal effort and aggression and penalizing caring (Baum, 1991b; Gunder, 2003).

The field of self-preservation often extends to a desire to be liked by one’s colleagues, to be part of ‘the group’, both in the office and the broader planning practitioner cultural community (Baum, 1991b). In such a way, those who may experience anxiety about themselves as individuals may be confirmed in their identities through shared fantasies. The group culture (e.g. the local Planning Institute branch or development assessment section of a local planning authority) offers them a sanctioned place for themselves where they can feel secure and among friends.

There may be a discontinuity between the ‘out-of-office-hours’ persona and the manufactured cultural relations of the planning officer at work. The ‘planner’ mimics an image that they take to be their own. They thus reinforce a process of cultural mirroring which can recur throughout their lives.11

**Desire and jouissance**

Desire is as central to Lacan as power is to Foucault (Copjec, 1994). As suggested above, this desire may be on the part of an individual to be part of a group or ‘gang’ (Apollon, 1994), to take the path of least resistance (Hillier, 2002), to get one’s way and so on. Planning officers, applicants, objectors and elected representatives all have desires from the system. ‘Underlying the production of cities are the hidden workings of desire and fear’ (Pile, 2000: 76).
Jouissance comes from the French verb, jouir, and refers to enjoyment and pleasure. Jouissance in Lacanian thought represents unfulfillable desire. Desire is unlike ‘needs’ or ‘demands’ that can be satisfied by particular objects, as the only object of desire is something unreachable, a lost object.

For Lacan the individual or subject comes into being as a form of attraction toward and defence against a primordial and overwhelming experience of what the French call jouissance; ‘a pleasure that is excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination’ (Fink, 1995: xii). Such pleasure may include enjoyment in refusing a development application or seeing a particular applicant, elected representative and/or residents’ action group vanquished by making a certain recommendation, or alternately, the pleasure of performing one’s job well. However, it is impossible to conceive of enjoyment except in relation to an Other (Evans, 1998). Lacan (1971) suggests that human language and culture come at a cost to participants, the cost of forgoing surplus jouissance that is cut-off by conformity to the desire of the Other. With regard to planning practice, we refer to the ‘big Other’ of the law: ‘the will of the-law-for-the-law is homologous to the will of jouissance’ (Miller, 1997: 1). Lacan symbolizes this desire as ‘object (a).’

As suggested above, the idea of development assessment as driven by a will to jouissance could imply a certain pleasure in either applying or transgressing the letter of planning law. Yet, perniciously, this very desire for jouissance is ‘fundamentally indifferent – and often imical – to the well-being both of oneself and of the other person’ (Bracher, 1993: 20). It transcends enjoyment to become an obsession. It is why actors sometimes hold intractable positions in the face of overwhelming authority; for instance, in applicants seeking, residents objecting to, or a planning officer recommending refusal of the gaining of planning approval for a particular development even though their reflective conscious voice is saying that the position is silly, or at least unwinnable. Jouissance also explains why planners, applicants and residents may too easily buy into the rationalization why a certain decision must be accepted, even when counter to their beliefs, because they concede too easily that it is not worth the fight. Lacan’s Four Discourses are powerful tools for understanding these dispositions driven by the will to jouissance.

Discourses of planning

Habermas’s communicative theory and ethics suggest a range of ‘evaluative criteria that inhere within the process of communication itself’ that allow speakers ‘and listeners to judge their exchanges [as to the truth-validity of statements made] and learn from them’ (Healey, 1997: 266). As noted above, these criteria tend to underestimate the distortions induced by power within discourse. Power, however, is central to Foucault’s communicative arguments: ‘it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined
together’, for ‘discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it’ (Foucault, 1979: 100–1). Foucault suggests the need for an ‘analytics’ of power focused on relationships of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1979: 82). Lacan provides a framework for understanding this dance of power-knowledge within human discourse that we believe may be of significant value to advancing our understanding of planning practice and theory.

Lacan’s discourse theory illustrates how power is infused from the speaking agent to the listener and the consequence, or ‘product’, that this induces in those receiving the articulation. Lacan (1991b, 1998) developed his theory of the Four Discourses in the late 1960s and early 1970s seminars; drawing on mathematical representation of four underlying elements constituting speech acts in the following relationship:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{agent} & \rightarrow \text{other} \\
\text{truth} & \rightarrow \text{product/loss}
\end{align*}
\]

Where:
- the agent is the dominant or commanding position;
- the other is the inherently submissive receiver;
- the product or loss produced as a consequence of the receipt of the speech act;
- and the truth is the element that drives the agent to speak.

The left-hand positions are occupied by those factors active in the subject speaking or sending a message, while on the right-hand are those positions that the subject receiving the message assumes. The top position on each side represents the overt or manifest factor and the bottom position the ‘covert, latent, implicit, or repressed factor – the factor that acts or occurs beneath the surface’ (Bracher, 1994b: 109). The top left position is the place of agency or dominance, while at the bottom left is the factor that underlies, supports and drives the dominant factor.

Each of the discourses affects knowledge-production and the conscious and unconscious ordering of the subject’s relationship both with ‘truth’ and the law’s capacity to (re)interpret their subjectivity (Stacy, 1997). It is important to note that the four modes of discourse seldom exist in this pure form. Discourses are often a blend of several of the modes in any of their various permutations.\(^\text{12}\) We present the four schematized forms below for purposes of exposition only. We propose that these model discourses can be applied to planning processes, such as development assessment, as base models from which to apply Lacanian theory and gain greater insight.

The Four Discourses are those of the Master, the University, the Hysteric and the Analyst. As Bracher (1993: 53) indicates, the discourses offer a means of understanding social and political phenomena: governing (the Master), educating (the University), protesting (the Hysteric) and analysing or transforming (the Analyst). They thus present a way of explaining social and political events and changes (Newman, 2003).
The first discourse, modified to apply to planning, is the ‘Master’s Discourse’ of traditional/authoritarian planning. Lacan expresses the Master Discourse as:

\[
\begin{align*}
S_1 & \rightarrow S_2, \\
\$ & \rightarrow a
\end{align*}
\]

Where:

- $S_1$ is the master signifier – the planning master belief system;
- $S_2$ is knowledge as slave to the law;
- $a$ is the jouissance produced or lost by implementing the master’s law; and,
- $\$\$ is the divided subject, the split between conscious and unconscious.

The master must be obeyed, because they say so. No justification need be given for this imperative power; it just is. As long as everything works and their power is maintained, the master is satisfied. The subject receiving the master’s assertion produces/suffers a loss of jouissance in their obedience. The master is concerned with certainty. ‘I am = I am the one who knows’ (Ragland, 1996: 134). To sustain this certainty the Master’s Discourse excludes the unconscious, the knowledge that is not known. The discourse of the master thus stands in a relation of dominance and authority to knowledge, excluding as it does the unknown. For Lacan, this relation to knowledge is a political question in which knowledge is used in an attempt to gain mastery of the social field. Strategies of governance exemplify articulations of the Master’s Discourse.

The conceptualization of the Master’s Discourse may be equated with that of master or blueprint planning and the practices of some centralized planning bureaucracies. Literally, ‘To be Bureaucracy’ (Lacan, 1991b: 35).

The second Discourse is the ‘University Discourse’ of the knowing planner, or expert in the planning arena.

\[
\begin{align*}
S_2 & \rightarrow a, \\
S_1 & \rightarrow \$\$\$
\end{align*}
\]

Where:

- $S_2$ is systematic knowledge – planning law, planning techniques;
- $a$ is surplus jouissance;
- $\$\$ is the alienated subject; and,
- $S_1$ is any unconscious master signifier.

Knowledge replaces the master signifier in the dominant position. ‘Systematic knowledge is the ultimate authority, reigning in the stead of blind will, and everything has its reason’ (Fink, 1995: 132). The product or loss is the divided subject, the ‘alienated’, unknowing subject.

It has been suggested (Grigg, 2001) that the University Discourse simply justifies the Master’s Discourse in that knowledge, whether absolute or not, is obtained after the fact. The ‘hidden truth’ of the University Discourse is that it is effectively a cover for the blind authority of the Master Discourse.
The type of knowledge involved amounts to mere rationalization. The University Discourse would appear to instruct planning students in the use of rational comprehensive planning, offering the guise of rationality to the power and centralization of planning practice in the Master’s Discourse. Further, as Hillier (2002) and Flyvbjerg (1998) clearly illustrate in actual practice, the role of systemic knowledge in planning is often deployed as rhetorical ammunition for what Flyvbjerg refers to as real rationalität.

The third Discourse is the ‘Hysteric’s Discourse’ of challenge to the planner, prove your knowledge is true! The Hysteric’s Discourse presents resistance or challenge to the ‘truth’ of the master.

\[
\frac{S}{a} \rightarrow S_1 \rightarrow S_2
\]

Where:
- $S$ is the alienated subject (residents, applicants etc.);
- $S_1$ is the master signifier – planning master;
- $S_2$ is systematic knowledge – planning law; and,
- $a$ is surplus jouissance of the hysteric’s desire.

In the Hysteric’s Discourse, the split subject occupies the dominant position, calling the master signifier into question, because their underlying truth is one of anxiety, uncertainty, or confusion with regard to the master signifier. The hysteric ‘goes at the master and demands that he or she show his or her stuff, prove his or her mettle by producing something serious by way of knowledge’ (Fink, 1995: 133) and provide an answer to the hysteric’s desire. However, since it is impossible to satisfy the hysteric’s desire, the answer that the master provides is always inadequate. Hysteric’s may be likened to local residents who challenge the knowledge of the planners. Further, it could be considered the discourse of resistance for parties at variance with particular planning prescriptions.

As Newman (2003) points out, the hysteric tests the knowledge and authority of the master, who, in attempting to protect their position of authority, provides answers that serve to further expose their impotence and lack of knowledge. Hysteric’s thus come to regard the master as an impediment to the realization of their desire. Mistrust increases, which may result in either heightened resistance or dejected ‘exit’ by the hysteric’s.
The fourth Discourse is the ‘Analyst’s Discourse’ of exposure of hidden master signifiers.

\[
\begin{align*}
\frac{a}{S_2} & \rightarrow \frac{$}{S_1}
\end{align*}
\]

Where:
- \(a\) is surplus jouissance;
- \($\) is the alienated subject;
- \(S_1\) is the master signifier; and
- \(S_2\) is systematic knowledge.

In this Lacanian discourse the external factor of the analyst is deployed to expose the unconscious fixations and blockages that constitute subjective agency of the planners. The analyst interrogates the subject at the split between the conscious and unconscious so that fragments of the master signifier can slip through. The task of the Lacanian analyst is to bring unconscious master signifiers into relation with other signifiers, and in so doing negate them, with the analysand often not even being aware that this has occurred. Lacan’s discourses demonstrate that knowledge claims are both constructed and situated. However, just as the unconscious is not knowable by the conscious, in regard to planning, the underlying ideological distortions and practices comprising the planning field are not always visible, or knowable, to those immersed within them (Gunder and Mouat, 2002). Planning practice may thus appear ‘to someone caught up in it, absorbed in it, as a transcendent universe, imposing its own ends and norms unconditionally’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 151). Bourdieu goes on to caveat, while nothing may be absolute, or sacred, in these ends and norms, they create an illusion for the practitioner that can be only ascertained by the critical observer situated externally.

We suggest that the Analyst’s Discourse is analogous to the deconstruction of social power or planning ideology/construct/structure or shadows by the planning theorist. The role of the Lacanian planning theorist is not to be objective, because we cannot be (Žižek, 1989). Rather the theorist seeks to facilitate subjects (planners, residents and so on) to identify and own their desires and alienations by confronting them with their own unconscious fantasies and demonstrating that what supports these fantasies (the Other) is deficient and ungrounded. This, hopefully, allows a more ‘functional’ professional life and practice.

Alternatively, the idealized model of a DA planner might be likened to the analyst or therapist, analysing DA applications. The DA planner seeks to expose the unconscious fixations and distortions that constitute not only the development application, but also the subjective agency of the applicant and any objectors. In this manner the DA planner stands back from and analyses the situation, bringing the master signifier of planning into relation with the other signifiers and making a statutory decision recommendation.
on the application. However, Lacanian theory would suggest that such a
situation is delusional. Planners, like all people, including academics, are far
too immersed in their practices and pre-structured ideological perceptions
to be able to make objective, value-free decisions, no matter how hard they
may strive to do so (Dean, 2001; Žižek, 1989).

In the framework which we offer in this article, we place the DA planner
as residing under the Discourse of the Master ($S^1$/($S^2$), or perhaps under
the University Discourse of systematic knowledge ($S^2$/($S^1$), as always the
agent of ($S^2$) – the law/big Other/society/governance – the signified (Žižek,
1998). Residents and institutional/corporate objectors and advocacy
planners are generally Hysterical barred subjects ($S$), or at best, advocates
of alternative networks of signifiers – alternative knowledges and ‘expert’
opinions. In reality, all tends to be obscured in realrationalität and ideo-
logical distortion – which only the detached analyst, or perhaps the reflec-
tive practitioner, can draw out.

Planning law as big Other

DA planners may be regarded as gatekeepers of the law. They give or deny
permission to act according to their interpretation of some symbolic order
or ‘code of accepted fictions’ (Žižek, 1999: 1), what Lacan calls the big
Other. The big Other may be defined as ‘objectivized knowledge – the
symbolic substance of our being, the virtual order that regulates intersub-
jective space’ (Žižek, 2001: 254). It is ‘the force of dialectical mediation-
appropriation’ (Žižek, 2001: 153) such as behavioural ideals encouraged by
planning law, officer Codes of Conduct, ground-rules governing communi-
cative action or consensus-formation and so on.

The DA officer catchcry of ‘the facts speak for themselves’, is, as Žižek
(1994: 11) points out, ‘the arch statement of ideology – the point being,
precisely, that facts never “speak for themselves” but are always made to
speak by a network of discursive devices’ (emphasis in original). DA
represents the otherness-externalization of utilitarianism as the key
ideology underpinning planning practice. By the act of recommending a
decision, planners suppose the existence of the big Other as guarantor of
their meaning (Žižek, 1991).

What is the Lacanian big Other? The Lacanian subject is a person who
is situated in a network of relations of need and demand with many others
(family, colleagues, boss, etc.). The big Other binds subjects to the struc-
ture. It gives identity and purpose through signs and practices. It is exterior
as well as determinative (Caudill, 1997). It is the source of rules that
maintain the legitimacy of the discourse of (planning) power. As Apollon
(1996: 32) indicates, however, ‘the question of the foundation of the law as
the legitimation of authority is a repressed question.’ Moreover, this repres-
sion is necessary to the practice of planning power. Apollon (1996: 32–3)
continues that such power ‘appeals to the sovereign use of violence, through
the concern of the law that establishes that sovereignty.’ The political or planning enterprise as a management device cannot be separated from the exercise of power against those managed as it must guarantee both the permanence and the legitimacy of the authority’s representation. The law thus becomes Other, with a big O. Planning discourse is then carried on through the enigma and power of the big Other; the symbolic order consisting of ‘chains’ that bind and orient (Caudill, 1997: 63).

Subjects supposed to know and subjects supposed to believe

The two notions, of the subject supposed to know and the subject supposed to believe, are not symmetrical since knowledge and belief are not symmetrical. The status of the Lacanian big Other is that of ‘belief (trust), not that of knowledge, since belief is symbolic and knowledge is real’ (Žižek, 1997: 107). The big Other relies on a fundamental trust (in planning law, the planning system, etc.). Belief involves some element of conservatism (reliance on the structure of belief) and ‘a belief in the belief of someone else’, whereas knowledge is not knowledge about the fact that there is someone else who knows. The logic of the subject supposed to know is therefore productive of new knowledge (see Žižek, 1997: 125 n.25). In Lacanian terms, the hysterical subject (e.g. a residents’ action group) who probes the Master’s (planning officer’s) knowledge epitomizes the emergence of new knowledge (such as local environmental conditions).

Dean (2001) demonstrates the gap between the utopian notion of the public supposed to (or having a right to) know and the reality of the public supposed to believe. Provision of information and public involvement in participatory strategies thus hold out the possibility of good decision-making to the public supposed to believe. Yet lack of information conceals the gap between the public supposed to know and the public supposed to believe. Reality is ‘a reductive acceptance of the way things are instead of a utopian embrace of the way things might be’ (Dean, 2001: 630).

In this manner, information may be withheld from the public or manipulated for public consumption. In such authoritarian logic, the identity of scientists (planners) and their ‘facts’ are ‘essentialized’ as intrinsically rational, good and truth-bearing. The public, alternatively, and its ‘opinions’ are essentialized as irrational and non-factual. Lacanian analysis resists such essential formations, opening up discussion to contingency and multiple interpretations.

Similarly, in participatory planning exercises, various actors may be ‘economical with the truth’, engaging in a ‘dance’ (Lacan, 1971) of deception or ‘opportunistic manoeuvring’ (Žižek, 2001: 155) and rivalry. For instance, resource managers may understate potential levels of environmental harm caused by resource exploitation and environmental objectors may overstate the size of their support base (Hillier, 2002).

Having introduced what we regard as some of the Lacanian concepts that
offer most potential for enhancing our understanding of planning practice, we now turn to a brief critique of Lacan’s work.

A brief critique

Lacan’s writings have been criticized as being purely theoretical and lacking in empirical material (Sarup, 1993: 26). Lacan does not describe any case examples from which he either developed or tested his theorizing.15 While this criticism could also be levelled at this article, we emphasize that we have drawn on our respective interactions with, and understandings of, planning practice in selecting and exploring the Lacanian terms above. Our intent is to present, in as accessible a manner as possible, central elements of what we regard as a theoretical framework that may hold potential value for understanding planning practice. The next step we would envisage as being rigorous application of these elements to empirical case examples.

Within contemporary feminist theory Lacan’s work is regarded both as a useful framework for challenging phallocentric knowledges and patriarchal relations of power (by, for example, Judith Butler, Julia Kristeva, Juliet Mitchell, Elizabeth Grosz) and as privileging masculinity, conceiving women as lacking, substrata of the male subject (by Luce Irigaray, Germaine Greer, Dale Spender). This latter group argue that the Lacanian concept of the symbolic order is essentially phallocentric and represses the feminine, which is represented as a lack.

We position ourselves with those feminists who defend Lacanian theory and argue that Lacan’s work should be read as a descriptive and analytic tool for comprehending power relations (Grosz, 1989; Mitchell, 1974; Ragland-Sullivan, 1986), rather than read substantively. Although Lacan himself may not have acknowledged the structure of patriarchal oppression and developed his theory from the perspective of a male psyche, we concur with Elizabeth Grosz (1990) that Lacan does alter our understanding of patriarchal power relations and their social reproduction. By going beyond Freudian mere biologism, Lacan enables us to locate women’s oppression in the socio-economic and linguistic nature of society.

The value of Lacan for planning theory

‘Lacan’s thought disrupts and challenges many assumptions about knowledge and subjectivity common to the social sciences and humanities as well as in everyday life’ (Sarup, 1992: 15). In planning theory the importance of language, discourse and cultural meanings is now accepted. Lacanian theory may be valuable in increasing understanding of issues of subjectivity and interpretation that underpin much planning decision-making. Lacan enables us to comprehend rule-following and rule-resistant behaviours
(Mooij, 1982) and the play of forces involved. Lacan’s theory of discourse trains us to listen less for what is known than for what is unknown (Boothby, 2001: 11) and in so doing promotes an awareness of the predispositions of the self, of planning practice and of planning theory.

Returning to discussion of the grounding of recent planning theory in Habermasian and/or Foucauldian traditions, Lacan provides a valuable link with both. As Dews (1995) illustrates, Lacan’s conception of linguistic intersubjectivity is similar to that of Habermas and both agree that psychoanalysis provides a means of deciphering the distortions of symbolic structures and communication. ‘The parallels between Lacan’s line of argument and the “discourse theory of truth” which Habermas begins to develop in the 1970s are unmistakeable’ (Dews, 1995: 497).

One of the key differences between Habermas and Lacan, however, is that Lacan regards intersubjectively shared systems of meanings as dialectical (with which we agree) rather than reciprocal as Habermas would prefer.

As noted above, Foucault also found much of value in psychoanalysis, drawing from it the notion that the subject’s truth is to be found through discourse (Forrester, 1990). Foucault introduces the concept of the subject as part of a play of forces of domination and discourse in developing his understanding of the strategy of power that embodies knowledge (knowledge-power) that has been applied in relation to planning by authors including Flyvbjerg (1998).

In this regard, psychoanalysis occupies, according to Foucault (1970: 373), ‘a privileged provision in our knowledge’ because psychoanalysis forms ‘an undoubted and inexhaustible treasure-hoard of experiences and concepts, and above all a perpetual principle of dissatisfaction, of calling into question, of criticism and contestation of what may seem, in other respects, to be established.’ As Gunder (2003) consequently observes, Foucauldian critique, when coupled to Lacanian insight, provides an enhanced prism from whence to understand planning practices and to expose pernicious planning processes.

Lacan thus provides a bridge between Habermasian- and Foucauldian-based theories. All three authors agree that a ‘failure to acknowledge the fundamental intersubjectivity of the structures of language and human understanding can lead to political consequences incompatible with the essential democratic aspirations of modernity’ (Dews, 1995: 519). Lacan enhances Habermas’s and Foucault’s focus on language and power while also further instituting desire and imagination as central constituents of social action.

**Conclusions**

‘The magical but wounded power of the city does not lie in great theatrical urban landscapes, but in the slow accumulation of skill and intuition that is
the best means of coping with the elusive, phantasmatic, emergent and often only just there fabric of urban life’ (Thrift, 2000a: 407). We offer a Lacanian analytical framework as explored in this article in an attempt to ‘notice the city in new ways’ (Thrift, 2000a: 407); to overcome situations in which ‘one cannot see the wood of the theory for the trees of the technical process’ (Lacan, 1998: 118). The practice of development assessment in planning embodies in planning officers a power that subjects applicants to conform to a set of rules and regulations under the threat of potentially coercive laws. While DA tends to be, but is not always, pre-political (taking place before elected members make a decision on the issue), theorists have tended to overlook analysis of this aspect of planning. Traditional legal discourse is popularly conceived as being neutral and the social and psychological status of the legal adjudicator is often exempt from enquiry. There is a need to ‘connect’ identity, meaning, power and space through examination of the activities and attitudes of DA officers.

Planning law may be regarded as ‘a body of rules that were laboriously drawn up at a moment of history’ (Lacan, 1971: 140). Any stability offered by the law is constructed, however, as the desires of applicants, of resident objectors, of elected members and of DA officers, the existence of property ‘rights’ and the limits of governmental ‘intrusion’ are all contestable. A Lacanian analytical framework may shed light on DA as the implementation of planning law and its impact on space.

Planning decision-making is a complex mixture of hybrid processes – technical, collaborative and political. There may be a relation of non-exhaustive mutual determination between the psyche and the social and between planners, elected members and the wider public. Lacanian thinking offers us theoretical space to explain and understand the events planners experience in the internal and external worlds of practice and how they and other actors may behave in attempts to decide development applications. ‘Just the right dose of fantasy, such as to think beyond the old oppositions of utopia or realism, containment or conflict’ (Benhabib, 1990: 355).

Acknowledgements

Our thanks to two anonymous referees and especially to Huw Thomas for their insightful and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. We also thank Saul Newman for making available to us a draft of his paper on the Four Discourses.

Notes

1. We regard the latter as too ‘complex and out of sync’ (Caudill, 1998: 282) with contemporary planning and law and too unique a reading of Freud for discussion in this article. For a discussion of Lacan’s psychoanalytical clinical theory and role in relation to planning, see Gunder (2003).
2. See, in particular, Habermas (1972, 1979, 2001). The Frankfurt School held that basic socio-economic concepts had to be integrated with psychological concepts due to a belief that an emancipated society and an autonomous self were interdependent. Habermas similarly believed in the interdependence of forms of social integration and forms of identity (*Communication and the Evolution of Society*, 1979).


5. For Lacan (1971), ‘law’ stands for both codified rules of law and the unwritten norms that constitute culture and shape our behaviours (Zupanic, 1998). He also referred to the totality of these guiding constraints as the ‘big Other’.

6. DA planners are those who draw on the requirements of statutory plans, perceived and expressed community standards, objections of affected parties, national or state planning and development legislation, and other locally or nationally relevant planning criteria, such as planning policy guidelines; inspectorate, tribunal, or environment court case law, and especially, the known behaviours of their elected decision-makers, or appointed commissioners, with regard to specific development issues.

7. According to Boothby (2001: 12) ego-psychoanalysis conceives the task of psychic life to be adaptation to reality. The ego’s powers of synthesis and defence mediate conflicts between internal instinctual drives and the constraints of external reality. Theorists associated with ego-psychoanalysis include Ernst Kris, Heinz Hartmann, Rudolph Loewenstein and Anna Freud (Boothby, 2001; Sarup, 1992; Van Haute, 2002).

8. The essence of understanding Lacan revolves around his theory of early childhood identity creation, within which all further human desire and action are grounded.


10. The sound-image or written form of a mental concept, such as planning officer.

11. The same person can thus adopt a series of different personas, e.g. in Australia, in particular, as a planning officer, a surf-board hero, an Italian son, a sexual ‘stud’ and so on, according to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Lacan would refer to each persona as being a master signifier which, when totalized, defines and creates that person’s ego ideal (Fink, 1995).

12. There are estimated to be some 48 discourse permutations.

13. Remembering that, for Lacan, desire is a ‘lost object’.

14. For example, belief in a God. One may believe in a God, but one cannot know that the God exists.

15. One could argue, however, that Lacan’s theorizing is derived from 50 years of clinical practice. As such, his insights could be argued to derive from the multiple case studies of his analysands and hence be consistent with Flyvbjerg’s (2001) proposal for the development of phronetically derived social science.
16. For a different opinion see Žižek (1992: 102–5).

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