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EVALUATING PLANS PRAGMATICALLY

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Abstract In this article I take up the topic of plan evaluation. I compare two approaches. One approach uses rational analysis, the other pragmatic reasoning. I argue that planners should place less emphasis on rational analysis and adopt a distinctly pragmatic approach when evaluating plans. Analysis may offer objectivity and precision, but it sacrifices context and continuity. A pragmatic outlook embraces context and seeks continuity among diverse viewpoints. It avoids the separation between analysis and action, providing a useful rationale for what some practitioners might call common sense judgment.

Keywords deliberation, democracy, evaluation, pragmatism, rationality

The blind people and the elephant

Most of us are familiar with one or another version of the story about the blind people and the elephant. Several blind people each positioned at a different place along the body of an elephant offer conflicting descriptions: snake, pillar, wall, etc. The tale warns us about the importance of context to perspective. Planners usually use it to illustrate how we who study the same cities and policies using concepts drawn from different disciplines may
speak past one another. The economist, sociologist and political economist describe the city using different concepts (e.g. market, migration and voting). But the story also warns us about the danger of misplaced inference – taking the part for the whole. It is not that cities do not include markets, migrants and voters, but that we go astray when we take one of these descriptions as inclusive of the whole.

But what if the blind people had spoken with one another about their observations? At first each might have insisted upon the integrity of their own judgment, emphasizing the veracity of their sensual experience (or superiority of their respective discipline). Some versions of the tale do have each blind person proclaiming to the others the obvious conclusion that the elephant is most evidently a snake or wall. What if the blind people had listened to one another? How might they have come to recognize their differences as less due to commission than omission? The rush to judgment for each blind person seals them off from each other. The differences in their experience had less to do with their character, reasoning or abilities, than their shared privation – a fixed position along the length of the elephant. Each imagined a part of the elephant as the whole. This imagining was not contemplative or fanciful but tacit and experiential. Their attachment to each their own conclusion was all the greater because of this contact. What must happen for the blind people to recognize not only that they inhabit different positions, but also that such differences distort their judgment about the whole elephant?

Rationality and pragmatism

In this article I take up the topic of plan evaluation. I compare two approaches. One approach uses Rational analysis, the other pragmatic reasoning. I argue that planners should place less emphasis on Rational analysis and adopt a pragmatic approach when evaluating plans. Rational analysis may offer objectivity and precision, but like the judgment of the blind people, it sacrifices context and continuity. A pragmatic outlook embraces context and seeks continuity among diverse viewpoints. It avoids the separation between analysis and action. The Rationalist asks how can I be sure that my analysis is correct and certain. The pragmatist asks what must we know to cope with our problem.

I capitalize Rationalist to refer to those theorists who want their ideas to provide a more important – because more logical and precise – foundation for evaluating plans and planning. The pragmatic approach does not search for a conceptual foundation, but uses conceptual inquiry as one among many tools (e.g. craft, feelings, intuition, experience, custom and so forth) we possess to cope with the problems we encounter. The pragmatists do not believe theoretical ideas and methods can trump the practical effects of human language, history, culture, evolution and so forth. For instance, the
belief that professional planning analysis may be value neutral relies upon Rationalist expectations. In contrast, the belief that professional planning analysis must include the purposes of the relevant audience reflects a pragmatic outlook. The Rationalist wants ideas to illuminate the value of plans like sunshine illuminates the world. The pragmatist evaluates plans holding and pointing a conceptual flashlight (Hoch, 1995).

The pragmatists cannot prove that ideas remain inescapably tied to historical and geographic context. They simply re-describe beliefs and claims about the meaning and value of plans in ways that show how these foster or frustrate specific purposes. The pragmatists believe that organizing such inquiry using democratic means will prove more useful than others in coping with complex uncertainties and meeting diverse purposes. This belief does not treat such democratic behavior as inevitable or necessary. The pragmatists do believe democratic inquiry represents the best approach we humans have invented so far to cope with the uncertainties we face. Knowledge does not protect us from contingency and surprise, but may prepare us to more clearly and effectively cope with unexpected difficulties.¹

The pragmatists abandon the grand separation between theory and practice. The Rationalists insist upon this distinction believing that the power of ideas will trump the uncertainties we face. We need theory to guide practice. The pragmatists, like many current postmodern thinkers, worry that the quest for certainty becomes a power trip as those with little democratic sensibility use Rationality to subject others to purposes that masquerade as necessary and inevitable conditions (Harper and Stein, 1996). Pragmatists tie abstraction to context. Sometimes we use the formal and logical properties of a social theory or urban model to abstract from details that obscure a structural order or causal sequence. We go astray when we use this abstraction to substitute for the contingent complexity that always accompanies and shapes the abstracted order. The pragmatists avoid the theory–practice dualism because historically powerful people have used the elevation of Rationality to justify modes of inquiry and social control not for reasons the weak find compelling, but for reasons that make the purposes of the powerful appear natural. Adversarial prowess substitutes for the democratic pleasures of diverse modes of inquiry. In his recent book, Return to Reason, Stephen Toulmin offers a historical account for this unfortunate divorce in philosophy. He argues for the sort of reunion pragmatists hoped to enjoin:

In this respect, Dewey was right to suggest that Pragmatism is not just one theory on a par with all others. Rather, it represents a change of view, which puts theorizing on a par with all other activities. From now on, honestly productive craftsmen need not apologize for vulgarity, nor do we need to put logic above rhetoric, ethics above casuistry, metaphysics above sophistry, or the Prophets above the Pharisees. For the time being that game is over; and when
Plato declared that Gorgias and the Sophists prostituted their skills by setting up ‘knowledge shops’ (phrontisteria), it was he who was guilty of vulgar libel. Academic jealousies turn out to be as old as the Academy itself. (Toulmin, 2001: 172)

This article emphasizes what many planning theorists often leave behind in their intellectual ambition to get things right (Hoch, 1984, 1992). Rationalists want to construct theories that provide a foundation for future claims about the world. Rationalists imagine theory as a platform or superstructure for our claims about plans and values. American pragmatists Charles Pierce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James and John Dewey tried to sidestep this approach over a century ago:

They all believed that ideas are not ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered, but are tools – like forks and knives and microchips – that people devise to cope with the world in which they find themselves. They believed that ideas are produced not by individuals, but by groups of individuals – that ideas are social. They believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and the environment. And they believed that since ideas are provisional responses to particular and unpredictable circumstances, their survival depends not on their immutability, but on their adaptability. (Menand, 2001: xi–xii)

Planning advice and evaluation

We make judgments all the time about our future. We anticipate, forecast, and predict events and behaviors. Our account of future events informs our judgments. When we make plans we offer advice to ourselves or others. Planning implies forethought and intention. When we produce plan documents we expect people to read them and use the advice to inform and influence their own judgments about the allocation of public resources, the use of property and so forth. Implicit in such sincere and often urgent effort is the belief that planning will improve the quality of the judgments and that these improvements will produce more effective consequences on the use of resources, property or whatever. If we did not expect plans to make a useful difference, why would we make them?

If we imagine planning as a kind of forethought, then the regular act of monitoring achievement means remembering the earlier intention as a framework for assessment. This framework serves not only as a cognitive reference, but an emotional benchmark as well: ‘I made this commitment. I don’t want to break it.’ Contrast this with the conception of deferred gratification. This concept treats deferment as a kind of contract. I must go through all the hoops before I receive my reward. Evaluating plans may offer a taste of fulfillment each step of the way. So, for instance, the planner
who implements zoning and other development regulations with an eye on the larger plan may express satisfaction with the incremental results. (This does not mean that the same planner is blind to a larger and longer viewpoint that weighs the increments within a larger whole and asks, ‘Do these implement the plan?’.)

Professional planners make plans and use them to justify a variety of regulatory, investment, project, and assorted development activities. But rarely do professional planners evaluate plans, or at least not in the same manner as they go about making them. There are many practical reasons for this; lack of time and money for instance. I want to argue, however, that there may be social and conceptual reasons as well. Planners make plans that combine a multiplicity of viewpoints and voices. Most plan making includes analysis, but few planners would expect that analysis alone makes a plan. In contrast, plan evaluation often means analyzing the plan according to select parts, relations, and purposes. Practitioners imagine objective analysts conducting rigorous tests of a plan. Some may have witnessed such a study, disappointed that it left out so much, yet excusing the omissions for practical reasons. Furthermore, analysts frequently conduct plan evaluation using only one kind of measure (e.g. economic) or a specific ideological approach (e.g. deep ecology). I am arguing that the pursuit of objectivity and methodological rigor may, like the blind persons and the elephant, offer an unnecessarily limited assessment of the plan.

Evaluating plans: comparing Rational and pragmatic approaches

‘How would you know a good plan if you saw one?’ author William Baer (1997) asked not too long ago in an article published in the Journal of the American Planning Association. Baer distinguishes four targets for plan evaluation: plan alternatives, plan outcomes, impact on public good, and impacts on professional practice. Baer makes these distinctions, I think, to remind us that the meaning of an evaluation depends crucially on the goals and methods used to conduct it. Baer’s classification identifies what I will render as four different viewpoints, or sticking with the metaphor, standpoints – one for each blind person. Just as the blind judges imagine and project parts for the whole, so too do plan evaluators. In the article that follows I argue that the blindness comes less from difference in method and more from reliance on a kind of Rationality that often limits and even distorts efforts to comprehend the effectiveness of a plan. In order to show how these limits work, I will contrast a Rational against pragmatic approach to evaluation for each of the four standpoints Baer identified:

1. Plan formation: how well does the plan evaluate alternatives?
2. Plan implementation: how well do after plan outcomes meet plan objectives?

3. Plan critique: how well does the plan serve the public good?

4. Plan competence: does the plan improve professional planning practice?

In each case the first example will describe a Rational evaluation that anticipates precision, correspondence, principles and expertise; and the second, a pragmatic evaluation that anticipates relevance, similarity, consensus and stewardship. I am not arguing against rational analysis, but against a Rationality that elevates theory above practical reason. The Rational approach evaluates plans reflecting on conceptual coherence and fit. The pragmatic approach evaluates plans anticipating purpose and consensus. The comparative reviews that follow illustrate the difference in approach for each type of evaluation.

1. Plan formation: how well does the plan evaluate alternatives?

Formal and precise

Planning analysts use trip distribution models, soil erosion schemes or cost benefit ratios to evaluate planning judgments. The tools of rational appraisal define what count as measures of quality and merit at the outset of inquiry. Planners possess a vast array of techniques for measuring and calculating changes in value. For instance, in his recent book Community Impact Evaluation, Nathaniel Lichfield (1996) describes 10 plan evaluation methods that test outputs (e.g. checklist, multi-attribute, linear programming), three that test inputs (threshold analysis) and 12 that do both (e.g. cost benefit analysis, optimization and community impact analysis). Virtually all of these provide means for measuring and calculating value using increments of utility. Lichfield briefly reviews the many disagreements among evaluation analysts and admits that applying different methods yields different evaluations of the same place and project. But after admitting that context matters in the use of methods he spends the bulk of the text discussing improvements to method rather than explore relationship to context (pp. 33–45).

Lichfield makes the argument that economizing represents the primal value for members of modern society. We may have many layers to our lives, but all must build upon economic prosperity. Hence, for Lichfield (1996) scarcity shapes all other values by its insistent necessity. The efficacy of the varieties of economically oriented cost benefit methods flows from this view of our social relationships (pp. 47ff.) This enables him to reduce the vast assortment of human attachments, activities, beliefs, and so forth to a relatively modest set of monetary measures that he can use in his impact analysis. The complexity returns later, but in the form of residual externalities.
Such sweeping abstraction simplifies as it offers access to a diverse assessment of relationships that we cannot comprehend relying solely on our own common sense. The method lifts us out of our conventional mindset offering a detached calculus for comparing and weighing the impacts of alternative decisions. The chunky tradeoffs among environmental, social, physical and economic issues once translated into an instrumental framework of calculation provide a legible and efficient source of feedback for analysts and decision makers. But when taken too far or relied upon too exclusively, such analysis generates exaggerated claims. This happens when analysts seek to escape the practical contingencies of social and political life through careful deployment of method alone. The problem results not from the pursuit of clarity and precision, but the elevation of strict methodological guides as boundaries for meaningful discourse about what counts as good advice. The brilliant instrumentalist, like the drunk, searches for lost keys only where the light shines (Kaplan, 1964).

Relevant and plausible
In their book, Evaluation of the Built Environment for Sustainability, editors Brandon et al. (1997) classify and compare 40 papers delivered at an international conference. Several authors conducted multi-attribute plan evaluations. This approach does not use a uniform measure of value to enhance the powers of calculating difference (e.g. cost benefit analysis), but seeks to identify and measure different preferences people express comparing specific policy choices. These preferences (usually ordinal measures of social, physical, environmental and other valued conditions) are combined into relatively legible and graphically accessible preference scores for different planning alternatives. For instance, Peter Nijkamp and Luisa Artuso (1997) compared three planning alternatives: current commercial development, adjustment to preserve historic features and a sustainability alternative with tough environmental controls on parking and rehabilitation – all for the historical downtown of Bassano del Grappa, Italy. The simultaneous assessment of multiple attributes helped policy makers understand how development decisions might produce multiple related impacts. For instance, attributing economic value varied with choice of impact on property values, commercial revenue, or employment.

This approach provides an accounting scheme to help decision makers in complex and contentious policy arenas compare the relative merits of different combinations of likely outcomes. Most importantly, the method provides a tool for improved deliberation in a collective decision making context rather than a substitute for such deliberation.
2. Plan implementation: how well do after plan outcomes meet plan objectives?

Did people follow the plan and did the actions they take yield the expected outcomes? Many classic case study accounts of comprehensive planning offer a rather dismal account of the planning enterprise. Consider the works by Meyerson and Banfield (1955), Alan Altshuler (1965) and Peter Hall (1980); all highlight the failure of various planning schemes. Not only did people not follow plans, but worse still the plans when followed did not produce the anticipated results. Recent research, more focused and less sweeping in its claims, offers more hopeful assessments.

Methods guide purpose

Emily Talen (1996) uses spatial statistics to test claims about the geographic relationship between park access and the characteristics of city residents in Pueblo, Colorado. Talen compares park access in 1996 with planned park access in 1966. Interestingly, Talen does not test whether or not the parks proposed in 1966 got built. She admits that overlaying current parks and planned parks showed little fit. The district did not follow the 1966 plan. She focuses on outcomes instead.

Talen measures whether or not park facility access improved after the plan. She uses spatial statistics to compare the pattern of accessibility among residents in relation to the entire system of park facilities before the plan (1966) and long after (1990). High access residential areas score above the mean, low ones below it. Talen uses four different models of spatial distribution to assess accessibility from the center of each census tract to each park.

In the end Talen admits that the choice of spatial model defines the kinds of pattern one finds in the data. The use of abstract statistical measures, however, also shifts the evaluation criteria away from the deliberations of park planners, officials and users. If the park facility plans proposed in 1966 were not followed by public officials (which Talen admits), should we use the proposed planning facility locations as a planning norm? In effect, if we know after the fact that the plan was not followed, what does it mean to evaluate the plan? Talen’s use of GIS shifts attention to outcomes and criteria bound tightly to method, but only loosely tied to purpose and plan.

Purposes guide method

Michael Stegman and Michael Luger (1993) conducted an evaluation study of a home ownership subsidy program for the Town of Chapel Hill. Local planners and officials had designed a program using public money to subsidize the purchase of homes by moderate income households that would, without the subsidy, remain renters. The program pursued two goals. First, assist moderate income renters to enter the home owner market. Second, build equity over time so that when and if the owners sold their subsidized
home they would acquire enough equity to pay back the original subsidy and still make a down payment on a new home. Stegman and Luger believed these goals were not complementary, but mutually exclusive. They believed that the town had to choose to invest the subsidy for individual household equity accumulation or recapture the subsidy at time of sale for use by other moderate income renters, not both. Stegman and Luger used spreadsheet analysis to compare the financial outcomes for each approach over time. The analysis showed that the effort to serve both goals simultaneously fell short of achieving either. Households did not escape the need for subsidy and the Town only recaptured a portion of their original capital. The study re-framed the town officials’ belief that they could serve both ends and gave them reason to choose between the two. Once offered plausible evidence about the likely consequences of their policies, the local council reconsidered its original commitments and chose the wealth enhancing program forgoing efforts to recoup the program funds.

3. Plan critique: how well does the plan serve the public good?

Baer places planning critics in this category: analysts whose vocabulary is alien to the participants doing the planning. This includes political economists of the ideological right and left, as well as those postmodern thinkers challenging the very prospect of planning at all. The critics from both left and right despite their many disagreements leave room for planning, but postmodern critics hope to junk the entire enterprise. So I will tackle the most challenging.

Postmodern critique

In his book, Seeing Like a State, James Scott (1998) argues that four elements combine to turn the modern state into a nasty imperialistic and autocratic surveillance system. First, the state imposes administrative order on nature and society. The state classifies diverse people and landscapes into abstract categories that increase the ease with which the state can manipulate people, the land and their possessions. Second, the ideology of high modernism promotes a blind faith in the power of scientific and technical progress. The pursuit of this rational order inspires confidence in the efficacy of physical and aesthetic designs; build new towns and grand housing blocks that implement state organized utopian improvement schemes. Powerful state officials have often embraced high modernist optimism, putting the ideals to use as conduits serving their interests in expanding and extending the reach of the state and their authority as officials. The third element includes an authoritarian state regime that combines the surveillance system and high modernist designs into an especially coercive system of subjection. Such regimes prosper in societies fragmented by social upheaval: war, revolution, depression or civil disruption. Finally, successful state growth requires a weak and divided civil society. If people can
organize themselves to resist the imposition of the surveillance state, then
the despotic state can be kept at bay:

In sum, the legibility of a society provides the capacity for large scale
engineering, high-modernist ideology provides the desire, the authoritarian
state provides the determination to act on that desire, and an incapacitated civil
society provides the leveled social terrain on which to build. (Scott, 1998: 5)

The four elements may be clustered into two domains: rationality and
authority. Standardization and high modernism together produce the
rationality post moderns love to hate, while despotic officials and civic pas-
sivity foster the authoritarian state long associated with the red menace of
the now dismembered USSR during the cold war years. Scott’s case against
rationality cuts more deeply and critically than his treatment of the elements
related to authority. First, the rational lends itself to such critique because
homogenization takes the same shape across all the diverse landscapes of
the world. Cultural, social and individual differences lose value. The variety
of authoritarian regimes make a grand critical argument less compelling.
Second, Scott wants to warn us, as did, I believe, Foucault, about the loss of
the diverse individual particularities that make freedom worthwhile
(Foucault, 1975). Scott may admit the necessity of a paradoxical state
reining in his anarchistic impulses. But when it comes to the rational
elements of legibility and high modernism he makes a more heroic and
romantic critique. The rational organization of the concepts used to make
plans and conduct planning evaluations imposes an order that subjects more
than it liberates. Planning paves over differences generating homogeneous
spaces that can be more easily managed and controlled. Whether narrow
cost benefit analysis or robust multi-attribute analysis, rationality packs a
powerful repressive wallop.

This grand critical narrative awakens us to the dangers of a rational
government in modern times. Ironically, Scott’s strong rejection of the tools
of rationality, government regulation and their application in planning
schemes for the improvement of human settlement leaves little room for
meaningful public planning. Scott does qualify his argument. He admits we
need not apply it across the board. But the rhetorical structure he adopts
does not show how such planning would work without subjecting, leveling
or excluding multiple voices. He holds to an underlying ideal about practice
that offers very little practical meaning.

Critical participation
Leonie Sandercock provides an ambitious postmodern critique of city plan-
ing. The rational methods that inform government planning in the name
of a greater public interest fail. The powerful and prosperous receive
benefits the weak and poor can only imagine. But unlike Scott, who ties
the power of knowledge to the power of the state, Sandercock explores fissures
in the relationship between knowledge and authority. She studies seven examples of insurgent practices that she contends offer hopeful examples of local democratic resistance and innovative social mobilization directed at community improvement (Sandercock, 1998).

Against the long standing planning ideal of a unified public interest, Sandercock proposes a civic ideal of a multiple or heterogeneous public. Practically, this means giving democratic voice to the many different groups and interests in a society, relying on an overarching set of shared principles. Planning should be regarded not simply as an instrument of the state, but as a tool for social mobilization and the practical articulation of new civic ideals. Instead of expanding the rational ties of the global marketplace, planning rationality should emphasize forms of reasoning tied to local experience, face to face dialog, hands on experimentation and active engagement. She insists that nonverbal forms of learning as well as contemplative knowing be included as well. The good plans, the insurgent, democratic plans, inspire dialog, conduct active hands on learning with those individuals and groups who will most likely live with the consequences. Sandercock is no less critical than Scott, but she focuses that criticism on purposes tied to current practice.

4. Plan competence: does the plan improve professional planning practice?

The conventions that professionals bring to the plan making task will include the mandates, regulations, procedures and tools of their craft. These are described and cataloged in Planning Advisory Service reports prepared by the American Planning Association, planning legislation, the conventions of professional practice and a variety of manuals, guides and reference texts. Each planner, however, adopts the knowledge and criteria within their own particular practice. As planners make judgments about the elements of the plan they do more than just follow instructions and guidelines. They select and compare the meaning and value of different planning elements as they compose the plan. The final written form may resemble the framework imposed by mandate or other requirements, but this resemblance does not necessarily mirror the preceding thought and activity actually used to make the plan. I use the word craft here to suggest that the quality of plan making includes activities that cannot currently be identified and isolated with sufficient precision to enable routine independent performance. Plan making, unlike some computerized regulatory planning tasks, cannot be easily rationalized into specialized chunks done by non-professional clerks. When planners write, draw and calculate they compose a narrative, make arguments and envision relationships that speak to particular audiences. These audiences include the authority associated with a plan mandate, but also include a diverse audience of potential critics, colleagues, citizens, officials, and most important, oneself. The plan maker
anticipates the expectations and judgment of these audiences. This distinction provides a much richer conception of plan assessment than Baer considers. When we make plans we make judgments about the adequacy, merit, fit, feasibility and rationality of the document in relation to a variety of audiences (Mandelbaum, 1991).

Planning incompetence

Social psychologist Dietrich Dorner uses computer simulation games to test planning competence. Assigned planning roles, participants make choices among a list of possible choices and then use calculated computer feedback to assess the impacts their choices have on the modeled relationships. For instance, one simulation requires participants to plan and manage resources for a rural community of herds-people in a third world setting. Another has participants enact the role of mayor influencing a variety of policy and program choices for a mid-sized city. The simulations test for competent planning judgment in the face of controlled complexity.

Dorner studied not only outcomes, but also how participants conduct their inquiry. Ineffective participants tend to make few decisions, focus on a single goal and set effects, fail to make and test hypotheses, fail to follow up on insights and issue commands while avoiding responsibility. They act in a narrowly rational fashion. In the words of planning analyst Donald Schon, the participants improperly frame problems. They mistakenly elevate their familiar, rational expertise at the expense of a more complex and open-ended learning (Dorner, 1996: 34). The emotional and political demands of planning practice often encourage planning practitioners to adopt familiar rationales that promise more than they can deliver (e.g. zoning) (Baum, 1983, 1987; Hoch, 1988).

Planning competence

Dorner lays out a pragmatic version of the rational model as the appropriate way to cope with complex uncertainty. However, he uses the model not as an ideal type, but a practical guide for assessing the quality of judgments made in complex situations. Effective participants tend to make frequent decisions, seek out causal and systemic links, offer and test hypotheses, follow up on hunches and take responsibility for errors. They use pragmatic inquiry for comprehending a complex, changing and obscure situation. Dorner, a social psychologist, provides evidence for a pragmatic versus rational planning.

Planning researchers have long studied what planners do (Dalton, 1989). Recent research on planning practice, whether autobiographical accounts (Jacobs, 1978; Krumholz and Forester, 1989), case studies (Baum, 1998; Flyvberg, 1998; Grant, 1994; Healey, 1997a; Throgmorton, 1996) or interviews (Baum, 1983, 1987; Hoch, 1994; Krumholz and Clavel, 1994; McClen- don and Quay, 1988) evaluate planners, favoring those who demonstrate political savvy, moral sensitivity and active learning. The meaning of good
practice comes to us in the details of practical conduct carried out in a specific context. Ironically, the good planners are not necessarily those whose efforts mobilize great power or who achieve stunning success. Good planners in these accounts foster useful planning deliberations that challenge misleading, unjust or otherwise destructive preconceptions. The good planners find ways to make judgments using practical democratic intelligence sensitive to future consequences.

A pragmatic sensibility

We often evaluate plans like blind men studying an elephant because we elevate the rationality that abstracts from the complex contexts and multiple purposes that accompany plans to serve as the proper framework for judgment. A pragmatic approach helps us find ways to compensate for the limits of our rational blindness and fixed position. Pragmatism does not provide a miraculous cure, but modest practical steps for recognizing and assimilating differences. Many years ago in his book, The Reflective Practitioner, Donald Schon (1983) made the case for reflection in action. He reminded us that judgment uses knowledge in action. We learn to do things in a different way than we learn about how the same things work or why doing those things matters. Professional planners use knowledge all the time to resolve problems enough to satisfy officials, superiors and citizens. But when the planners encounter problems that do not lend themselves to their tacit knowledge, they may pause and think about their current knowledge. Schon does not expect planners to use rational analysis at such moments (whether market or class analysis), but a kind of pragmatic inquiry that generates new metaphors to bind together the confusing and troubling aspects of inquiry.

He describes the case of engineers at MIT trying to design a synthetic brush that would lay paint as effectively as a horsehair brush. In the midst of their evaluation efforts, one of the engineers stopped thinking about the structural properties of the materials and considered how painters used brushes. Instead of analyzing the effectiveness of the brush as a conduit he imagined its usefulness as a pump. Painters pump a brush to control the flow of paint. Once equipped with this metaphor the engineers reframed the problem and set off a new round of more successful tests.

We use the concept of evaluation in many different ways to help us negotiate the complex ambiguities and uncertainties people face making judgments about plans. The pragmatic attention to the consequences of use uncovers and invents an intricate web of meanings. The pragmatic insight provides a vocabulary that turns attention away from the pursuit of a rational order outside practice. James Throgmorton (1996) uses the metaphor of a web to describe the relationships among advocates, analysts and clients in the use of argument. We do not make meaning unilaterally,
but through a network of interconnected filaments that bind us to one another. In one sense this metaphor reflects the inescapable inter-connection of language. We strive to invent new metaphors that push the margins of conventional comprehension (e.g. sustainability or deep ecology).

**Turning Rationality into rationality**

A pragmatic rendering of Baer's four types of evaluation would soften the edges emphasizing continuity and similarity rather than detachment and difference. When we evaluate plans our judgments do differ as we select alternatives, compare consequences, conduct critiques or assess competence. But these ideas flow less from the logic of rational method and more from fitting purposes to context, helping blind persons learn to speak to one another. A pragmatic viewpoint encourages us to refine our practical reasoning critically and contextually, but without the confinement of rational precision, fit, principle and expertise. So how do we judge a good plan pragmatically? Consider what a pragmatic approach brings to each type of plan evaluation:

1. Plausibility versus Precision: does the plan include alternatives that show potential consequences vividly and plausibly for the relevant stakeholders?
2. Similarity not Correspondence: do relevant stakeholders use the plan, resist the plan, grudgingly submit or perhaps ignore it altogether? Do people take the plan to heart and remake their lives in terms of its purposes?
3. Consensus versus Principle: did the plan propose or otherwise inspire consensus building measures that relevant stakeholders used to improve deliberations about plan policies, options or outcomes?
4. Stewardship versus Expertise: do the plan makers make their intentions known in ways that anticipate and include shared responsibility for plan consequences?

**1. Selecting alternatives: Plausibility versus Precision**

What do planners do when they cook up new planning alternatives? How do they make good plan alternatives? How do planners compose plausible alternatives from among a vast array of possibilities? Consider how popular TV detectives conduct their investigations. They do not move from general principles to the particular, but construct and compare plausible accounts of how each suspect might have committed the murder. Hilda Blanco (1994) argues that planners use a similar kind of thinking when they plan. Planners usually face problems with geographically unique and historically
contingent properties that defy the limits of rational analytic inquiry. Planners do not analyze so much as imagine how general goals apply to more specific, practical policies and projects. They do not compose plans deductively or inductively, but (and here Blanco uses ideas from pragmatic philosopher, Charles Pierce) abductively. Planners offer plausible interpretations of what goals mean in specific situations.3

The wicked problems so common to planning and so difficult to handle with induction or deduction can be abducted. Planners propose plans that offer new institutional relationships or a new way of life. They design plausible yet ideal arrangements that readers or viewers can use to re-describe and re-imagine the current activities that accompany the problem. The pragmatic deployment of abduction renders rational what analysis casts aside. The tools of technical and instrumental rationalists work well where certainty and agreement are great. Planning offers a vocabulary for tackling messy and disagreeable situations. It trades off certainty for relevance. Offering people plausible alternatives to settled but problematic ways of life will not prove anything about causality or structure. We can analyze plans and planning, but should beware relying on analysis alone to plan or evaluate plans. The criteria we use to judge the effectiveness of a plan should attend to the diversity of meanings associated with the consequences of the plan. A pragmatic approach anticipates these meanings from the moment planning gets underway.

Consider what this means for planners as they discuss the merits of different plan alternatives. All the varieties of human communication and comprehension: storytelling, reasoning by analogy, debate, persuasive argumentation, drawing, and so on now count as legitimate tools for rational inquiry. The authority and legitimacy of a pragmatic evaluation of plan alternatives depend less on the deployment of a rigorous and narrow analysis and more on the use of a forgiving and robust narrative. Practitioners frequently recognize the wisdom of such evaluations, but then deny the validity and rationality of their judgments because the activities that make their practical inquiry meaningful do not fit the vocabulary of Rational analysis. The arguments they construct, the stories they tell and the drawings they make appear soft compared to the hard precision of scientific analysis. But considered from a pragmatic viewpoint, these efforts appear quite reasonable. Furthermore, the demands of relevance and contextual fit impose demanding evaluation criteria. They are hard to do well. They just do not require the use of detached objective analysis.

2. Evaluating consequences: Similarity not Correspondence

When we judge how well a plan is followed we anticipate correspondence between blueprint and product. We use models to identify relationships and assign criteria to test the fit. For instance, we use ideas about utility and markets to describe the relative costs and benefits of a proposed project.
Typically, we calibrate the model to assess how well it predicts relevant consequences of current relationships using historic data. Then we apply the model to expected or planned future relationships measuring the likely relationships. We analyze trends. Daily weather forecasts offer a widespread example of this type of evaluation. The forecasters use meteorological data from previous days to estimate future behavior. Short run forecasts prove much more reliable than long term because the complex relationships that compose weather violate short run trends. Interestingly, the reliability of forecasts tends to be scale dependent. The more geographically and temporally inclusive the outlook, the more reliable the forecast. Ironically, the value of such grand forecasting diminishes for those who hope to put the forecast to practical use. We want to know what the weather will be like in our own community next week in order to prepare for our planned trip. But the model cannot answer this problem. These models work best where the uncertainty associated with the modeled relationships remains relatively stable and scale invariant. These conditions are not common for urban planning problems that involve, like the weather, increasing uncertainty as the frame shifts from the regional to the local.4

Models represent a prosaic, specialized variety of metaphor. Planners use more robust and less precise metaphors to bind purpose and practice. They leave behind the clarity of the blueprint. Instead of seeking correspondence they pursue coherence. The mechanical, ecological or cybernetic metaphors inform images, descriptions and narratives that illustrate how multiple seemingly antagonistic goals and desires might cohere together. Looking back, after the fact, we model relationships that make what happened an obvious and perhaps inevitable fit. Looking forward the same logical reasoning proves frustratingly dogmatic. We use metaphor to reach towards our future.

Metaphor – evocative similarity – fuses an unfamiliar but useful juxtaposition into a new habit of practical judgment. Robust metaphors are scale invariant. We use them to describe collective and individual action at both large and small scales. Sustainability has now become a central concept in planning parlance. For years resource management and environmental assessment coexisted as parallel enterprises accommodating one another from afar. Each tradition described the same set of development relationships in overlapping yet distinct terms. The experience of continuous effort common to many human endeavors is mapped onto the relationship between the natural and the human. Such a mapping would have proven much less popular without the practical groundwork laid by environmental reformers, movement activists, planning innovators and so forth. How the shift to sustainability occurred requires careful study and analysis. My point is that the sustainability concept currently bonds human development and environmental protection together in a new and useful manner. How useful? Well, planners can use the concept to discuss site specific water retention, as well as region wide flood management issues. The concept
leads us to identify and assess at each scale the interdependencies whose damage or repair might increase or decrease the symbiotic relationship between human and natural environments.

3. Serving the public good: Consensus versus Principle

Planners seldom work solely on their own – lone scientist in a laboratory or solitary artist in studio. Planners work with others in a variety of organizational settings. Planning judgments with meaningful authority must speak to a diverse assortment of institutional and organizational members: elected representatives, agency officials, neighborhood residents, community activists, business lobbyists, developers, and so forth. A pragmatic approach not only includes these purposes and interests when selecting and comparing options, but also anticipates a wider democratic consensus. Planners rarely bring matters to a close like researchers announcing the results of an experiment or politicians taking a vote. But planners can foster activities that encourage decisive deliberations among the diverse assortment of antagonists and allies. A pragmatic outlook supports public deliberations about a plan, not as civic window dressing for professional expertise, but a crucial source of practical comprehension useful for building consensus (Fox and Miller, 1995).

Planners too often adopt legislative or courtroom mentalities, imagining all forms of democratic activity as a form of adversarial voting or adjudication. Planners present truthful analysis and principled testimony to public representatives divided into factions. Given the close alliance that has developed between government and planning in the last 50 years, this hardly seems surprising. But the emphasis on these arenas of judgment exaggerates the effectiveness of objective analysis as a source of truth in adversarial contests that often shape how the public evaluates plans. Advocacy planners were the first to point out the limits of this approach – that many public goods require planners to choose among them – urging planners to take the side of the weak (Davidoff, 1965; Krumholz and Clavel, 1994). A professionalism that links the authority of expertise with one or another principle prepares planners to take sides when they evaluate plans. Rationality becomes a weapon of objectivity in a polarized political debate. A pragmatic planning tries to avoid adversarial contests by fostering consensus building. Emphasizing negotiation and deliberation may not resolve a dispute, but it can inform, invent and even inspire democratic agreements that prevent and pre-empt adversarial blow outs. When planners consider how well their plans build consensus, they adopt a pragmatic outlook (Healey, 1997a; Innes, 1995; King and Stivers, 1998).
4. Evaluating authorship: Stewardship versus Expertise

Good problem solvers in complex situations, Dietrich Dorner (1996) found, tend to form positive, specific goals clearly and explicitly laid out, identifying contradictory or troubling overlaps. The bad problem solvers adopt negative goals that are vague and general, unclearly identified while relying on implicit assumptions. But rarely did any participant accomplish this all the time in different experimental simulations. Dorner measures differences in how well participants score in the simulations. No one was perfect.

Dorner explores the fuzzy relationship between general and specific goals; what planners often describe as the difference between goals and objectives. Achieving multiple goals requires that people neither form too deep an attachment to a specific decision nor avoid taking any action for fear it will violate a larger goal. Dorner (1996) proposes the awkward phrase, ‘efficiency diversity’. ‘A situation is characterized by efficiency diversity if it offers many different possibilities (“diversities”) for actions that have a high probability of success (“efficiency”). In chess, examples of such situations are control over the center of the board, more men, and strategic placement of pawns’ (p. 53, emphasis in original). This conception of strategic rationality resembles Andreas Faludi’s (1987) consequentialist approach, but without the rationalism. Niraj Verma’s (1998) recent scholarship, following the pragmatist William James, argues that the emphasis on rational analysis detaches planners from purposes and sentiments. Verma not only reminds planners to tie conceptual distinctions to consequences rather than formal logical relations; but he also argues that feelings, beliefs and commitment shape our expectations. Judging the meaning of consequences for the purposes at hand requires attention to the continuity and connections among different experiences. Good evaluation requires that we take relevant feelings and beliefs into account because these mark the attachments that bind purpose and experience (Marris, 1996).

Conclusion

The pragmatic approach reviews the plausibility of plan alternatives, the similarity binding plan and product, the breadth and depth of the consensus the plan informs and the responsibility the plan inspires among those able to follow it. These prudent pragmatic judgments provide theoretical coherence for the practical common sense that wise planners acquire on the job. Instead of promoting an exaggerated distance between the judgments of experts and practitioners, it invites a critical engagement. The pragmatist does not fault the practical side of practitioner judgment, but the tendency among practitioners to stress a combination of occupational (e.g. transportation versus housing, long term versus short term) and disciplinary
(e.g. economics, geography) attachments that unnecessarily reinforce premature conceptual, political and moral convictions.

The pragmatic approach does pose risks. First is the threat of a cynical pragmatism. The cynic shapes purpose to fit context or ends to fit means turning evaluation into a ‘snow job’ or a damning critique. This common practice undermines the legitimacy of a pragmatic approach making it all the more important to reclaim the proper meaning and practice. Second, the pragmatic outlook can serve as justification for a conservative incrementalism where relevance means conformity and similarity translates into sameness. The practical safeguards against either risk do not come so much from improvements in method, as close attention to shared consequences. In a democratic society people can and do monitor plans in just this fashion. Pragmatism provides a vocabulary that can improve the quality of such evaluations, even as cynics and conservatives obscure the view (Harmon, 1995).

Adopting a pragmatic planning outlook will not restore vision to the blind persons standing round the elephant. There are real practical and institutional differences among the diverse standpoints taken when evaluating plans. Fearful owners, powerful developers, prejudiced neighbors, selfish petitioners, and the host of people who inhabit, influence and direct the organization of settlements comprehend and judge plans differently. Instead of trying to tame the contingency and uncertainty of the planning enterprise through a privileged Rational method and professional expertise, we should try to comprehend and organize the different viewpoints and the ambiguity among them by adopting a pragmatic outlook. The pragmatic approach recognizes the inescapable plurality of these differences and then proposes a vocabulary that the blind persons can use to speak to one another as they review together the merits of a plan. It turns methodological competition or disciplinary debate into shared deliberations that use multiple methods and purposes. Theory does not replace the political and moral values with conceptual trump, but invites the use of such values within a democratic arena focused on shared consequences rather than shared assumptions.

Notes

1. Critics of pragmatism do not usually disagree with the pragmatic belief in democracy, but attack the prominence and centrality of this belief. Forester anticipated such criticisms in his earlier work by focusing on planning and power (Forester, 1989). The intellectual sparks fly when pragmatists turn epistemological debates into political debates. Forester faced this criticism in his work. See his article in Society and Space and the ensuing criticism and rejoinder (Forester, 1983; Forester and Roweis, 1983). For a more contemporary example read the debate between myself and Mickey Luria and Marsh Feldman edited by Patsy Healey in the predecessor to this journal (Healey, 1997b).

3. This interpretation of the planning process is precisely what Dewey had in mind in his theory of value. The planning process operationalizes values. It gives meaning to vague and abstract preferences by identifying the conditions under which such preferences can be actualized, and the consequences they are likely to entail. Such a process enables us to make informed judgments about conflicting values and, in itself, provides us with the means to actualize them. Planners, through their plans, essentially engage in the kind of value construction and analysis that Dewey believed would flow from the application of the method of social intelligence. Planning can thus accumulate knowledge on social values through its practice (Blanco, 1994: 162).

4. One of the promising features of GIS is the ability to easily shift the visual representation of geographic relationships at different scales. The traditional land use plan at 1:24,000 exhibits choropleth blobs that at 1:50 become building footprints, lot lines and landscape details familiar to local inhabitants. The increasing ease of scale shifting with computer aided imagery erases technical barriers to assessing the effects of planning policies across scales. This increases the accessibility of the information to a much wider audience of viewers who may grasp the detailed local maps more readily than the more abstract images for an entire region. However, the detailed maps do not so much answer questions as provide an enriched context for interpretation. The arrangement and selection of layers of information introduce the visual equivalent to the multi-attribute analysis using demographic and economic values.

References


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