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The Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes

John Forester

(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999)

A Review by Pitch Pongsawat

Since the 1980's, when the 'specter' of state intervention was at last being exorcised from models of planning practice, planning professionals have been caught in a malaise. In an era of ascendant neo-liberalism, 'market-based' approaches have robbed the profession of some of its former grandeur. Lest we despair, John Forester has spent much of this period relaying the stories of practicing planners in the hope that we may find new values in their experiences. *The Deliberative Practitioner* is Forester's latest take on this task.

In this book, we see contemporary planners telling themselves how significant their work is — before leaving their houses, while at their desks, or caught in a routine meeting. By focusing on the day-to-day, Forester's work is an important example how the justification of planning can take new form. Where before the 'public good' justified planning at a macroscopic scale - which implied state intervention - here we find justification through the planner's routine roles in the processes of participation.

The Deliberative Practitioner devotes much attention to planners in the act of reminding themselves that their lives are meaningful. Yet, what do we get from reading a book about planners written and told by the planners themselves? Is this the way to go about justifying the planning profession? What might we have read from a book on how deliberative and inclusive planning is from the point of view of the worst off, the excluded, or those who have been affected by planning and planners? Perhaps it is too coincidental that this new justification for planning sits so comfortably with the more limited scope of planning (and the state in general) in contemporary political economy. Is this then simply a justification of the status quo?

If the practicing planner is herself but one among a whole profession struggling to justify itself, this new approach to justification is even more risky. Though attempting to be reflective, the new justification is not

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grounded in a clear debate. At least the old justification related to the ideological dimension of the question, “what is good for the public” as contested between the state and the market – and the tension ultimately made the basis for weighing any justification transparent. In this case though, Forester’s justification of planning through reflection on the practice of planning borders on tautology. Recourse to philosophies of practice and to a whole new vocabulary of ‘deliberative’ planning is somewhat under-specified and ultimately confounding.

Without such external grounding in this model, deliberative planners become like Plato’s philosopher kings, or Nietzsche’s supermen - albeit in the small field of shaping attention or influencing public discussion. That is to say planners achieve justification by willing it so, by claiming for themselves and planning institutions that they constitute a meaningful and significant public institution within a weak and limited state.

The central but controversial contribution of Forester’s book is his attempt to introduce the notion of deliberative democracy into planning. The theory he is speaking to is not rational planning or advocacy planning, but the reflective planning of Schon’s *Reflective Practitioner* (1983). Forester may just achieve his goal of grounding planning practice as a learning process in a political and democratic realm. This achievement is done in two ways.

First, Forester problematizes the notion and existence of the “public” as contentious and full with power and domination. Second, he suggests the role of planners as promoters of deliberative democracy, who engage in the politics of meaning, of listening, learning, and shaping attention in the participatory planning process. But this has little to offer to advocacy planners or those who work outside state institutions, or those who commit themselves to represent various interests in the planning process where the capacity to shape is restricted. In *The Deliberative Practitioner*, ‘planner’ and ‘planning’ are narrowly defined, and seem to be those who serve the interests of existing power structures: bureaucratic planners and the planning department.

The troublesome element of Forester’s deliberative practitioner results from focusing too much on the deliberative learning process in a fashion that justifies gradual disassociation from issues of class. Though Forester might encourage Deliberative Practitioners to engage in political conflicts, the stories we receive from Forester do not provide substantial socio-political background on the planners themselves, and therefore

leave the reader unable to understand their political motivations. The only two major criteria Forester seems to focus on are their affiliation with the state (as ‘official’ planners or contractors) and their educational background (planning education). Real planning issues thus become exogenous — challenging issues “out there,” that planners should not be afraid to jump into. They only ought to make sure that the planning process is as inclusive as possible.

Thus conceived, only a deliberative ideology of liberalism justifies planners as professionals. What would have been the case if mass mobilization took place in some these planning cases? Could we justify planners who forge organic ties to the oppressed or the worst-off and try to infiltrate into the power structure?

For what it is worth, Forester’s book should help liberal planners to operate more meaningfully by engaging in the micro-politics of planning process and trying to expand the public sphere as much as possible. But truly, any deliberative planning *should* move to ground practice in the perceptions and conditions of the worst off, rather than in political philosophy and philosophy of science.

To be certain, advocacy and radically inclined planners should read this “Chicken Soup for the Planner’s Soul” to learn more about the complexity of the transformation in the planning process from a purely state activity into the realm of civil society (while Deliberative Practitioners justify themselves as leaders in civil society). Certainly, study of the frustration of these planners, how they cope with their own existence, and teach each other to continue the planning process without transforming it structurally will shed light on how to transcend the deeper malaise of a neo-liberal state and its affiliated centers of domination in civil society.