Communicative Planning: Reflections on Foucault’s Conception of Power

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Abstract
The notion of communicative planning as the democratic rhetoric of consensus bases decision-making has gained a new paradigm of planning practice in this 21st century. The paper asserts that there is emerging trends that concerned with how communicative planning has shifted profoundly towards neo-liberalized market economy by significantly systematizing the decision-making process. There is indeed, mirroring broader affects that the democratic ethos are in a state of crisis. Therefore, drawing upon Foucault’s conception of power, the paper argues, can perhaps measure the effects in practice by determining how power being position towards the desired outcomes. In this sense, the dynamics of power relations in planning practice might deploys ways of thinking [or use of government tools] to shape and legitimate the decision-making process. Attention is directed to the application of power in the governance practice that can only occur if one can resist. Otherwise, it is oppressive. One important dimension of the process is to discover how the state articulates the actions and strategies through the logic of communicative planning that structured around the uncontested neo-liberal frame. Crucial to this, the paper will conclude by providing new insight on the capabilities and the autonomy of planners to explore the forces of neo-liberalism calling for a paradigm shift for the planning profession itself.

Keywords: Communicative, planning, Foucault, power, neo-liberalism
1. Introduction

The idea of communicative planning has deeply integrated in the academic literature from the 1980s and has recently increased attention in both planning theory and practice (see, for example: Cheng, 2013; Fainstein & Fainstein, 2013; Hytonen, 2014; Matthews, 2012; Purcell, 2009; Sager, 2013). This paper is an attempt to engage in the recent discussion on the consequences of power in everyday planning practices through communicative turn in planning. To do so, the paper draw its inspiration from the theory of communicative planning that emphasized on how this discourse plays important roles in shaping planning practice. In particular, it explores the struggles in the public realm whether the approaches has led to a new forms of governance in planning. Perhaps, the exploration may provide understanding to what extent is communicative planning directing (or not) development towards balancing economic, social and environment well-being in the neo-liberal age. This adds to the deeper understandings of participation, to look more fundamentally at how participants act, communicate and challenge to power relations, which owes much to Foucault’s conception of power analysis. Given this context, the decision-making that is shaped and turned to contradictory outcomes may reveal conflict and tension that emerges between the rhetoric and reality of the participatory process. This infers a need to recognize how communicative planning through power dynamic can ultimately articulated and justified the ‘dark-side’ of planning in neo-liberal globalization era (Flyvbjerg, 1998; 2002; Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002).

2. Communicative planning in practice

Planning decisions and their implementation within the public sphere are inevitably political and complex (Bruton, 2007; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Healey, 2012a). In meeting this challenge, planning systems need to be engaged with the narratives of communicative action among the actors around participatory planning (Brownill, 2009). Originally, the idea of communicative planning leans more on Arendt (1958), who offers a discourse about speech and action. Arendt’s thinking offers a perspective drawn on by Habermas’ (1984, 1987) theory of communicative action, which deals with social action in the domain of collective action, or governance with engagement and empowerment in managing development (Forester, 1989; Healey, 2006; Hillier, 2003; Howitt & Lunkapis, 2010; Innes & Booher, 2010; Sager, 2013; Sanyal et al. 2012). Initially, John Forester (1989; 1999; 2012) developed the work of Habermas into the context of planning as practical communicative action, the relationship of power in the decision-making process and the study of planners’ actions in organizational settings. Patsy Healey then translated the concept of communicative action into a communicative or collaborative planning theory, which is regarded as the most influential approach in the planning field (Forester, 1999; Ploger, 2001; Healey, 2006; 2012; Sager, 2013; Wezemael, 2012).

Despite different strands of communicative planning among scholars, evidently, the common understanding of the approach is the concern with dialogical interactions in the planning process. As such, communicative planning potentially can strengthen and enhance understanding of interrelations between governance and public (Bond, 2011; Brand & Gaffikin, 2007; Holgersen, 2015). Thus, it is believed that ‘modes of communication play a key role in shaping planning practice, public dialogues, policymaking, and processes of collaboration’ (Ploger, 2001: 219) because ‘[i]n
planning practice, talk and argument matter’ (Forester, 1989: 5). Therefore, the paper placed a strong emphasis on the need for giving attention to the publics’ voice. In such a way, the paper engaged with the ideas of communicative planning, which is arguably ‘occupy extremely hegemonic position in planning’ (Purcell, 2009: 146) and ‘the best measures for guiding well-intended use of planning theory’ (Sager, 2013: 248), as to what this may mean in the neo-liberal context.

In this regard, communicative planning has had a heavy bearing as part of the decision-making process in the twentieth century. What is equally important in understanding planning theory and practice in this new paradigm is, how the rhetoric of communicative planning can shape and structure the economic fabric of the city. The term ‘communicative planning’ in this paper involve participatory and deliberative democracy (Healey, 2006; Sager, 2009; 2011) that reflects ‘how people behave communicatively and come to agreement, including with their built environment’ (Matthews, 2012: 140). Thus, following Healey (2006), the communication in this paper is interpreted as a discourse, which refers to the relationship between planning organization and other forces that acknowledges dialectics and actions in the decision-making process (see also Holgersen, 2015). The idea is that dialectics emphasizes on how social order and planning ‘through the state apparatus constitute each other’ (Holgersen, 2015: 8). And more precisely, the approach is on dialogue, in which participant ‘come to know what is in their own best interest’ in planning decision-making process (Sager, 2013: 27). As such, communicative or collaborative planning is important in planning because it affects autonomy and empowers the local public through an extensive deliberation of inclusive dialogue that supports deliberative democracy to improve the public’s quality of life (Campbell & Marshall, 2012; Cheng, 2013; Healey, 2012; Sager, 2013). It is also what Forester (1989: 157; 1993) argues long ago when he emphasize on the planning practice itself as a communicative action, in which he suggest by understanding it might:

‘…given a conceptual (and researchable) bridge from analysis to implementation (via the shaping of attention), from information to organization (via the shaping and reproduction of political identity), from cognition to action (via the claims-making structure of communicative action), and thus from the analysis of abstract meaning to a pragmatic assessment of practical professional activity.’

In fact, the multiple ideas that are brought together in the literature have predicated ‘communicative planning as a desirable ideal of democratically determined local planning and community empowerment’ (Gunder, 2010: 302). Here lies, the capacity of society – the marginal – to participate in the planning process because they want their voice to be heard on particular issues. As such, a further use of the theory of communicative planning has acquired a central position to create a mutual understanding and justifiable collective decisions. Hence, what is needed is an arena that is open to discussion and values difference opinions in the decision-making process (Healey, 2006) that ‘has led to the creation of participatory processes and space to allow a public sphere to flourish’ (Matthews, 2012: 142). This is encourages by shared spaces among the societies (local governance, planners, politicians, public) in a more collaborative ways ‘which asserts that all those with a stake in a place should have a right to give voice and be heard in the development of policies about
what should happen there’ (Healey, 2006: 316; 2012a). In this respect, the success of market regulation is to integrate and solve problems of society and conflict over local environments by means of communicative planning (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2013; Gunder, 2010; Healey, 2006; 2010).

The aforementioned analysis illustrate that the new forms of governance, arguably, have become increasingly involved and associated with neo-liberalism. In this regard, the significant efforts of the theory of communicative or collaborative planning to advocate public empowerment has been questioned and criticized (Fainstein & Fainstein, 2013; Gunder, 2010; Hillier, 2003; Irazabal, 2008; Purcell, 2009). As Matthews (2012: 142) simply puts it: ‘[t]he emotionality, mess and tension of the real world mean that communicative practices are far from the ideal of rational communicative action’ (see also, Barnes, 2008; Huxley, 2014). At worst, communicative approach may be used as ‘a tool of manipulation’ (Harper & Stein, 2006: 158). Further, the relational perspective that considers the need for proper communicative planning arena, Swyngedouw (2009: 608) argue, has transfigured its traditional disciplinary society ‘into a society of control through disembodied networks of governance.’ In this sense, the state may increasingly occupy the society through collaborative platforms. The wish to democratize participatory process through democratic deliberation is seemed lead to conflicting reasons. In fact, Gunder and Purcell, among others, contend that there are neo-liberal challenges faced by communicative planning which ‘has largely been captured, or has simply been intentionally deployed, to obscure and facilitate the dominant ideology of contemporary market forces’ (Gunder, 2010: 302; see also Purcell, 2009). This further makes the decision-making ‘do not end in harmonious consensus’ (Hillier, 2002: 37), as many have proved (for example, Farkas, 2013; Flyvbjerg, 1998; Gunder & Mouat, 2002; Matthews, 2012). At their worst, these renewed interests in participatory process indicate that the idea of communicative planning is fundamentally problematic (Fainstein & Fainstein, 2013; Huxley, 2013; Purcell, 2009).

Consequently, many scholars argue that the understanding of communicative planning in practice may clarify the manner of governance that arguably tends to facilitate or confront the critique of neo-liberalism. Further, there is a wide debate among the scholars on how to resist neo-liberalism, amongst other, by using critical pragmatism (Forester, 1989; 2012), new applications of critical theory (Matthews, 2012), insurgent planning (Miraftab, 2009), counter-hegemonic movement (Purcell, 2009), and new co-production ideas (Watson, 2014; see also Albrecht, 2013). The aim here is not to bring up the debate concerning different conceptions of these ideas. However, the question to ponder is how the creation of this arena in planning practice has been uses to create a communicative rationality that reflect the public concerns and accountable economically to the public. The argument is vital by manifestation that drawn dichotomy between social, environmental and the economy sphere under neo-liberal condition that often ‘turns the planning profession schizophrenic’ (Baeten, 2012: 210). In this way, Baeten’s argument is well set to foster a possibility that planning is merely limit and control the decision-making, which need to be given careful attention. Also, this is what Gunder (2014: 2-3) refer as ‘fantasy’ that act ‘to structure social reality’ through ‘collective desires of a polity, or society, and these also visions that may initially and subsequently guide and shape the agency of the organization itself.’ In short, if public is included in the decision-making process, it
will make people feel empowered even the outcome is dominated by propertied interests.

Such a dynamic perhaps, adds to the notion of communicative action as power. In this regard, the important aspects of any effort to influence people for certain action can be analyzed through communication by capturing ‘the relations between those holding power in governance arrangements and those remaining outside of them but being affected by the resultant decisions’ (Benz & Papadopoulus, 2006: 274). This paper, therefore, offers a reappraisal of Foucauldian’s perspective of power to illustrate how participation through communication may involve the process of exclusion (Mouffe, 2005; Purcell, 2009). Hence, the section that follows is intended to make a contribution to such areas.

3. **Reflections on Foucault’s conception of power**

Many scholars argue that by studying practice of governance, it does imply the political discourse and action in orientating toward the practices of power (Blakeley, 2010; Dean, 2010; Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002; Healey, 2010; Hillier, 2002; Swartz, 2013). Thus, the exploration of Foucault’s concept of power is significance to reflect ‘how to be governed, by whom, to what extent, to what ends, and by what methods’ (Foucault, 2007: 89) in which planning directly engaged with. There is more than one definition of what is defined by the word ‘power’. As Dean (2013: 2) observes, normally ‘the concept of power is located in a dense field of distinctions and relations with many other terms [such as] authority, domination, legitimacy, jurisdiction, violence, government, coercion, control, capability, capacity, ability, force, and so on.’

Rather than viewing power as something that can be possessed, is sovereign and can be controlled, the ideas of Foucault take this forward, by seeing power as something not owned but ‘exist[ing] only when it is put into action’ (Foucault, 1982: 219), in which power can only happen ‘when those acted upon are free to exert power back – resist’ (Gunder & Mouat, 2002: 129). Hence, this suggests that the governance practice has important implications in the field of planning ‘to resist the potentially disruptive effects’ within the societal domain (Healey, 2012: 22). In this perspective, Duineveld et al. (2013: 23) highlights, ‘[r]esistance also shapes the object and can even increase the chances of implementation by making it more real, for more people, within more and different networks.’ On the other hand, when the public are incapable to act freely, the situation is known as domination rather than power (Dean, 2013; Gunder & Mouat, 2002; Shirato et al. 2013; Torfing, 2009). What is particularly relevant is that how the exercise of power by governance ‘can produce as much acceptance as may be wished for’ (Foucault, 1982: 789) and deploys ways of thinking [or use of government tools] to shape and legitimate the decision-making process within power relationships.

Further, as many argue, by using Foucault’s conception of power, it is ‘better place’ to denote ‘different forms and practices of government and the techniques, tactics and strategies used to govern’ that helps to deepen the analysis of planning practice (Blakeley, 2010: 132; see also Dean, 2010; Van Assche et al. 2012a). In fact, Van Assche et al. (2014b: 3) offers a line of reasoning on how planning can benefit from using this kind of power relations, as they succinctly put it,
'We argue that planning theory can benefit from the understanding of power as essential to the daily functioning of a planning system, the continuous evolution of a planning system and the dynamic relations with its environment. Understanding these different manifestations of power can shed a new light on the way planning comprehends itself and its environment, and on the ways it tries to organize itself and its environment.'

Indeed, the relationship of power is a necessary condition to analyze the art of governing in planning decision-making process (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Gunder & Hillier, 2009; Hillier, 2002; Irazabal, 2009; Ploger, 2008; Van Assche et al. 2014b). In fact, the need for empirical analysis on how power is mobilized in governance networks is a new observation. Indeed, the empirical analysis of the Aalborg case entails how power penetrates everyday practice, which has been elegantly done long ago by Flyvbjerg (1998). Recently, Fox-Rogers and Murphy (2013: 20) in their study demonstrate how the power imbalances manifested in the planning decision-making that further ‘raise serious concerns about the democratic nature of the planning process given that powerful interests dominate by operating through informal channels in ways that disguise the operation of power in planning.’ More specifically, Fox-Rogers et al. (2011) observes in the Republic of Ireland on how the legislative changes have been designed specifically to reduce participatory democracy in the planning process. On a critical tone, Fox-Rogers et al. (2011: 641) note that the ‘relations of power are altered whereby the general public’s political power is reduced in the planning process through legislative reform that favours the consolidation of private power to a much greater extent’ (p.641). This establishes modes of action through mechanism that constitute power relations, in which Foucault refer as ‘strategy’ (Foucault, 1982: 793; see also Flyvbjerg, 2000), which ‘involve threats, manipulation, and withholding information’ (Sager, 2013: 35). This power relation plays a significance role in shaping and control ‘people’s option for action’ (Hillier, 2002: 57; see also Flyvbjerg, 2002; 2012).

In this context, the articulation of power and social order constitutes a significant dimension in the analysis of actors in the decision-making process. From this perspective, can perhaps measure the effects in practice by determining how power being position and use to influence the decision-making process. Indeed, ‘planning is, after all, the main mechanism through which the state seeks to manage (development) changes’ (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012: 94). Arguably, it shows the delineation of how planners should represent the people (or, themselves), by fully grasp and understand this forms of power relations for more appropriate and effective planning practice.

4. Communicative planning as power

Although the discourse of communicative planning has been spreading in many parts of the world (Healey, 2006; 2012; Kaza, 2013) but, the idea gain as the new paradigm of planning theory and practice in this 21st century (Gunder, 2010; Leino & Laine, 2012; Matthews, 2012; Purcell, 2009). This can be seen in the current attempts to promote the idea of consensual engagement through collaboration methods in the decision-making process (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Bond, 2011; McClymont,
According to Gutmann and Thompson (2004: 34), public ‘need forums within which they can propose and debate issues concerning the basic economic structure of society, over which corporations exert a kind of control that is properly considered political, not only economic.’ This reflects ways of deliberation and foster dialogue through arenas of planning system which long have been recognised to encourage public to participate in the planning process (Brownill & Carpenter, 2007; Forester, 2012; Healey, 2012a).

As already noted, this arena also demonstrated the issues concerning power relations through deliberation and participation (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2013; Healey, 2003; 2006). In this regard, the paper accords with Aitken’s (2010: 253) notes, ‘meaningful participation requires empowerment of participants and thus any evaluation of participatory activities consider where power is found and how this is deployed.’ The argument further draws on a criticism that; despite the importance of power in communicative planning, the theory fails to capture the relations in planning (Finlaysen, 2013; Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002; Purcell, 2009). This is particularly true, as the participatory process do not necessarily reflect and incorporate the views of the public, which often (mis)use of the term ‘communicative planning’ (Aitken, 2010; Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2013; Gunder, 2010; Healey, 2006; 2012). That is to say, public opinion has to some extent not been able to influence the dynamics of institutional change and institutional settings where the market-led development has always been argued as dominant over the social branch. Here perhaps, indeed, there are significant questions about the role of communicative planning to promote participatory democracy in this contemporary world (Brownill & Carpenter, 2007).

For this reason, it is necessary to explore the exercise of power and how it arises, through which participatory process is managed and articulated to particular outcomes that may limit the power of participants. Accordingly, this illustrates that the participatory process are fraught with potentially conflicting arguments because ‘considerable power rests with the decision-maker and his/her subjective judgment’ (Aitken, 2010: 252). In this regard, communicative planning is actually ‘serve as a legitimizing strategy for powerful interests given that it essentially disguises the manner in which power operates, privileges the already powerful’ (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2013: 249). This significantly led state to have absolute power to ‘rubber stamping’ the neo-liberal agenda in the name of neo-liberal solution. Further, this state’s anticipation signaled neo-liberalism to exclude some affected group that hardly struggle for their right to be heard (Hashim, 2005; Howitt & Lunkapis, 2010; Porter, 2014). In fact, this existing social fragmentation arose partly as a result of globalization, privatization and liberalization policies that further ‘led to the abuse of power’ in order to serve the economic interest (Bruton, 2007: 11). One significant result of this legitimation process through democratic communicative practice (Forester, 2012; Healey, 2012b; Inch, 2014) explicit manifestations of ‘consistently marginalized or eroded by those with far more influential rights’ in the decision-making process (Porter, 2014: 389). Of course, it is certainly true that ‘[b]ecoming democratic is therefore a process by which people reclaim their own power’ (Purcell, 2013: 92), however, it thus seems that the communicative planning efforts is inherently linked as a means of limiting the exercise of power in planning decision-making process (Allmendinger & Haughton, 2012; Fox-Roger & Murphy, 2013). Consequently, the underlying premise of communicative planning poses a far more critical challenge as this mechanism so often perpetrating social inequality. As such,
by understanding Foucauldian concept of power in communicative planning has more to contribute to these questions, and inherently useful to study how governance practice and their implications for planning.

5. Re-emphasizing the role of planners

For all of its flaws and problem, the insight of governance lies in its emphasize on the role of planners. Indeed, a rich literature indicate that it is the responsibility of planners to deal with uncertainty (Gunder & Hillier, 2009; De Roo, 2010; Nilsson, 2010) and be able to adapt to the consequences of neo-liberalism (Clifford & Tewdwr-Jones, 2013; Low, 1991; Sager, 2013). In line with this, it is fundamentally reflected the practical and wise judgement of governance in the planning process, in which planners are well-placed to engage and transform for a more democratic form of planning (Campbell, 2012; Clifford & Tewdwr-Jones, 2013; Fainstein & Campbell, 2012; Gunder, 2014; Gunder & Hillier, 2009; Sager, 2013).

However, planners often operate within the constraints of democracy and bureaucratic procedure, ‘where the planners provide recommendations but political leaders make the decisions’ (Tironi, 2013: 3). As Harper and Stein (2006: 263) argues that planning supposed to be a democratic process, hence, it may turn out ‘to have undercurrents that serve certain [elite] interests other than those it purports to serve.’ Through these, planning operates in the strand of conflict and contested forms. Such practices of planning, ‘involves delicate day-to-day choices about whether to follow the rules, or whether to change them, to transform the structure’ (Healey, 2006: 47; 2010; 2012a; Huxley, 2010). Here perhaps, planning still need an account of what the practice of planner is all about in this contemporary governance because planning has evolved (Van Assche et al. 2014a). In fact, Clifford and Tewdwr-Jones (2013: xii) claim,

‘what has been missing to date, is the planner’s own responses to and perceptions of this maelstrom of change. In fact, the voice of the planner has been curiously absent from both conceptualisations and analyses of planning reform over the last 20 years.’

Therefore, planning must adapt to a rapidly changing world in order to survive especially because planning obviously play a crucial part to arrange ‘the order of power through procedures and hierarchies and therefore they are tools of governing and structuring the possible field of action’ (Ploger, 2001: 227). This is important because planners can recognize, anticipate, and work to counteract these influences that can help them to manage conflict and other resources ‘by the interplay of power and interests rather than just the result of economic or political factors’ (Clifford & Tewdwr-Jones, 2013: 236).

6. Conclusion

The ideas of communicative planning resonates in this paper is defined as an important basis to undertake planning practice and as an integral part of participatory democracy in the 21st century challenges. Despite criticism that communicative planning only serve the neo-liberal ideology (Purcell, 2008; Bengs, 2005), hence, it need urgent attention to interrogate of the effects of communicative planning as this discourse might affect individual’s ability to influence and bring a voice to decision-
making. It is vital because ‘the planning decisions imposed by governments must be justified to those burdened by the plans, and justification must appeal to evidence and arguments acceptable to the citizens’ (Sager, 2013: 19). However, in reality this practice is often fail to fulfil promises (Gunder, 2014).

As such, the exploration of Foucault’s concept of power is significance to look at a wide variety of planning practices in this contemporary neo-liberal world. This paper contends that it is significant in determining how relations of power and forms of resistance and domination are linked, how such regimes are contested, and thus how it might be possible to act differently in planning practice. This is true, as Innes and Booher (2014: 13) succinctly puts,

‘…to bridge the multiple perspectives planning theorists should focus more research on the role of communication in planning and incorporate into their thinking work already published that can shed light on how communication has power.’

Here perhaps, indeed, planning and the planning profession itself need to engage and transform for a more democratic form of planning in response to the conflict underpinned by neo-liberal globalization.

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