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# Pragmatic Communicative Action Theory

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## Abstract

Communicative action (CA) theory need not displace the critical insights of social scientists, geographers, and other urban scholars about the processes of social, economic, and political change that shape urban settlements. CA analysts believe we settle differences in research findings and interpretations by studying the consequences these differences produce instead of claiming philosophical trump. In the first part of this article, I summarize and critique the argument that CA theory is unrealistic explaining of how CA analysts care more about relevant consequences than causal certainty. In the second part of the article, taking some conceptual advice from social theorist Jurgen Habermas, I show how CA analysis can combine structural and intentional concepts to revise and integrate the apparent antagonism between comprehensiveness and compromise for planning practice. I conclude that a pragmatic CA provides a useful and critical theory for planning practice that remains open to future challenge and debate.

**Keywords:** *communicative planning; critical realist; comprehensive planning; planning theory; pragmatism*

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In a recent essay, Susan Fainstein (2005) argues for planning theory to more directly address the issue of the "just" city. In making her case, she criticizes CA theory as a process-oriented planning theory that mistakenly focuses attention on superficial talk rather than more consequential structures of power. Several years ago, this journal sponsored a symposium critiquing the communicative turn in planning theory, ideas that Fainstein directly draws on in her essay. In the symposium introduction, Huxley and Yiftachel (2000) compared the ideas of CA analysts against the ideas of critical realists such as themselves. CA planning analysts study what professional planners do (Forester 1989; Healey 1997; Stein and Harper 2003), while critical realists study how planning actually gets done (Fainstein 2001, Flyvberg 1998, Huxley 1997, Yiftachel 1995). Huxley and Yiftachel pose six propositions:

*Exaggerated* CA falsely claims paradigm status for normative ideals (proposition 1).

*Universalist* CA inadvertently justifies the imposition of Western rationality onto other cultures (proposition 2).

The combination of epistemological idealism (proposition 1) and theoretical provincialism (proposition 2) fosters four related theoretical shortcomings:

*Normative* CA gives an exclusively normative account of planning and thereby fails to explain planning as it really exists (proposition 3). Emphasizing ideals and strategies for improved communication does not help us comprehend how planning actually takes place. Understanding requires a more critical analytical and explanatory account of the wide range of institutions and practices shaping urban development.

*Narrow* CA inspires research that focuses exclusively on planning as communication conducted mainly by professional planners and so overlooks plans and planning undertaken by other more powerful institutions and people (proposition 4).

*Provincial* CA exaggerates the importance of professional planning as a guide for urban development and assumes an undeserved theoretical stature justifying the study of what these professionals do (proposition 5). Urban theory drawing on the social sciences provides a more realistic and accurate framework for understanding the causes and reasons for urban development.

*Naïve* CA treats planning as a public policy process that functions independently of larger and more powerful institutional influences, most importantly, the powerful role of the state (proposition 6).

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In part 1 of this article, I argue that the arguments by Fainstein, Huxley, and Yiftachel do not grasp the pragmatic conception of action at the center of theoretical work by Stein and Harper (2003) and Harper and Stein (2006), Forester (1989, 1999, 2000), Verma (1998), and Hoch (1994, 2002) that focuses more on the relevance of consequences than the accuracy of causes. These pragmatic analysts leave behind a philosophical separation between idealism and realism as well as theory and practice that critical realists hope to retain. When CA analysts adopt a pragmatic outlook, they trade philosophical debates about the foundation of knowledge for political debates about the meaning and value of our knowledge for future consequences. This shift makes discussion of theoretical paradigms as foundations irrelevant. What matters instead is knowledge of the differences in the practical social, political, economic, and cultural ideas and conventions people use to make sense of urban development and to justify what they expect to do using this knowledge as a guide for future actions. Plans do not implement a doctrine but conceive responses that we use to anticipate and cope with complex situations.

The purposeful and normative quality of planning is especially well suited to this distinctly pragmatic CA analysis. Pragmatists envision planning, comprehending, and anticipating future consequences produced by the interdependencies and complexities of urban systems focusing attention on the practical possibilities for change among diverse stakeholders and actors. Plans propose and justify action. Philosophical reflection and the social sciences prove less useful for this purpose to the extent their practitioners emphasize explanation and interpretation without identifying problems or recommending changes that attend to future consequences.

In the second part of the article, I briefly trace how pragmatic ideas influenced the work of critical social theorist Jurgen Habermas, making him an attractive candidate for inspiration in the work of John Forester—the most prominent CA planning theorist. I illustrate how planners can use Habermas's ideas to revise and relate seemingly antagonistic concepts of structural comprehensiveness and individual compromise for planning. I emphasize the pragmatic aspects of both Habermas and Forester.

In conclusion, I agree with Fainstein, Huxley, and Yiftachel and other critics as I argue that a pragmatic CA does not displace the critical insights of social scientists, geographers, and other urban scholars about the processes of social, economic, and political change that shape urban settlements. Pragmatists believe we should settle differences in research findings and interpretations by studying the consequences these differences produce instead of claiming foundational trump. Pragmatists envision a planning that selectively adopts and combines ideas and conventions from both liberal and progressive sources for practical reasons. These efforts invite criticism that can include multiple voices, attending and

selecting among these based on practical historical relevance versus epistemological primacy. A pragmatic CA need not apologize for caring about professional planning and planners. Purposeful inquiry conducted among a disciplined band of planning scholars who publicly and critically debate the merits of respective research claims and arguments provides all the ground any pragmatic analyst expects to enjoy.

## ► Part I: A Defense of Pragmatic Communicative Action

In this part of the article, I briefly summarize and respond to each of Huxley and Yiftachel's criticisms of CA analysis. I do not make a case against the value of critical social theory, radical political economy, or other sources of conceptual insight that the critics consider important for understanding urban development. My argument criticizes the philosophical and rhetorical framework they use to justify their approach. In the end, I conclude that critical knowledge about structural injustice and cultural difference can improve the quality of CA analysis. But such complementary insight requires a major shift away from the critical realist belief in epistemological trump—the belief that knowing the truth about structural causes tells us what we need to know to offer useful and powerful planning advice.

### Exaggerated Status and Universalism

Huxley and Yiftachel focus on a provocative quote from Judith Innes (1995), who claimed paradigm status for the communicative approach to planning theory. They argue that CA does not deserve paradigm status (proposition 1). Ironically, Innes's claim was not the product of a systemic literature review and theoretical debate among analysts. She used the paradigm label to describe theoretical beliefs she thought provided a valuable and useful framework for understanding planning. Her statement was less a theoretical conclusion expressing an underlying consensus than a rhetorical challenge in an ongoing debate with proponents of the rational model. Assigning paradigm status, as Huxley and Yiftachel properly note, is premature for planning theory. Besides, no one analyst can properly claim paradigm status for one set of ideas. Paradigm consensus is a collective enterprise. But what did Innes achieve by making such a provocative—if unrealistic—claim? Innes recognized and celebrated the increasing popularity of communicative theory relative to other competitors for intellectual attention among planners.

This rhetorical interpretation of the CA paradigm shifts attention from unproven epistemic supremacy to the contest among competing planning theories for popular uptake

among the planning intelligentsia. Huxley and Yiftachel's portrayal of excessive epistemic dominance imposed by CA proponents in their first proposition loses its critical bite. So too does the criticism in their second proposition that has CA proponents imposing a universal version of rational communication on unsuspecting folks in non-Western societies. Beauregard (1996) understood this social shift in attention in his mildly critical commentary included as part of the Mandelbaum, Mazza, and Burchell planning theory text published a decade ago. How did Huxley and Yiftachel miss the rhetorical meaning of Innes's claim and so treat it literally? They want to hold CA analysts accountable to beliefs about critical realism.

### Idealistic, Narrow, Provincial, and Naive

The four remaining propositions that Huxley and Yiftachel make against CA flow from their realist conception of theory. Huxley and Yiftachel believe that the physical and social world we inhabit exhibits a causal order that our knowledge represents. Theory provides the critical conceptual analysis necessary to comprehend the underlying structure that binds us together in the real world. We test these theories using empirical inquiry that compares how well the causes we conceived match the underlying causal order of economies, states and cities, and the lives of people who live within them. We may individually and collectively modify causal structures, but we cannot subordinate them to the specific moral, psychological, and emotional attachments we each possess.

*CA is idealistic and narrow.* Huxley and Yiftachel make a strong distinction between theory that explains, the kind I just described, and the kind that interprets—the communicative kind. They use theory to describe ideas about the way things exist, while the CA analyst can only describe ideals and values about how things should work (proposition 3). Communicative moralizing proves even less attractive than other liberal varieties of planning theory such as the rational model.<sup>1</sup> Huxley and Yiftachel claim that CA analysts focus empirical inquiry on the ideas, talk, and actions of individual planners (proposition 4). Attention to individual interpretive details, they insist, ignores the institutional and structural causes that shape what planners or planning can actually accomplish. Worse still, instead of conducting planning theory properly by starting with ends and moving in a principled fashion to consider means, the CA analysts treat individual moral conduct as if it could provide moral insight about worthy ends instead of the other way around. Huxley and Yiftachel mockingly insist that we cannot develop a theory of legal justice by studying what lawyers do, and we will do no better in the case of professional planners.<sup>2</sup>

*CA is provincial and naive.* Turning to theoretical content (proposition 5), Huxley and Yiftachel claim that CA analysts conceive planning too narrowly (e.g., what professional urban planners or local planning commissioners do) and too abstractly (e.g., rational deliberations about public decisions). They insist that any theory about planning must draw directly on ideas from cultural, social, political, and geographic theory to critically understand causal effects. Treating planning as a kind of ideal process elevates planning above its actual social role as a minor profession and does not properly locate this profession as an institutional subset within more encompassing cultural, social, political, and geographic relationships. As realists, Huxley and Yiftachel believe planning institutions and practices do not so much cause as mediate the spatial organization of settlements relying heavily on state authority. Attention to the ideas and activities of professional planners overlooks the more fundamental relationships that cause change in urban development plans and policies (proposition 6). Critical social theory provides a crucial resource for comprehending the real sources of urban policy in local state regimes or political coalitions because it uncovers the true causes of change.

### Adopting Pragmatic versus Realist Beliefs

The realists treat beliefs as a kind of window to the real world. The CA pragmatists treat beliefs as action taken to respond to practical problems. The realists look for accuracy, while the CA analysts seek adaptability (Hoch 2002). The basic difference in theoretical outlook leads to very different ideas about planning. The realists focus on beliefs that describe actual causes in the social world that when properly understood will inspire efforts to put this knowledge to practical use. Efficacy of any practical action flows from a vivid comprehension of real social causes. The critical aspect emphasizes a skeptical uncovering of false hopes or ideological beliefs that obscure underlying causes. Critical realists uncover the misleading beliefs of most planning theory and describe the social causes underlying local planning efforts. Plans and planners are not the subjects of change but the objects of change (Fainstein 1997; Flyvberg 1998).

In contrast, pragmatic CA analysts focus on the kinds of beliefs about the world that people who do planning expect will prove persuasive and useful. The efficacy and meaning of planning efforts flow from judgments about the consequences of these efforts modified by relevant contextual conditions. Plans and planners are the subjects of change, although the planners may include people from many different occupations, professions, and walks of life.

I believe that it is this change in focus rather than attention to communication that sets pragmatic CA apart from critical realism. Instead of seeking explanations about planning as a kind of intervening variable in more encompassing analysis of social classes, political regimes, and state institutions, pragmatic planning theory studies how people plan in different contexts shaped by these institutional relationships. This encompasses the kinds of actions individuals and groups take when they plan—including how stakeholders, actors, and other participants respond to such actions. Instead of analyzing causes as relationships that determine how plans work and what planners do, the CA analysts study the meaning of specific planning actions undertaken for different purposes within different contexts. They do not seek a correspondence between an external framework and the internal beliefs of participants but focus on what people believe, how these beliefs shape what they decide to do, and the consequences that ensue (Hoch 1984a, 1984b, 1992, 1994).<sup>3</sup>

This focus on purposeful action and its consequences has the effect of encouraging and supporting the study of planning practice, activity, and policy as a central resource for theory. This seemingly provincial focus on planning practice does move the intellectual reach of claims about planning theory away from the grand egalitarian hopes of Fainstein (2005) and Friedmann (1987) to much more modest claims about people who believe in planning as a valuable and useful activity.<sup>4</sup> However, while modest in scope, communicative practice studies speak directly to the concerns of planning analysts and practitioners who believe that their expertise and experience matter as causes for future actions shaping urban settlements. These planners, even as they recognize their position within a weak profession (compared with medicine and law) want to learn how people come to believe in plans and use them (Beauregard 2001). They also want to study when the use of these plans works to meet purposes, overcome obstacles, and remedy confusions—especially as compared to unplanned activities. It is this pragmatic approach that has, I believe, attracted a wide audience for CA planning theory.

### Rhetorical Confusion

Huxley and Yiftachel believe that disciplinary knowledge about institutional relations can offer more convincing—because they are less provincial and self-serving—insights about the effects of plans. Analysis tied to current professional values cannot possibly be critical, because it is unable to distinguish real causes from professional ideals or habits. But critical realistic analysis provides important insights about causal relationships that often prove irrelevant to professional planners and others seeking change. Paying close attention to the social, economic, and political inequality generated by capitalist

urbanization can provide evidence and analysis documenting how the formation and maintenance of institutions foster and legitimize new forms of exploitation that degrade the environment, discipline workers, erode wages, and more. But arguments of this sort do not study the kinds of contributions that professional planners or others might make to remedy these problems. The critics lose the attention of planners who want a theoretical outlook that offers practical knowledge informed by a hopeful rather than skeptical critique.

### Epistemological Trump

The critical realist treats the truth as an antidote to the blindness of false belief. As we understand the real causes of social repression, we will act on this knowledge in new ways. However, structural critique alone does not provide practical political or professional savvy. It is not the lack of critical bite that makes the insights of critical realism unattractive to a largely liberal and progressive planning audience (Hoch 1994) but the lack of relevant insight for practical planning action. This is not new.

Lily Hoffman (1989) studied the compatibility of leftist inspired political activism and professional work for activist planners and doctors over a twenty-year period (1968 to 1988). She describes activists participating in three stages of radical reform: service, empowerment, and transformation. Hoffman reluctantly concludes that activist reform efforts were not very effective. The service delivery and advocacy strategies adopted early on brought planners into contact with community activists whose criticism of their elite status inspired these professionals to critically review their own powers. Activist professionals shifted from service provision to citizen empowerment. Ironically, this shift reinforced their professional status as conduits of authority. Finally, activist planners adopted egalitarian political roles to level the difference in status, sacrificing professional and organizational legitimacy. This proved the worst failure of all. Local community members felt co-opted, and sponsors felt betrayed. Research by Marris (1987, 1996) offers a complementary assessment in his review of leftist inspired community action efforts by professional planners in the United Kingdom.

This empirical research does not discredit arguments about the inequality and injustice of capitalist urbanization but shows how knowledge of such theory does not in itself provide useful and practical knowledge for planning changes that will remedy the causes of injustice. A pragmatic CA provides a crucial and complementary resource for translating the insights of critical realist analysis into practical, relevant ideas for social change. The critical realists' belief in a foundational epistemology, a kind of knowledge that can escape the intentional and contingent qualities of human communication and judgment, blinds them to the practical resources

we possess to anticipate and change our future. Since planning appears only as a structural effect, it cannot be an activity with practical significance. In the next section, I conduct a conceptual analysis of comprehensive planning and political compromise. The analysis shows how we can reconcile and integrate structural and intentional conceptions of planning using a pragmatic version of CA.

## ► Part II: Pragmatic Communicative Action: Critical and Useful

How might planners learn to more intelligently resist and change the imposition of structural inequalities that generate unjust urban relationships? This question is at the very center of the research by John Forester (1989, 1999), the most prominent and important CA theorist. Forester adapts the critical pragmatics of German critical theorist Jurgen Habermas to institutional contexts where planners, policy analysts, and assorted public officials and reformers craft advice as arguments, conversations, and narratives. On one hand, plans and planners matter because they shape the expectations that these people use to guide their actions. The ordered complexity of modern institutional and organizational life relies on such plans—the strategic and structural dimensions of modern life. On the other hand, these plans also matter because they shape the beliefs, hopes, and feelings that people hold about the future consequences. Modern organizations and institutions seek to channel these beliefs in ways that inspire compliance and consent among workers, clients, and citizens—the purposeful, interpretive dimension. Forester (2004) includes the desires, moral inclinations, and feelings of planners, as well as rational strategic judgment, as part of the practical reasoning used to conduct planning deliberations. Forester uses the insights of Habermas to build a conceptual bridge between the strategic aspects tied to social structure and the normative qualities tied to social communication—what Forester (1992) calls *critical pragmatism*.

Attending to the meaning of deliberative conduct does not in itself signify a failure to comprehend the influence of institutional, structural, and cultural relationships as causes. All the relationships that social science disciplines study ultimately depend on the conduct of individual people, even if some theorists believe that the most important relationships shape this conduct below the radar of individual meaning or awareness. Taking a pragmatic approach does not elevate attention to moral conduct above scientific analysis of institutional relationships but treats both as consequential and real. A pragmatic CA avoids the strong separation between fact and value, focusing instead on the meaning of different kinds of causes that we use to cope with the world. Communication plays such a prominent role because scholars rely on deliberation to interpret the validity and value of different causal claims—the kind

of deliberation that settles claims based on mutual agreement rather than other less democratic means. From this view, when we raise claims that members of neighboring intellectual communities find unpersuasive, the reasons will likely have more to do with differences in political belief or disciplinary craft than differences in theory. The pragmatic outlook takes consequences, the product of practice, as crucially important for effective knowing—knowing that makes a difference for people and places.<sup>5</sup>

I want to show how a pragmatic CA works to foster understanding across the apparent divide between critical assessment of an encompassing structure of meaning (e.g., comprehensive planning and political corruption) and personal commitment to practical action (e.g., compromise). Instead of tapping John Forester's work directly, I turn to some ideas developed by Jurgen Habermas (1993) that have not otherwise played a role in planning theory debates. I want to show that using some distinctions developed by Habermas can provide a useful way of answering an important challenge raised by Bish Sanyal (2002) about the role of planning theory when confronted with the commonplace practice of political compromise. Specifically, how can we conceive of comprehensive planning that can include practical political compromise without succumbing to a cynical dismissal of public goals as structurally futile (e.g., naive) or morally indefensible (e.g., corrupt).

### Taking Advice from Habermas: Comprehensive Plans and Compromise

Habermas distinguishes between theoretical justification and application. His discourse analysis provides a very elaborate justification for taking speech norms as a critical resource justifying the quality of deliberations we humans conduct about public matters. In this respect, some social philosophers describe his work as Kantian—focusing on epistemic method or rules. But his conception of justification reflects another influence: the ideas of pragmatic philosopher Charles Peirce. Peirce argued that how we conduct inquiry shapes the consequences that ensue and that the norms of inquiry provide a guide for assessing the value and relevance of these judgments. The pragmatic conception of inquiry helped Habermas socialize Kant's transcendental ego (Habermas 1971).<sup>6</sup>

Habermas argues for the validity of rational claims directed at a broad, universal audience (everybody). But he socializes these epistemic ambitions. This universal reach is important, he insists, because the conditions of modern life leave us with rival social traditions and ways of life that no longer can claim general rational validity. (Here, he follows in the steps of Max Weber, challenging Weber's skepticism). Habermas does not believe that the coercive imposition of one way of life over and against other rivals offers a legitimate

response to such rivalries. The basis for selecting norms that guide relationships of coexistence across different traditions should rely on the force of reasons. But not just any sorts of reasons work here.

We can't expect to find a generally binding answer when we ask what is good for me or for us or for them; instead, we must ask what is *equally good for all*. This "moral point of view" throws a sharp, but narrow, spotlight that picks out from the mass of evaluative questions practical conflicts that can be *resolved* by appeal to a generalizable interest; in other words, questions of justice. (1993, 151)

### Comprehensive Planning Revised

Habermas's distinction between application and justification offers a way to reframe the use of comprehensiveness on the part of planners. On one hand, conventional planning practice still insists on the principle of comprehensiveness as an essential structural quality for a public plan. It implies both completeness of coverage and most important a structure for all the partial effects considered together or in common. The concept includes completion (did we include all the relevant parts?) and coherence (did we consider how all the parts fit together?): the plan as solution to a complex open-ended puzzle (Hopkins 2000).

The distinction also applies to how professional planners comprehend the public interest. On one hand, the concept of public interest refers to a universal audience for the plan. When we seek to justify the validity of the plan for the public as a whole—the public that includes the full diversity of social groups and interests—we frame such a wide review as a kind of inclusive participation. Habermas (1993), for instance, defends his discourse ethics against charges of an emphasis of deontological rights or process norms, insisting that it . . .

adopts the intersubjective approach of pragmatism and conceives of practical discourse as a *public* practice of *shared*, reciprocal perspective taking: each individual finds himself compelled to adopt the perspective of everyone else in order to test whether a proposed regulation is also acceptable from the perspective of every other person's understanding of himself and the world. Justice and solidarity are two sides of the same coin because practical discourse is, on the one hand, a procedure that affords everyone the opportunity to influence the outcome with his "yes" or "no" responses and thereby takes account of an individualistic understanding of equality; on the other hand, practical discourse leaves intact the social bond that induces participants in argumentation to become aware of their membership in an unlimited communication community. (p. 154)

For individual instances of planning deliberation, administration, and debate to take place, the participants already anticipate and use comprehensiveness even as they may violate it for reasons of ignorance, prejudice, or greed.

Planners draw on norms, rules, and customs associated with specific social institutions to conduct deliberations about land use, affordable housing, and environmental quality, but these deliberations draw on this underlying social solidarity.<sup>7</sup>

### Analytically Complete and Normatively Inclusive

Comprehensiveness refers to the inclusive consideration of all the relevant interests (stakeholders) such that each recognizes the opportunity to shape the plan elements and so accept its legitimacy. In this sense, comprehensiveness refers both to a set of particular features, functional elements, geographic boundaries, or other material aspects of a settlement as well as how well each stakeholder understands the validity of a plan's claims from the viewpoint of the others. We test the validity of comprehensiveness in this sense when we ask about how fair-minded the plan is. We review what voices and interests may be missing and consider how and to what extent those included received equal treatment and respect. Habermas describes this as transcendental, meaning that deliberation is only possible if we already anticipate the sincerity, truthfulness, comprehensibility, and legitimacy of others' claims. But unlike Kant, Habermas adopts a pragmatic transcendentalism. We learn to anticipate these norms as we learn to speak and deliberate with others as part of our socialization within specific societies. So the claims are open to empirical testing and not tied to individual consciousness.

Comprehensive does not only mean intellectually thorough or analytically complete but normatively inclusive. The comprehensive plan needs be both functionally and democratically credible. Specialized functional, instrumental, or strategic plans lack this inclusive normative dimension. When a corporate planner makes a strategic plan to ensure the efficient and profitable pursuit of corporate purpose, he or she treats the purposes of others as market rivals, public regulators, or consumers. Corporations compete with one another and use their plans to improve their prospects for success. The successful competitors may contribute to public and private philanthropy, but such contribution follows on market success. We do not grant such strategic plans the same social standing as a comprehensive plan precisely because the strategic plan excludes the interests of other public stakeholders, even those it might greatly affect, from its purview. These strategic plans are not comprehensive plans because they are not public plans.<sup>8</sup>

Pragmatist Charles Peirce argued that we can and must pursue a comprehensive outlook for the thorny problems we face. This outlook was not speculative and abstract, but active and social. Louis Menand (2001) captures Peirce's combination of conceptual grip and social conviction in the following quotation:

Reasoning “inexorably requires that our interests shall *not* be limited. They must not stop at our own fate, but must embrace the whole community . . . He who would not sacrifice his own soul to save the whole world, is it seems to me, illogical in all his inferences collectively. Logic is rooted in the social principle. (pp. 229-30)

This pragmatic conception embraces the effort to comprehend the connections that draw our diverse interests together into a community—a comprehension that draws on practical habits of conceptual analysis tied to useful norms of adaptive inquiry. This social conception of knowledge puts a different light on how we can use Habermas to retain the concept of comprehensive planning.

### Pragmatic Comprehensiveness

The social conception of comprehensiveness can be combined with more conventional meanings about conceptual or rational completeness. Comprehensive (i.e., synoptic) in the strongest sense means complete knowledge about the causes and consequences of uncertainty—knowledge we can use in plans to reduce the uncertainty (Lindblom 1979). But this quest for complete certainty proves misleading because it presumes we can somehow reason in ways that escape the limitations of our human existence: our evolutionary lineage, historical tradition, cultural heritage, individual socialization, personality, emotional experience, linguistic competence, and so forth. We can and do imagine and invent orders that enable us to predict the movements of galaxies, the trajectories of bullets, the mutation rates of species, the movement of traffic, and other regularities that we observe and make. But these orders work within the practical intellectual frameworks of physics, ballistics, biology, and traffic engineering. We borrow knowledge from within these frameworks and adopt them in others using analogy to selectively link concepts from one domain to another. Such borrowing draws on that wider network of social communication and learning where we attend to one another across differences by seeking analogies that bridge the divide between us and them. The disciplines include not only an ordered body of concepts and practical know-how, but a social community that keeps the concepts and their use alive. These communities tap into the more encompassing social communication of everyday life, enabling disciplinary insights to travel back and forth across the disciplinary boundaries. When we comprehend meaningful overlaps between mutation in an organic virus and mutation in a computer virus, the range of human knowledge expands—it becomes more comprehensive.<sup>9</sup>

Instead of using comprehensive to mean complete, we can use it in this pragmatic sense to describe a richer and more meaningful grasp of unfamiliar relationships in terms

of more familiar ones. So when we consider comprehensive plans, we need not insist on including a complete understanding of all elements in an urban settlement but rather describe important but unfamiliar relationships in terms people find meaningful. Additionally, the use of comprehensive analogy not only makes the plan relevant in this practical sense, but focuses attention on a composition of overarching or integrated order that tames the unfamiliar or confusing complexity of the urban settlement. We use the comprehensive ideal not to sum up parts, but to identify and encompass the meaning of the whole settlement for the plan. Composing the plan combines practical usefulness, conceptual order, and social meaning to envision parts within a coherent whole. We do not follow a fixed plan like a blueprint but take the whole plan into account as we anticipate any specific sequence of actions.<sup>10</sup>

So adopting a pragmatic CA outlook provides a way to combine our beliefs about an inclusive public interest with beliefs about a coherent scientific account of a complex urban world. This does not mean that we already know in detail the relationships that will exist in the future but that we study and describe current relationships attending to the functional aspects that anticipate consequences for the relevant audiences. The plan includes alternatives that describe these future consequences, combining causal attribution that uses models, tables, charts, and maps to illustrate analytic probabilities along with evocative narratives and vivid designs that offer plausible images that relevant audiences find meaningful. We anticipate norms about public order and fairness that take shape in plans that simplify and compare possible futures. We use these to imagine plausible consequences not only for our immediate interests as professionals or stakeholders, but for the interests of others as well. The pragmatic approach makes room for practical wisdom, public sentiment, and imaginative conjecture as these add value to the meaning of the consequences that ensue as people act on a comprehensive plan. The successful conduct of such complex planning anticipates and fosters deliberation—the kind of collaborative activity that CA analysts study (Innes and Gruber 2005; Fischer 2003; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Wilson, Payne, and Smith 2003). What happens when the aspirations and expectations associated with a comprehensive plan conflict or circumstances undermine the feasibility of adoption or implementation?

### A Case of Political Compromise

Bish Sanyal (2002) describes two planning responses to globalization and its effects on local populations: cheer-leading supporters and skeptical critics. He contends that the two polarized antagonists embrace theories about globalization that justify an adversarial standoff. Theoretical

assurance fuels moral certainty for each, blinding each side to the other. Planners, Sanyal contends, work in intermediate institutional domains where policies supporting enhanced global trade and local self-reliance coexist. These practitioners learn to negotiate compromises in their development plans, but in so doing, they appear to betray either theoretical position for or against globalization. Sanyal wants theory that will justify and inform the compromises these practitioners make.

Sanyal argues that planners negotiate political compromises to cope with the complexity and inequality of globalization in specific cultural, institutional, and geographic circumstances. He adds that practitioners do not refer to any specific theory to justify the sorts of compromises they make in their work. They make their theory selectively. He concludes that we need to pay attention to a contextual and practical ethical understanding of compromise as a crucial activity for coping with the complexity of globalization in ways that reduce the scope and intensity of inequality.

Sanyal overlooks resources for comprehending practical compromise. He does this, I think, because he believes that theoretical ideas offer a more fundamental and more truthful comprehension of global complexity than the practical ideas of a provincial planner. He expects theory makers to cook up ideas that will filter down to practitioners to guide practical judgments about trade-offs in much the same fashion as Huxley and Yiftachel (although Sanyal holds different beliefs about such trade-offs). Much as Fainstein hopes theory will tell us how to make cities more just, Sanyal wants theory to tell us how to make more just compromises.

If we envision planning theory as a kind of practical reasoning rather than a kind of template or primal rationale, we avoid creating an epistemic gap between theoretical judgment and practical judgment. We can distinguish between theories about what we believe (e.g., global complexity and its causes) and theories about what we desire (e.g., global efficiency and equality). Practical judgment finds us drawing on both. When planning theorists took the interpretive turn a few decades ago, they left the gap behind and faced new challenges (Taylor 1998). Sanyal (2002) mentions an important one: the problem of accounting for institutional conventions and constraints at different scales. So for instance, he notes that game theory cannot cope with situations where the rules change or are complex, while deliberative theory focuses too much on small-group interaction outside encompassing institutional and organizational settings (p. 120). Sanyal is on the right track when he urges us to pay close attention to how planners do successful compromises. But this inquiry will not uncover criteria for success using theoretical reflection. It will mainly describe the kinds of social and political agreement that was reached and the quality of democratic activity used to produce it.<sup>11</sup>

But we can think about theory not as a belief we turn to for reassurance or guidance, but as a belief we use to invent new ways of solving an old problem or negotiating a better agreement. We can learn about such beliefs in many different ways such as through a good story, by attending to the procedural steps the belief entails, conducting tests that compare how well the belief stands up in relation to its competitors, or adopting the belief as our own and using it to guide our own conduct. This pragmatic conception of theory places responsibility for the knowledge we create and its application on us, the users, but users who enjoy a rich array of social and cognitive resources (Jamal, Stein, and Harper 2002). Compromise represents only one strategy for adapting democratic planning to the political demands of complexity. There are many other less promising and more potentially destructive strategies: passivity, withholding, deception, and so forth (Van Eetern and Roe 2000; Healey et al. 2003).

Compromise as part of the kind of comprehensive planning described above offers a practical way to intelligently and sensitively respond to inescapable complexity and unnecessary injustice in globalizing places. We can judge the quality of those compromises using technical, moral, and political evidence to assess how far their consequences foster tolerance for stupidity or moral indifference to suffering. If we are fortunate, we conduct our assessment with others who share our comprehensive outlook. But many times, we do not enjoy moral and political support and so find we must accept a compromise that betrays the hopes of our own comprehensive plan. We need not abandon the value of comprehensiveness when we consider the necessity of compromise but focus our attention on those practical aspects susceptible to influence. This recasting of compromise adopts coherence rather than consistency in planning judgments—using multiple continua to represent related trade-offs. Planning analysts will mostly disagree about the methods, styles, and substance of each compromise but find common cause in the pursuit of a more inclusive plan or planning.

## ► Conclusion

Communication as an object for theoretical attention hardly covers the full range of relevant relationships that planners and plans address. Political economists and others rightly argue that we need to include a wider range of relationships and their consequences. Additionally, we need to be critical in approach, carefully assessing the meaning and value of these relationships for our own purposes. Recasting CA as pragmatic practical theory analyzing and justifying the consequences of collective purposeful action avoids conversation-stopping epistemological claims and introduces pathways to foster deliberation about useful political and social beliefs for planning (Hoch 2002).

A pragmatic approach enables planners to critically analyze consequences using concepts and beliefs that draw on the practical ideals embedded in prior efforts at reform, new innovations in practice, and even transgressive practices. If analysts and practitioners find the beliefs useful for guiding productive compromise in managing complex urban relationships, then they need to pursue no deeper or more fundamental justification outside meaningful practice. Planning draws on norms that anticipate the ideals of the just city even as planning and planners may exploit or enlighten their urban clientele (Verma and Shin 2004). Pragmatic theory imagines planners taking actions within competing versions of liberal community. Preconditions for effective pragmatic planning include the tolerance, freedom, and fairness associated with liberal democracies at their best. Useful planning knowledge requires attention to the details of planning deliberation and institutional innovation in specific situations. We learn the meaning and value of comprehensive planning as we study how plans get made, changed, and used among those for whom the consequences matter (Laurian 2004; Kohl 2003).

Political economists and other critics of CA and the pragmatic variant I offer find such conclusions maddeningly illusive. They complain about the process orientation—the lack of specific theoretical claims or moral convictions. Fainstein (2005) concludes that normative CA theory should be combined with explanatory urban theory to identify the goal for urban political mobilization. “Planning theory ought to describe that goal, along with the means of attaining it and the context in which it rests” (p.128). Fainstein wants theory to tell us how to plan the just city. The desire for rational consistency means that specific theoretical ideas about justice should take shape in plans for the city. Pragmatic planning theory provides a vocabulary for organizing and the complex assortment of doctrinal and disciplinary bricks that planners and planning intellectuals make and then take for granted. A pragmatic outlook does not offer specific doctrines about complex urban development but elaborates different practical modes of democratic inquiry that planning bricklayers can use to consider the consequences of joint deliberation. These include ideas about collaboration, consensus building, cooperation, and other kinds of democratic activity (Ali 2003; Margerum 2002; Van Herzle 2004; Umemoto and Suryanata 2005). We need bricks and mortar to make plans and policies powerful enough to attract public interest, inspire purposeful change, and sustain the willingness to learn together from our mistakes and misfortunes (Blumenberg 2002; Flyvberg 2002; Takahashi and Smutny 2001). When Fainstein and other critics want theory to tell readers what kinds of institutions we need create to effectively remedy urban injustice, they want a too-large brick to replace the complex interplay of bricks and mortar that compose contested beliefs about urban order and change.

The research focus on consensus building or collaborative planning does not preclude research on larger scale

institutional relationships, nor does it avoid issues of conflict and power (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). The difference between CA theory and critics like Fainstein, Huxley, and Yiftachel flows from different political beliefs about liberalism and the complexity of urban settlement. A pragmatic orientation adapts the ideals of deliberative democracy into the fabric of planning inquiry, treating causes and constraints as conditions for action rather than forces shaping action. The critical realists urge planning analysts to suspend this commitment while conducting structural analysis of those systemic causes and constraints that co-opt the promise of liberal democracy. I have tried to argue that while this effort offers intellectual interest, it lacks relevance for planning inquiry.

Adopting a pragmatic orientation shifts debate about political and moral differences for planning from doctrinal disputes about knowledge claims to a focus on empirical and interpretive claims about the effect of particular urban changes and planning activity. Instead of trying to create a theory that can guide how to plan the just city, a pragmatist imagines theoretical ideas offering a specific alternative, for instance, plans to reduce racial and ethnic discrimination in a local housing market. These planning ideas set off debate among local planners and others who use the ideas and among analysts who raise questions about the validity and efficacy of the ideas. Debate ensues. Practitioners modify and adapt the idea, reject it, or perhaps ignore it. Analysts do the same. Those involved in the debate learn and adapt aspects of the idea to new uses. But what about those overlooked or excluded from the debate? What about the other issues of injustice overlooked while focusing attention on housing discrimination? These and many other related questions provide the proper focus for planning theory—planning theory that can include attention to urban politics, social movements, corporate investment, housing markets, and all the many dimensions of urban order and change.

The pragmatic approach can hold together the complexity of many different beliefs about these dimensions because the pragmatic outlook emphasizes the provisional quality of plans (Hoch forthcoming). Plans neither make nor control events. Plans offer advice. Plans work not by compelling consent, but by earning it. Plans envision future alternatives that we can compare before we decide and act—alternatives that anticipate different outcomes in the pursuit of select purposes. The pragmatic planning theorist believes that the commitment to what Seymour Mandelbaum (2000) calls *open moral communities* should guide planning inquiry at the intersection of practical activity and conceptual invention—inquiry always subject to ongoing critique and revision.

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## Notes

1. I use this idea expansively to include synoptic rationality, satisficing, game theory, and other varieties of rational decision-making theories.

2. This pokes fun at scholars like Forester (1999), Throgmorton (1996), and Healey (1997), who believe we do learn about the meaning of planning by studying what planners do.

3. See for instance the excellent summary of the emergence of the communicative practice tradition in an essay by Vanessa Watson (2002). She nicely shows how the attention to practice rather than communication ties these interpretive theorists to one another. The pragmatist does not seek to verify beliefs against objective rational criteria independent of social inquiry. "For pragmatism, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can. Insofar as pragmatists make a distinction between knowledge and opinion, it is simply the distinction between topics on which such agreement is relatively easy to get and topics on which agreement is relatively hard to get" (Rorty 1991, 23).

4. Allmendinger (2002) critiques the substance versus process distinction that animates the critique by Huxley and Yiftachel, who remain tied to a positivist outlook—the belief that how we understand the causes of moral action differs in a profound fashion from the way we understand the causes of natural effects. The knowledge of natural effects offers more truth. Ironically, Allmendinger in the same article tries to create an overarching typology of different postpositivists' planning theories. His effort to establish a rational scaffolding to order relations among different interpretive theories seems to rely on an underlying belief in an order outside the interpretive activity of theorists. A typological scaffold offers a sensible device for comparing specific points of difference or similarity among precise claims among theorists but cannot substitute for the content of the deliberations within the contexts. The scaffold does not so much typify as point.

5. From this view, the difference between fact and value is not that facts represent reality or truth and values represent feelings or opinions, but that facts cause us to modify our reasoning about things, while values cause us to modify our feelings about things. We know our world less as a picture and more as a product of social adaptation (Davidson 1989).

6. Eugene Halton (1995) insists that Habermas misuses Peirce. "As Peirce pointed out so clearly, every scientific inquiry must stand upon an as yet unquestioned ground of preconceptions, which is to say that interpretation requires a 'past' simply in order to interpret. All human knowledge, especially scientific, is inescapably fallible. Science itself includes more than rationality, as Peirce's discussions of abduction showed so well, so that the misguided attempt to reduce human institutions and conduct to so-called rational foundations or standards reveals a grave mistake in disallowing the deeper basis of human reasons. Both conjecture and experience are ingredients in the logic of science, and both are extrarational" (p.175). Hilda Blanco (1994) describes the relevance of Peirce's thoughts for planning in part 2 of her book.

7. Michael Walzer (1994) uses the distinction between thick and thin conceptions of justice to capture the difference between the norms we use to comprehend the interests of strangers and those that bind us in more complex and layered ways to country, family, and friends.

8. James Bohman (1996) uses the concept of publicity to describe how justification takes shape as a requirement for legitimate liberal political deliberation. People withhold their consent for plans if they believe the authors cast the proposals without consideration of goals and interests they consider important. However, people may give consent to a plan, even if it includes disagreeable elements, knowing that their values and claims were fairly discussed. Bohman's publicity test offers a more robust if less elegant requirement for legitimacy than Habermas's discursive justification.

9. However, whether we consider metaphors possessing cognitive content is a matter of dispute. See for instance the argument by Niraj Verma (1998) and Rorty (1991). Donald Schon (1983) provides an important example of the cognitive use of metaphor that illustrates Rorty's distinction about invention.

10. Niraj Verma (1998) offers the most succinct description of similarity as a planning idea.

11. I agree with Ernest Alexander (2003) when, in his comments on Sanyal's essay and John Friedmann's (2003) response, he insists that for practical purposes, a general theory of planning is useless because it is unable to inform judgments about what to do in specific situations—the only situations within which any plan gets done. I disagree with his ideas about contingency theory, because he still believes that a theory provides proper grounds for beliefs about complex urban regions. Theory offers something solid we can rely on as a resource for action. He does not seem to recognize that once we turn epistemic conflicts into differences based on political and social context, his critique of Friedmann's ideas has more to do with differences in political values than truth value.

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