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The Usefulness of Normative Planning Theories in the Context of Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract The article focuses on three contemporary and better-known normative theories of planning: communicative planning theory (Forester, Healey, Innes and others), the Just City approach (Fainstein), and those concerned with the recognition of diversity and cultural difference (Sandercock). Such theories are of great interest to planners who continue to grapple with the problem of overcoming the extreme forms of inequity, division and social breakdown that persist in the cities of Africa. The article examines some of the central assumptions underlying these theories and considers the extent to which they provide useful direction, or simply attempt to generalize a western context.

Keywords communicative planning, multicultural planning, normative planning theory, Sub-Saharan Africa, urban justice

Introduction

Current normative theories of planning, represented by communicative planning theory (Forester, Healey, Innes and others), the Just City
approach (Fainstein) and those concerned with the recognition of diversity and cultural difference (Sandercock), may be of great interest to planners who continue to grapple with the problem of overcoming the extreme forms of inequity, division and social breakdown which persist in the cities of Sub-Saharan Africa.

This article takes the position that, as planners, we should only proceed on the basis of a thorough understanding of the socio-spatial and political processes which shape the contexts in which we work (see amongst others Huxley and Yiftachel, 2000). It raises the question: given the particular dynamics which currently appear to be shaping many cities in the subcontinent, do these normative theories of planning offer a resource on which planners can draw?

Some justification is required for both the theoretical and contextual focus of this article. I recognize that the three normative planning theories considered here do not exhaust the field. Communicative planning theory (which itself has a number of different strands) is frequently held up as a currently dominant theoretical paradigm (Innes, 1995), although this is almost as frequently contested (Yiftachel and Huxley, 2000). A relatively recent postmodern and cultural-turn scholarship (Storper, 2001) has influenced thinking in a number of disciplines, and Leonie Sandercock’s work is arguably the best known example of the application of this perspective in the planning field (Beauregard, 1998; Storper, 2001). The third example, the Just City approach, represents one position within a much wider normative literature on city form (e.g. Breheny, 1992; Lynch, 1990), but its strong roots in social theory set it apart from other urban form positions and facilitate the examination of the assumptions which underlie it. These three theories together allow reflection on both planning processes and spatial outcomes in the context of Sub-Saharan African cities. I do not suggest that planning practitioners in such cities generally know about these theories or use them (although some certainly do). Rather, the question of their potential usefulness is posed in a largely hypothetical sense, to explore the issue of theoretical universality.

I use the term ‘planning’ in this text to refer to those intentional public actions which impact on the built and natural environment, and which are frequently accompanied by political processes of some kind. Planning is also (and not infrequently) initiated by groups other than formal governments, such as non-governmental and community-based organizations, and sometimes business. I therefore use the term planning in the narrower sense, referring to the activity of urban planning or town planning, while recognizing that planning is now used to describe the activities of a wide variety of actors and professionals. I am aware of the fact that the extent to which urban planning actually takes place within the context of Sub-Saharan Africa is highly variable. In some countries law and order has broken down and little intervention is possible; in other contexts planning systems function and planning initiatives are undertaken (see Diaw et al., 2001),
Although forms of planning differ (strongly influenced by particular colonial histories) and their impact may be highly variable across the city.

Two more qualifications are necessary. The focus of this article is specifically on the cities of Sub-Saharan Africa. The intention is not to negate the importance of the rural areas, nor the linkages that these have with the urban areas. However, the three normative theories under consideration have far greater potential applicability in the urban areas: considering their usefulness in the often very different rural areas would unreasonably stretch expectations of their applicability. Finally, I am aware that the Sub-Saharan continent is highly varied, and that reference to it as an entity borders on dangerous over-generalization. However, there are also important social and political commonalities. African scholar Mahmood Mamdani (1996) has argued cogently that these commonalities, rooted in the colonial history of the subcontinent, legitimate the consideration of Africa as a unit of analysis, and in particular, discount the position of South African ‘exceptionalism’. While care is taken in this article to highlight contextual differences where these have relevance, I proceed on the assumption that some level of generalization is possible.

The article is structured as follows. It first examines a number of assumptions on which the three normative theories of planning are based. It then turns to Sub-Saharan Africa, to sketch the context within which planners operate. The article concludes with some reflections on the value of the three normative planning theories in resource-poor contexts such as this one.

Three normative theories of planning

With the demise of rational scientific planning as the dominant form of planning theory, the space was opened up for the emergence of a range of new theoretical positions, concerned both to explain planning as a phenomenon and to provide ideas for how planning should be conducted, and to what ends. Some of these theorists, influenced by a growing disillusionment with modernist thinking and technocratic planning, were persuaded that social movements in liberal democracies, and the development of civil society more generally, held the key to social transformation. Their new interest in localized and empirical approaches centres on the empowerment of groups outside (and sometimes against) the state. Of these planning theorists, centre-stage is taken by those associated with communicative planning theory. John Forester (1989) and others after him drew inspiration from Habermas to pose communication as the most important element of planning practice. Interaction (with stakeholders or interest groups), communicating ideas, forming arguments, debating differences in understandings, and finally reaching consensus on a course of action replace detached, expert-driven planning as the primary activity of planners. These ideas
are developed in their most sophisticated form by Patsy Healey, who also introduces ‘institutionalism’ as an explanatory theory of social dynamics to inform the normative position of communicative planning.\(^1\) For the purposes of this article, the following aspects of communicative planning theory are important.

Habermas’s thinking is central in this work. With a concern to protect and extend democracy, he conceptualizes the ‘life-world’ (or public sphere) as separate from and outside ‘the system’ of formal economy and government. Within the life-world it is possible for rational and inherently democratic human beings to reach consensus, and coordinate action, through the process of communication (communicative rationality). Here the ‘force of the better argument’ will determine the final validity of a particular position.

Habermas recognizes that communication can be distorted in various ways and puts forward a set of criteria, or discourse ethics, to guide communication processes: if processes are inclusive, empathetic, and open, and if existing power differences between participants can be neutralized, then the outcome of such a process can be considered valid (Habermas, 1990a, 1990b). For communicative planning theorists, this has come to mean that the aim of planning is a just process, and that if the process is just, the outcome will be as well (see Fainstein, 1995).

Communicative planning theorists echo Habermas’s faith in civil society as a source of democracy, and as a vehicle for placing pressure on the state to act more responsibly. Healey refers to the ‘democratic deficit’ (the distance between the state and civil society), and argues that planning ‘... seeks ways of recovering a new participatory realization of democracy and of reconstituting a vigorous, inclusive public realm that can focus the activity of governance according to the concerns of civil society...’ (Healey, 1999: 119).\(^2\) The state, in terms of this position, is therefore downgraded as a role player relative to non-state actors, and civil society is seen as the main standard-bearer of the democratic project.\(^3\)

Habermas’s assumption regarding the consensual nature of discourse in the public sphere is also adopted by communicative planning theorists.\(^4\) While writers in this school do not deny the operation of power, the belief still holds that if communication processes are correctly managed (according to Habermas’s discourse ethics), then it is possible for voluntary but binding agreements to be reached. Basic to their position is the assumption of universal citizenship, where differences between actors occur only at the level of speech or ideas and can be overcome through argumentation. Thus: ‘... the power of dominant discourses can be challenged at the level of dialogue; through the power of knowledgeable, reflective discourse; through good arguments; and through the transformations that come as people learn to understand and respect each other across their differences and conflicts’ (Healey, 1999: 119). Healey refines the idea of universal citizenship further to acknowledge that communicating groups may operate within different ‘systems of meaning’, which means that ‘we see things differently because
words, phrases, expressions, objects, are interpreted differently according to our frame of reference’ (Healey, 1992: 152). The assumption that these differences can be accommodated in a consensus-seeking process remains.

Healey adds two further dimensions to the idea of communicative processes. The first, shared with ‘cultural-turn’ scholars (for example, Escobar, 1994), is the valorization of ‘local knowledge’, referring to ‘items of information that are mapped and interpreted within the sense-making frameworks and purposes of particular social networks’ (Healey, 1999: 116). This is different from ‘expert’ (or sometimes western) knowledge: it consists of common sense and practical reason, proverbs and metaphors, practical skills and routines, and may be spoken or unspoken. A second dimension, related to the first, is that consensus-seeking processes can have an added benefit in that the shared understanding, mutual trust and ‘identity-creation’ which are built up, linger on as new ‘cultural resources’ or ‘cultural capital’ (Healey, 1999: 114), benefiting future planning processes. Also now central in the mainstream development literature, social capital is frequently promoted as a precondition for both economic development and more democratic systems of governance (Mohan and Stokke, 2000). It assumes that such relationships of trust and mutual (economic) interdependence can persist over long periods of time, in particular localities, leading to ‘bottom-up’ processes of development.

The final important aspect of communicative planning theory is its tendency to focus on sub-national levels of government, on individual actors, whether planners or related participants, and on inductive theorizing. To quote Mandelbaum in the introduction to the volume which was a first attempt to define the shape of this new theoretical territory, there is ‘a pervasive interest in the behaviour, values, character and experiences of professional planners at work’, and in the practices of these planners which encompass ‘ways of talking, rituals, implicit protocols, routines, relational strategies, character traits and virtues’ (Mandelbaum, 1996: xviii). In terms of the long-standing structure–agency debate, the pendulum has clearly swung back to agency, and along with it, an interest in the power of local government and local organizations to take forward the idea of democratic planning. This, again, is not out of line with mainstream development thinking with its focus on local economic and political empowerment (Mohan and Stokke, 2000), and with cultural-turn scholarship’s interest in how culture and context shape knowledge and behaviour (Storper, 2001). The assumption is that society can be transformed from the ‘bottom up’, and that just local processes can change the broader distribution of resources and power (Fainstein, 1995). A gain, Healey is sensitive to this issue, and in her own analytical framework draws on Giddens’s theory of structuration to recognize that ‘active agency interacts with constraining structuring dynamics . . . to influence . . . the making and acknowledging of formal rules . . . the deployment of material resources . . . and the frames of reference actors deploy . . .’ (Healey, 1999: 113).
Leonie Sandercock’s theory of planning in multicultural societies (see Sandercock, 1998a, 1998b, 2000) may be regarded as a variant of, or development of, communicative planning theory, although there are some important differences with it. Like the communicative planning theorists Sandercock is strongly influenced by postmodernism and cultural-turn thinking (Storper, 2001). She holds with the notion of civil society as an autonomous site of resistance and social movements as primary agents of change. She places her own work within what she terms a ‘radical planning model’, with roots in advocacy planning, happening most often outside the formal structures of state and economy (Sandercock, 1998b). Her work focuses on agency and ‘the local’, and on the kinds of processes and discourse which shape planning debates. As Beauregard (1998) notes, both communicative planning theorists and multicultural theory shift the emphasis in planning theory from outcomes to process and from consequences to consciousness.

Sandercock’s point of departure lies in her idea of what constitutes citizenship and how this is fragmented by identity, and the role of the planner in relation to this question. As opposed to the idea of universal citizenship, her society is structured by relationships between culturally different groups, based on sexuality, ethnicity, gender or race. This diversity requires to be celebrated rather than repressed: that is, the claims of groups need to be recognized and facilitated. It can be argued here that Sandercock is not just interested in recognizing difference in procedural terms (in order to move towards a more homogeneous or equal society); she is interested in ‘substantive difference’, or affirming a society made up of different groups (Storper, 2001). This is promoting difference for its own sake.

The role of the planner in such a context is to link knowledge to action to empower oppressed and marginalized groups, to resist exploitation and the denial of their authenticity (Beauregard, 1998). However, the legitimacy of such claims is to be judged is not clear: Sandercock values the idea of a socially just city, but argues that this requires a politics of difference. Identity claims must thus be prior to material claims. This means, it would seem, that notions of what constitutes justice may be culturally specific and need to be uncovered through ‘different ways of knowing’ (an epistemology of multiplicity) and hence a different relationship between planner and groups. Her faith in ‘local knowledge’ and the questionable nature of ‘expert knowledge’ parallels Healey’s here. Assumptions regarding the possibility of reaching consensus are present in Sandercock’s writing as they are in communicative planning theory. The difference with Sandercock, however, is that she is concerned to build consensus between groups (which affirms and valorizes difference rather than erases it), which could take the form of resistance to the state. There is a difference here from communicative planning theorists who sometimes see the aim of a planning process as being to negotiate emotions and differences and arrive at a collective agenda, accommodated by the state (Beauregard, 1998). The issue of power, Foucaultians might argue,
thus remains as problematic in multicultural theory as it does in com- 
 municative planning theory.

With the demise of rational scientific planning, still other theorists drew 
 on the penetration of Marxist thinking into the planning field. From a 
 normative perspective, interest in a form of planning which achieves 
 redistribution, equity and justice informs the work of Susan Fainstein, and 
 in somewhat different form, that of David Harvey. Fainstein’s Just City 
 position is the focus of attention here (see Fainstein, 2000).

Fainstein’s theoretical base in a ‘postmarxist political economy’ (which 
 encompasses a more complex view of social structure and social benefits 
 than was envisioned by material analysis) gives rise to a number of com-
 monalities between her position and those discussed above. She, like 
 Sandercock, holds with a society structured primarily by groups rather 
 than classes, but her concerns are less with a planning which aims to valorize 
 and promote the claims (material and non-material) of these groups, and rather 
 with how such groups can benefit from redistributive planning actions.

Fainstein, along with the communicative planning and multicultural 
 theorists, is also concerned with planning processes and participation. But 
 she is closer to Sandercock in seeing her primary audience as the ‘leader-
 ship of urban social movements’, rather than government which may be 
 neither neutral nor benevolent, and she distances herself from communica-
 tive planning theorists who ‘primarily speak to planners employed by 
 government, calling on them to mediate among diverse interests …’ 
 (Fainstein, 2000: 468). Her faith in the reformatory power of civil society is 
 thus in line with other postmodern normative thinkers, and with neo-liberal 
 development theorists as well. She does, however, concede that certain indi-
 viduals within the state (progressive officials and ‘guerrillas in the bureau-
 cracy’) may act in the interests of marginalized groups, leaving the question 
 of whether or not to engage with the state presumably dependent on 
 particular circumstances.

Fainstein is more cautious than Sandercock in terms of accepting the 
 validity of all group claims, and recognizes that some claims can be highly 
 non-democratic. For this reason she is insistent that claims cannot be judged 
 by procedural rules alone. Just processes do not necessarily result in just 
 outcomes, as Habermas would have it. Hence the ‘substantive content’, or 
 the impacts of decisions, have to be judged as well for their impact on equity 
 and democracy.

The question this raises of course, is how do redistribution and equitable 
 planning occur, and who is to judge claims, if government is not to be trusted 
 and if progressive officials do not exist. Fainstein’s (2000) vision of the Just 
 City requires a state that is both entrepreneurial and provides welfare (p. 
 468), and assumes a capitalist world economy and a commitment to econ-
 omic growth. But as her theory downplays government in the planning 
 process, and as her arguments are addressed primarily to groups outside of 
 the state, it is not clear how this would happen other than through luck or
accident. Sandercock is somewhat clearer here: she throws in her lot with marginalized and oppressed groups and relies on their pressure to win gains from the state.

Where the Just City position departs significantly from the other normative planning theories is in terms of its concern with substantive spatial planning outcomes, as well as processes, and the distributive impacts that different spatial forms may imply. Fainstein’s inspiration for a spatially Just City is Amsterdam with its physical diversity, high density and socially and economically mixed residential areas. This spatial form is accompanied by, and has benefited from, a welfare state, a strong civil society and public ownership of land. Fainstein makes connections here to the spatial tradition of new urbanism (of which she is also somewhat critical).

There is a growing literature which would support Fainstein’s argument that spatial forms have different distributive (and environmental) implications (see for example Jenks and Burgess, 2000), and points to the negative social and economic impacts of spatial exclusion in cities (Borja and Castells, 1997). While it would seem to be important for a normative planning theory to articulate a position on a central substantive issue such as this, attempts to universalize a particular spatial form worry many other planning theorists. David Harvey (2000: 196) is unhappy about what he calls spatial form utopianism, because it treats space as a container for social action, and usually confines utopianism to the scale of the city. His own normative position, also inspired by goals of justice and equity, is expressed in a set of ‘rights’, one of which is the ‘right to reconstruct spatial relations. . .in ways which turn space from an absolute framework of action into a more malleable relative and relational aspect of social life’ (Harvey, 2000: 251).

The article now turns to the context of Africa to sketch the nature of issues confronted by planning.

What is happening to Sub-Saharan Africa?

There is a high degree of consensus in the development literature that the problems faced by Africa (and particularly Sub-Saharan Africa) are more extreme than elsewhere in the Developing World or the South. Chabal (1996) identifies four dimensions of this crisis: economic decline, political instability, ‘re-traditionalisation’, and the marginalization of Africa.

The economic crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa is severe: economies today are generally in a worse state than they were at independence. Even World Bank functionaries, usually inclined to ‘talk up’ development in Africa, now agree that descriptions of its economic performance as ‘tragic’ and of ‘crisis proportions’ are ‘not exaggerations’ (Elbadawi and Mwega, 2000: 415). The mean annual growth rate of real GDP per capita has declined steadily since the 1970s (Elbadawi and Mwega, 2000) with the result that of the 500 million people in Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 300 million are living in
absolute poverty, and these numbers are growing (World Bank, 2001). Moreover, extremely high levels of HIV/AIDS (68 percent of the world’s population living with HIV/AIDS are in Africa, with 3.8 million new infections occurring in 1999 alone – Aids Analysis Africa, 2000) are a major factor undermining possibilities of economic recovery.

Economic decline has been paralleled by political crisis, manifesting itself in warfare, endemic violence and state collapse. Sub-Saharan Africa has a higher incidence of civil war than any other part of the world with 40 percent of these countries having experienced civil war in the last 40 years (Elbadawi and Sambanis, 2000). Writers (see A llen, 1999) are now also pointing to new forms of violence on the continent, taking the forms of more frequent and widespread civil wars; dramatic increases in interpersonal violence linked to crime, and the breakdown of civility and respect for law; war-lordism; community-level conflicts often involving the seizure of food or other resources; ethnic conflicts; child slavery; and violence which targets vulnerable groups such as women, children and refugees.

Chabal (1996) is cautious when referring to what he calls ‘re-traditionalisation’ in Africa, described as a revival of age-old traditions and cultural practices. Seen in its own terms, Chabal argues, it must be understood as tied to questions of identity and adjustment (or resistance) to the particular economic and political circumstances sweeping the continent. Examples of re-traditionalization are to be found in the endurance of sorcery and witchcraft; the revival of African religion and the traditionalization of Christian churches in Africa; the persistence of ethnicity and the increased channelling of violence along ethnic lines; the dominant role played by kinship networks; the persistence of exchange and trade rather than a shift to productive investment, and an overwhelming ‘informalization’ of urban economies; and the apparent failure of ‘modern’ (liberal or socialist) politics in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Chabal (1996) points finally to the perception that Sub-Saharan Africa has become irrelevant in world terms, particularly from an economic and political point of view. Hopes that economic problems may be overcome by the opening up of African economies and greater exposure to foreign investment flows have not borne fruit. Africa now accounts for no more than 4–6 percent of net global direct investment (Simon, 1997) and most of this goes to Nigeria and South Africa. Africa is thus largely being bypassed by foreign private investment, and this is coinciding with dramatic decreases in aid financing as well: official aid flows fell by 48 percent in the 10 years to 1996 (Bush and Szeftel, 1998). Added to this is the ‘grotesque charade’ of Africa’s foreign debt, recently the highest in the world as a proportion of GDP (Leys, 1994), with some countries spending over half their foreign earnings on debt servicing.

Attempts to explain the African situation have emerged, over time, from the modernists, from various Marxist and dependency schools, and more recently from those who take a ‘cultural turn’, privileging explanations.
rooted in the specificities of political culture. There is also a productive body of policy-related work. While there is a notable lack of consensus between these various explanatory and prescriptive positions, together they do help to throw light on those aspects of economy and society that are relevant for considering the value of the three normative planning theories.

Civil society and the state in Sub-Saharan Africa

A number of authors, from various positions, have questioned conceptions of civil society in Sub-Saharan Africa and have drawn attention to the ways in which it differs from notions of civil society in western contexts.

How civil society is conceptualized depends to a large extent on the definition of it that is used. Allen (1997) points to the way in which earlier definitions of the concept, which saw it as a process by which society seeks to ‘breach’ and counteract the simultaneous ‘totalisation’ unleashed by the state (Bayart, cited in A llen, 1997), have given way, in the development literature in particular, to a focus on the actors responsible for such a process. Allen terms this the ‘associational life’ view of civil society, which is based on the assumptions that NGOs (non-governmental organizations) and ‘autonomous societal groups’ are a significant part of civil society, that they are distinct from the state and often in conflict with it, and that they drive democratization. Civil society is thus viewed as a category, separate from the state, which can be created or improved, rather than something that emerges spontaneously (A llen, 1997; Mcilwaine, 1998). This conception has been operationalized in an analytical sense: writers point to the massive growth of NGOs and social movements in developing countries in recent years as evidence of a growing and flourishing civil society; and in a prescriptive sense: neo-liberal development theory links market liberalization and ‘community enablement’ with strategies to reduce the role of governments in developing contexts and to channel aid funds to NGOs instead (Burgess et al., 1997). The question remains, however, can the growth of NGOs, and grassroots social and political movements, be taken as an indication of the development of civil society and democratization?

Given the relative weakness of indigenous social movements in Sub-Saharan Africa (Crush, 1996), NGOs have been viewed by development agencies and donor organizations as central vehicles for development and change. However, in reporting on an extensive evaluation of ‘northern’ NGOs (those funded and usually staffed by western donors) in Africa, Marcussen (1996) points to some major weaknesses in NGO performance. Many have taken a ‘top-down’ approach, and have exhibited a general failure to reach the very poor and foster sustainable economic benefit. NGOs have been described as ‘bastions of development’ focusing on small enclaves and lacking the ability to up-scale their activities or replicate them. Of particular concern is their tendency to see the state as part of the
problem and to try and bypass it, leading to direct competition and conflict with the state, particularly over funding and human resources. This in turn further weakens governments and prevents development ideas from being permanently institutionalized at a broader scale. Marcussen (1996: 420) makes the point that in the western world the development of civil society occurred organically and in cooperation with government, not in conflict with it. In Africa it has become an artificial and externally driven process orchestrated by organizations whose sphere of influence, relative to the scale of problems, is minor, and whose lifespan (and funding) is unpredictable.

Some writers (particularly those interested in political transition) celebrate a post-1990s ‘international momentum of democracy’ (Diamond, cited in Bartlett, 2000) characterized by the overthrow of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe and developing countries and the emergence of a vigorous civil society. In Africa there have been numerous cases in recent years in which one-party governments have been overthrown and replaced by multi-party and ‘democratic’ political systems. But tracking the results of these political transitions leads a number of researchers to conclude that they should not be simply equated with the establishment of either democracy or civil society. ‘Older political logics’ do not simply disappear because authoritarian regimes have been challenged (Bartlett, 2000). In the case of Zambia (argued by Bartlett to be typical), historically determined social and political conditions permitted the emergence of a dominant group able to exclude major elements of civil society and allow the resurfacing of corruption, nepotism and ‘spoils politics’. Or, as expressed by the then Zambian Minister of Foreign Affairs: ‘If I do not appoint people from my own region, who will?’. Bartlett (2000: 445) concludes that ‘the existence of a wide range of civil organizations gives no guarantee that any will articulate norms which further the development of a tolerant or participatory public arena’.

From a wide-ranging review of the literature on social movements in developing countries Walton (1998) finds evidence to support such conclusions. Despite the growth of social movements and moves to democratization, he suggests that participation is still mediated more typically by patron-client relations rather than by popular activism. In the context of Africa, De Boeck (1996: 93) makes the point that understood dichotomies such as state/society or legal/illegal no longer capture reality. In an ‘increasingly “exotic”, complex and chaotic world that seems to announce the end of social life and the societal fabric as most of us know it’, the state is but one (often weaker) locus of authority along with traditional chiefs, warlords and mafias. Definitions of legal and illegal constantly shift depending on which groups are exerting power at the time. It is a mistake in Africa, Aina (1997: 418) argues, to assume that the relationship of civil society to the democratization process is always progressive, in fact there are often strong conservative trends.
Identity

The issues of group difference and identity are increasingly occupying the attention of writers on Africa. Here the point is repeatedly made that political struggles in Africa are far less like the identity/lifestyle politics which have become so visible in developed contexts and are far more likely to be reactive to material issues and the simple need for survival (Mohan, 1997). This has led Mohan to argue that identity is not a useful starting point in understanding political struggles in Africa, or at least it may require a more complete understanding of the relations between materiality and identity.

In the context of the discussion above on the nature of the state and civil society, a number of authors highlight the extremely complex and fluid nature of identity in Africa. Social and economic collapse and turmoil leave many people with little sense of belonging (a process, some argue, which began with colonial penetration) or little idea of who represents them. One way out of this is to use identity in a highly opportunistic way:

...depending on the situation, sometimes religion, sometimes ethnicity may prove to be the determining factor in an individual’s identity and behaviour. The organisational versatility of the orders that has made them the primary modes of organisation vis a vis the state lies in their capacity to adapt to this ambiguity, and even capitalise on it. . . . (Leonardo Villalon, cited in O'Brien, 1996: 63)

Thus identity in Africa is often a product of hybridization, fusion and cultural innovation. It is frequently self-generated and self-constructed, sometimes with a renewed stress on ethnic identity or ‘retribalization’, sometimes intertwined with global identities (De Boeck, 1996). Currently religious commitment offers many young people a way of escaping from social marginalization, and O’Brien (1996: 64) comments that Christian missions are the biggest single industry in Africa today. Students are often in the vanguard of liberation movements, but their role is ambivalent, and may be related more closely to the desire to gain access to government jobs and membership of the ruling elite than to secure democracy. The political impulse of the crowd is above all economically motivated (O’Brien, 1996).

The ‘dark side’ of identity construction in Sub-Saharan Africa perhaps has more in common with other contexts. Identity defines elements of similarity, and simultaneously of difference – of ‘the other’. Where the state is weak, social cohesion fragile, and competition for resources desperate, social divisions can, and do, all too easily degenerate into the horrors of ethnic cleansing and genocide.
The economy and informalization

The most striking aspect of Sub-Saharan African economies over the recent past is their growing ‘informalization’. As economies have been opened up to global processes of trade (primarily as a result of structural adjustment policies) and domestic manufacture has been decimated, as the world terms of trade have continued to move against primary producers, and as the state, often one of the largest providers of formal employment, has been cut back, people have had to find ways of survival outside of the formal economy. They have moved in large numbers into self-employment (both legal and illegal) or casual wage employment, or have found it necessary to supplement formal wages with informal income-generating activities. In 1992 the ILO was estimating that 63 percent of the total urban labour force of Sub-Saharan Africa was in informal employment, and that this sector would be generating 93 percent of all additional jobs in urban Africa in the 1990s (Rogerson, 1997).

While a heterogeneity of work opportunities is sometimes regarded as inevitable in the new global economy, and while the growing informal sector is sometimes portrayed as a positive sign of entrepreneurialism by neo-liberal policy advocates, the particular nature of informalization in Africa has to be read as predominantly a survival strategy. Most informal activity is in the realm of trade, with little evidence that ‘incubating’, productive, micro-enterprises are emerging to secure a place in the world (or even regional) economy. Most activities provide few extra jobs and many of these provide low and irregular incomes under very poor working conditions. Most activities themselves are of a ‘survivalist’ nature, involving little investment, few skills and minimal profit.

These processes have obvious implications in terms of high levels of poverty, inequality and insecurity, but they have implications for other aspects of social and political life as well. In a context of shrinking economies, competition becomes intensified, promoting the need both to draw on a wide range of networks (familial, religious, ethnic, etc.) and to continually manoeuvre, negotiate and protect the spaces of opportunity which have been created (Simone, 2000). Intensified competition, Simone argues, means that economic and political processes of all kinds become open for negotiation and informalization. Networks with the state become particularly valuable, both in negotiating preferential access to resources and in avoiding control and regulation, with the result that, increasingly, ‘...public institutions are seen not as public but the domain of specific interest groups, and indeed they become sites for private accumulation and advantage’ (Simone, 2000: 7). The relationship between state and citizens, and between formal and informal actors, thus becomes under-codified and under-regulated, dependent on complex processes of alliance making and deal breaking, and particularly resistant to reconfiguring through policy instruments and external interventions.
Cities in Sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa, with only 31 percent of its population in urban areas, is the least urbanized region in the world (Simon, 1997), and there are few very large cities. A significant feature is the strong urban-rural ties which still exist, and which keep many people in perpetual motion between urban and rural bases. This strategy of spatially ‘stretching the household’ (Spiegel et al., 1996) functions as an economic and social safety net, allowing access to constantly shifting economic opportunities as well as maintaining kinship and other networks. As survival in the cities becomes increasingly precarious, rural resources assume greater importance and rural survival strategies begin to penetrate the urban areas – the ‘ruralization’ of the cities (in terms of productive activities and ways of life) is a term increasingly used to describe changes in cities in Africa (De Boeck, 1996). Economic decline has also precipitated more general movement across Africa in search of opportunity. The large-scale (often illegal) movement of people back and forth across the continent, trading drugs and curios, is evidence of this. One implication of this phenomenon is that conceptualizing cities as self-contained entities that can be planned and managed accordingly (as has been the case with past planning efforts in African cities) becomes obviously questionable; another is that the commitment of people to particular urban locales (and what happens in them) becomes more tenuous. As Simone (1999) suggests: connections between social and physical space become progressively disjoined, and frameworks for identity formation and networks are spread across regions and nations, rather than being rooted in specific locations.

Within many cities, highly differentiated patterns of access to resources are reflected in growing spatial divisions between a well-connected elite and the larger mass of the poor. Most African cities developed a formal, well-serviced business and residential ‘core’ which housed first the colonial masters and subsequently the local political and commercial elite and foreign investors. Many cities also display attempts from the post-colonial period to provide working-class housing in the form of apartments and low-cost site-and-services schemes. In subsequent years, declining state capacity to deliver urban services or regulate the urban environment, together with a rapidly growing urban poor, has resulted in an extensive informalization of the urban fabric and use of urban land. With growing levels of crime, those with wealth barricade themselves into high-security enclaves and carefully choose their movement routes to avoid car hijackings. These parts of the city remain, to varying degrees, well serviced and regulated. Beyond these areas, services are degraded or non-existent, shelters are makeshift, and land occupation and use are unregulated (and frequently highly contested). This does not mean that the organization of these areas is haphazard: Simone (1998) comments that it is difficult to determine where the city begins and ends but also how it is one city, instead
The usefulness of normative planning theories

of hundreds of quarters and neighbourhoods. In most cities, any new private-sector investment that is occurring avoids such areas, and thus exacerbates the divisions between rich and poor. Even in Cape Town, where the extent of informal and unregulated settlement is far less than in most other cities, the spatial divisions entrenched by apartheid are now being reinforced by the pattern of new investment which confines itself to the wealthier, better serviced and more attractive parts of the city (Turok and Watson, 2001). African cities are thus becoming increasingly inequitable in terms of their spatial organization, with the poor excluded spatially and socially from access to the few formal opportunities that cities do have to offer.

In essence, in many cities of the subcontinent, the ‘reach’ of formal institutions of state authority (and hence of systems of maintaining law and order) is only partial, and there are large parts of many cities which must be considered ‘ungoverned’. Here alternative sources of authority (tribal chiefs, warlords and drug lords) hold sway and resist attempts by the state to trespass on their territories. Even in Cape Town, certain of the ‘coloured’ townships are controlled by gangs (linked to international drug-trade routes) to the extent that they have, at times, taken over from the municipality the allocation of public housing units and the collection of rents. In another example, municipal attempts to initiate an upgrade of an informal settlement in Cape Town were resisted by local warlords with links to sources of tribal authority in the rural areas, as it would have removed their main source of income, which was ‘protection’ money from shack dwellers (Municipality of Cape Town, 1998). Other cities in Sub-Saharan Africa are a long way further down this path of reluctant power sharing.

Using normative planning theories in the cities of Sub-Saharan Africa

Can the three normative planning theories discussed above move forward the debate about planning in Sub-Saharan Africa? Do they offer, at least, a theoretical perspective on the role and positioning of planning in such a context, or do they, as Huxley and Yiftachel (2000: 336) suggest, inappropriately generalize a western context? I argue below that in some respects they offer important insights that planners in Africa will do well to draw from. In other respects, however, they are based on assumptions regarding the nature of the context in which planning occurs which appear not to hold in this part of the world.

The value of current normative planning theories

Given the nature of much past (and present) planning in Sub-Saharan African cities, which has been either weakly state managed, or donor driven
and often sectoral, all three theories usefully draw attention to the importance of civil society-based groups in planning processes, and to the political nature of planning. These theories thus move planning beyond technocratic, corporatist notions, grounded in instrumental rationalism and often insensitive to context. The theories also usefully question the Enlightenment model of the public realm which universalized a white male, European experience, denied others, and imposed the ideal of impartiality on all (Beauregard, 1998). The recognition that there are ‘different voices’ within civil society which represent what may be valid and valuable points of view is vitally important in Africa where societies are anything but homogeneous and where some voices are often repressed by violence or tradition. As Storper (2001: 156) has noted, movements to combat racism and other prejudices, and respect for diversity in general, are probably amongst the most important developments of the 20th century, and in this respect Africa should not be left behind. Sandercock’s position that these differences go beyond speech-level ‘differences in meaning’, and may be rooted in more fundamental cultural differences is also valid: high levels of mobility and turmoil in Africa have resulted in the coexistence of ethnically and culturally diverse groupings with often very different ways of ‘seeing and knowing’.

Aspects of Fainstein’s Just City approach are also very important for thinking about planning in Africa. In a context in which poverty and survival are the central issues for the vast majority of inhabitants, the question of the distributive effects of planning decisions and of particular planned spatial forms is crucial. Unless planning in Sub-Saharan African cities can demonstrate that it is about more than the control of land uses, and has a central role to play in addressing development issues, then it is destined to become even more marginalized than it already is. For this reason Fainstein’s recognition of the role of the political economy in both determining the nature of urban problems, and in shaping the range of possible planning outcomes, is an important correction to the focus on ‘agency’ and on ‘the local’ of the other planning theories. Important, therefore, is her focus on planning at the level of the city as a whole, as opposed to a focus on local group or project initiatives, and how decisions at this wider level set the parameters for more local actions.

Finally all three theories raise useful questions about the project of modernity, evolutionary development theories, and the sense of certainty that pervaded many planning initiatives of the past. In Sub-Saharan Africa, more than in any other part of the ‘south’, the future appears to be one of steady decline, broken by the occasional enclave of development. If and how this situation will ‘bottom out’ is not at all predictable, leaving planning (where it can function) with little useful precedent and with few firm foundations on which to chart a way forward.
Where current normative theories are less useful

In other respects these normative theories are based on assumptions regarding civil society, identity, and the possibilities of ‘bottom up’ development, which are unlikely to hold in the context of large parts of Africa. Just City ideas may also require some modification.

All three normative theories display a faith in the ability of civil society to promote the ideal of democracy, a faith shared by mainstream development theory. This has translated into the promotion of planning processes carried out by organizations based in civil society either in conjunction with local government or, in the case of Sandercock and sometimes Fainstein, entirely outside of government structures. The assumptions here are that organs of civil society are sufficiently organized to be able to: recognize the need for planned intervention; commit themselves to an organized process of planning which is accepted as well by those who will ultimately be affected by action; engage in a process of consensus-seeking which is democratic and equitable; negotiate any processes or outcomes with formal structures of government; mobilize resources and capacities to carry forward decisions; and maintain involvement with processes of implementation.

The highly dysfunctional nature of civil society in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa makes it extremely difficult for such processes to occur. Social or grassroots movements are few, fragile and often tied to ethnic interests, and cannot necessarily be relied on to take forward issues of broader public interest. Externally funded NGOs may be better positioned to take such initiatives but the limitations of these organizations have been noted above (also see Mitlin, 2001). The point has also been made that the linkages between state officials and politicians, and various groupings outside of the state, are complex and often ‘clientelist’ in nature: the notion of an independent civil society bringing pressure to bear on government to act more democratically and equitably is seriously at odds with the reality of much of Africa. Moreover, the possibilities of achieving consensus are undoubtedly more difficult in societies fractured so deeply by ethnicity and so motivated, necessarily, by the objective of survival. The exercise of power as a motivating force is present in all such situations, but can manifest itself more overtly and more negatively under conditions of scarcity and instability. Networks of all kinds operate intensively, but are unlikely to be concerned with the place-bound and long-term issues that usually occupy planning. Populations in constant movement, in constant search of ever-shifting opportunities, are not well positioned to commit themselves to lengthy processes of debate and engagement in localized planning initiatives. Unfortunately the hope of building up localized social capital to draw on in future processes also becomes less likely.

The recognition and celebration of identity, as advocated by Sandercock, also need to be thought about differently, given the continued focus of political struggles in Africa on material rather than lifestyle/identity politics.
Fraser (2000) is concerned with identity politics more generally, but her arguments have relevance for operationalizing this approach in Africa. Her concerns are firstly, that demands for recognition are eclipsing demands for redistribution (in a context of growing economic disparity), and secondly, that the reification of cultural difference is encouraging separatism and intolerance. The results, she argues, are growing inequalities and a sanctioning of the violation of human rights. Identity politics displace struggles for redistribution in two ways. Some positions cast the roots of injustice at the level of discourse (e.g. demeaning representations), rather than at the level of institutional significations and norms. This strips misrecognition of its social-structural underpinnings. Other positions, associated with cultural theory, assume that maldistribution is a secondary effect of misrecognition and that misrecognition should be considered prior to distributional issues. This appears to be Sandercock’s position. Fraser (2000) argues that not only do these positions obscure the real roots of misrecognition, which lie in institutionalized value patterns, but that reification of identity creates a moral pressure for group conformity, obscuring intra-group struggles, such as that around gender.

These ideas suggest that planners, who may be keen to foreground identity issues in the context of Africa, need to proceed with great care. To the extent that they sideline distributional issues, they may exacerbate a central problem in Africa: that of poverty and disparity. There is also the danger of failing to recognize that many expressions of identity in Africa are economically motivated and sometimes opportunistic. Assuming a primacy for identity may have economic consequences that are not entirely predictable or desirable. Perhaps even more important is the tendency in Africa for ethnic identity to form the fault lines for major conflicts, civil wars and genocide. There are indications as well, as Fraser (2000) suggests, that ethnicity covers a multitude of intra-group abuses (female circumcision, child slavery, etc.), affecting particularly the more vulnerable in society. At this point in time, reification of identity in simplistic ways may do more harm than good.

A third area of contention has to do with the focus in planning theories on ‘the local’. Both communicative planning theory and multicultural theory are concerned with local group processes and the role of agency. Local knowledge is valorized, and the concept of social capital becomes important in stimulating a process of ‘bottom-up’ development. In the Just City approach, the broader forces of political economy are recognized, but there is nonetheless the assumption that some kind of equity can be achieved at the level of the individual city.

There is no doubt that, in Africa as elsewhere, ‘the local’ plays an important role in determining processes and outcomes and this recognition is an important corrective to the structural positions of the past. But to marginalize the importance of broader structural forces in Africa’s development would also be a major mistake. While global economic forces are playing an
increasingly important role in the economies of all countries, Africa has been particularly susceptible to shifts in demand and pricing of primary products, its prime generator of foreign exchange. Most African countries are, moreover, influenced fundamentally by structural adjustment policies and aid programmes imposed on them by the World Bank and IMF. Few aspects of African economy and society are left untouched by these policies and programmes, and it has been near impossible for local initiatives to work outside of them. Growing poverty and political instability are in turn important factors underlying the extremely high levels of population mobility experienced within and between African regions. Local populations are thus neither stable nor cohesive, both preconditions, it would seem, for social capital creation,12 bottom-up development initiatives, harmonious group processes and a sustained commitment to planning and implementation processes. For the same reasons, inequities at the level of a single city must be traced to dynamics in the rural areas, to other cities and regions, and, of course, to much wider forces.

The problem with a focus on the local, argue Mohan and Stokke (2000), is that it circumscribes both consciousness and action. If the economic and political base is not rendered problematic, then blame can be simply placed on the inabilities of local groupings or areas to situate themselves correctly in relation to broader forces. This in turn ignores the need for local initiatives to ‘scale up’ or begin to make global alliances.

A fourth area of contention has to do with the kind of urban form promoted by the Just City approach. There is no doubt that the kinds of spatial principles to be found in a city such as Amsterdam (held up by Fainstein as an example of equitable form) come closer to meeting the needs of a poorer population than do the car-oriented, sprawling and ‘monofunctional’ environments promoted by much past planning in African cities. They also begin to address the issue of equity at a city-wide level as well as important environmental considerations (Jenks and Burgess, 2000). It is for exactly these reasons that these spatial ideas (sometimes called the ‘compact city’ model) found their way into urban plans in South Africa in the last decade (Dewar, 2000; Schoonraad, 2000; Todes, 2000; Todes et al., 2000), allowing some conclusions to be drawn about their viability in resource-poor areas.

The approach assumes relatively high levels of state control over land use in order to define and hold an urban edge and control land invasions. While this may be possible in the context of a city such as Cape Town which has less peripheral informal settlement than other South African cities, and valuable commercialized agricultural land beyond the edge, in other cities the curtailment of informal settlement in this way may be highly detrimental to poorer households which survive through complex urban–rural linkages and marginal local employment (Cross, cited in Todes, 2000: 619). The approach also assumes that significant resources are available to develop expensive inner city land and to build housing to high densities, rather than simply provide serviced sites. Few African countries are able to deploy...
housing funds of the magnitude required. The usual planning response, which is to provide very small serviced sites (to both cut costs and maintain densities) has proved highly unpopular, as larger sites are seen as an economic resource which allows sub-letting and sometimes agriculture. Attempts to achieve compact and more equitable cities also find themselves flying in the face of market forces, which are tending to direct private investment into decentralized and defended enclaves (Turok and Watson, 2001), and individual investment into peripheral housing (Bebbington and Bebbington, 2001). In South Africa at least, cities have become less equitable in income terms in the years since apartheid, with growing divisions and barriers between the wealthier and poorer parts of cities. Fainstein’s Just City idea remains an ideal worth striving for, but also seems to be increasingly unrealizable in a context such as this one.

Conclusion

It is not possible to think about planning in Africa outside of the issue of development more generally, not least because positions on planning are inevitably underpinned by assumptions relating to wider economy and society. In this article I indicate a situation in which the development problem is probably more serious than anywhere else. I draw attention particularly to the basic problem of human survival (threatened by AIDS, war and poverty); economic collapse; the inability of governments to represent, regulate or provide; inter-group conflicts of all kinds; cities which are dissolving into desperate factionalism; and the suspension of all moral and legal codes in the struggle to survive. The picture is not homogeneous: there are enclaves of economic success and wealth, and there are democratic social movements and NGOs that are doing positive work. But these seem to be the exception rather than the norm.

Modernism, in either its capitalist or socialist forms, has not served Africa well, or at least very unevenly, and neo-liberal development philosophies promoted through structural adjustment policies have been downright destructive. With no new development paradigm on the horizon, post-modernists and cultural-turn scholars retain a faith in civil society and social movements to build democracy and local economic development. Their vision of society is one of a diversity of groups with different values, interacting via porous frontiers and blurred borders (Storper, 2001). This is a view not incompatible, Storper argues further, with the friendly, consumerist world of neo-liberalism, and one that is equally depoliticizing. Other positions argue for greater control over global financial flows and a stronger role for the state in order to strengthen its welfare functions, a position now also conceded by emerging ‘pragmatic neo-liberalism’ (see Sen, 1999). But as Storper (2001) points out, there is:
... a viable intellectual contest right now to determine what degree of regulation capitalism needs in order to attain a reasonable level of stability and social justice. Current efforts to define the nature and degree of political regulation of capitalism have no credible utopian project attached to them. (p. 161)

In the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, policies to reduce the role and power of central governments, to decentralize them and to privatize public services, have been partly responsible for the slide into inter-ethnic conflict, and welfare and service collapse. Many previous governments were inefficient, over-centralized and corrupt, but ‘rolling back’ the state has been no solution to this. Moreover, in Africa, civil society is generally not cohesive enough or organized enough to carry forward, on its own, either development goals or democratic goals, and a strong civil society is going to require stronger government than now exists. In the same vein, it seems that the globalized economy is not about to bring ‘development’ to Africa and major structural changes (debt relief, massive assistance for AIDS and anti-poverty programmes, preferential terms of trade, etc.) are an essential precondition for any kind of economic revival.

This lends support to a form of planning in which governments play an important role, but are certainly not the only players. As Yiftachel (1995) suggests, the traditional values of planning which have to do with reform and public interest are as important as ever, as long as reformism does not resort to social control and there is a recognition of a heterogeneous public. It lends support to a form of planning that recognizes that ‘the local’ both shapes, and is shaped by, broader structural forces, and that local action on its own will be limited and depoliticizing. And it lends support to a form of planning which acknowledges the material basis of identity struggles, in Africa at least, as well as the complex, fluid and cross-cutting nature of identity issues. This in turn requires planners to be ‘street-wise’ when it comes to processes of negotiation: power will prevail over rationality (Flyvbjerg, 1998b) and will certainly be more evident than harmonious consensus seeking. Finally it recognizes the social and environmental impact of spatial interventions, and the need for these to respond to the particular demands of context, without resorting to simplified importations from very different parts of the world.

Notes

1. Differences exist between communicative planning theorists (see Tewdwr-Jones and Allmendinger, 1998). This article makes primary use of Healey’s work.

2. While this suggests a duality between state and civil society, Healey’s institutionalist approach emphasizes social networks which ‘. . . weave in and out of the formal institutions of government . . . ’ (Healey, 1997: 205).
3. Huxley (2000: 375) points to the potential problem which this raises for planners who are employed by government and are accountable to elected representatives, but who are required to operate in participatory processes and also be directly accountable to ‘a public’. Huxley also points to the unquestioned assumption underlying communicative planning theory that planning is the best institutional framework for fostering participatory democracy.

4. This is one aspect of communicative planning theory that has been strongly criticized (see Flyvbjerg, 1998a; Huxley, 2000; Tewdwr-Jones and A Ilmendinger, 1998)

5. As opposed to Habermas himself who has often been described as a modernist due to his faith in rational processes and the universality of his ideas, and his concept of citizenship.

6. Although she does not disregard the role of political economy, it is downplayed.

7. Beauregard (1998), in comparing the positions of John Forester (a founding communicative planning theorist) and Sandercock, notes that Forester is hesitant about identity politics and wants to de-emphasize difference. Planners are citizens first, and relate to identity secondarily.

8. The problem with this has been well articulated by Graham and Healey (1999).

9. This is not a phenomenon confined to African cities, as Healey (2000) argues.

10. In South African cities these efforts were linked to the apartheid project and the achievement of racially segregated cities. Formal housing and serviced site provision for lower income (black) groups was far more extensive than in other African cities.

11. Critics of communicative planning theory also question the viability of such processes in more stable, economically developed parts of the world (see for example Flyvbjerg, 1998a; Huxley, 2000).

12. The over-riding importance of the local in social capital creation has, anyway, been criticized by those examining the role of broader forces in Putnam’s famous case study (Tarrow, cited in Mohan and Stokke, 2000).

References


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