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PROGRESSIVE CITIES AND CRITICAL PRACTICE:
Toward a Meeting of the Twain

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Recent work in planning and political science has shown the dura-
bility of liberal hopes for "progressive cities" (Clavel 1986, Clavel and
Wiewel 1991, DeLeon 1992, Goldsmith and Blakely 1992). In Chi-
cago, New York, and San Francisco, long-dominant "pro-growth coali-
tions" have fallen to alternative coalitions who tried to ensure that
more resources reached or remained in the hands of "the community"
(Mollenkopf 1983 and 1993, Elkin 1987, Stone 1989, DeLeon 1992,
Clavel and Wiewel 1991). In practice, this diversion of resources
tended to mean more power for resident-controlled neighborhood
groups (Castells 1983), more resources for non-profit economic and
housing development corporations (Mier and Moe 1991), more oppor-
tunities for public participation in local decision-making (Keating and
Krumholz 1991), and constraints on large-scale real estate developers
(DeLeon 1992).

The examinations of local politics under the progressive coalitions
sometimes focus explicitly on the role of public-sector planning offices
in carrying out a progressive agenda (Clavel and Wiewel 1991, Clavel
1986). At least as relevant for practicing planners as the works on spe-
cific cities, however, have been those aimed directly at defining
"progressive planning" (Forester 1989, 1990), sometimes known as
"critical planning practice." Unlike the discussions of the role of plan-
ning in progressive city government, the theoretical work on critical
practice focuses on the everyday world of the public-sector city plan-
ner—whether or not she operates in a "progressive city" (Healey
1992).

There are few a priori reasons these two strains of work—examina-
tion of progressive cities and theorizing about critical planning prac-
tice—should need reconciliation, since they examine distinct phenom-
ena at different scales. But the strands have recently become inter-
twined, and in the process the same "progressive" label has been
stamped on both. This has occurred for at least two reasons: both con-
cerns appeared in the literature at roughly the same time; and perhaps
more importantly, two writers from the different strands have collabo-
rated on a book intended to show us how to make "equity planning"
work (Krumholz and Forester 1990).

The definition of "progressive planning," especially as it has been
developed in works by Forester (1989, 1990), Krumholz (with Forester,
1990), and Clavel (1986), causes difficulty and confusion. On the one

hand, there is the use of planning to further a progressive agenda. This is Krumholz's main interest, as it is Clavel's. On the other hand, there is Forester's main concern: the transformation of planning into a more democratic activity that improves the lives of its participants. Although both of these kinds of planning have been called progressive, they are certainly not the same thing, and in fact are not necessarily even mutually supportive.

In this essay, I examine more closely the details, assumptions, and implications of both strands of progressive planning. To enforce the distinction between the two, I will call Forester's field of interest "critical practice," because its focus—at least in *Planning in the Face of Power* (Forester 1989)—is primarily on making planning practice itself more critical of its own and others' assumptions. I will continue to use the work of Clavel and Krumholz as examples of "progressive planning," because as I will explain in more detail below, both Clavel and Krumholz have specific political goals in mind, and seek to achieve them through strategic use of the city planning bureaucracy.

I focus their differences through the lens they have both used: city planning in Cleveland in the 1970s under the leadership of Norman Krumholz (1978; with Forester, 1990). Although the Cleveland planners look progressive in this light, they scarcely look critical, despite *post hoc* attempts to portray them as such. Forester and Krumholz's dubious attempt notwithstanding, recent extensions of Forester's work offer few, if any, examples of the use of critical practice in progressive city contexts. Instead, thoughts on critical practice have been swept into a fashionable current of recent planning theory: postmodernism. Fusion with this often non-progressive paradigm, however, is not the only possible future for critical practice. New progressive city governments offer fertile ground (and not just ex post facto examples) for both theorists and practitioners who seek the closer correspondence between critical planning practice and progressive local politics.

Critical Practice: Key Features and Shortcomings

Forester's *Planning in the Face of Power* (1989) is thus far our clearest expression of theory on critical planning practice. The work draws equally on Forester's experiences in city planning departments, his reflections on what city planners do, and the critical theory of Jürgen Habermas. It is at once a reaction to previous planning theory and a prescription for future planning theory and practice; it demands greater openness and participation in the planning process.

Forester argues that the existing state-economic structure tends systematically to exclude certain groups from meaningful participation in the most important institutions for democratic life. Systems-rational planning, which Forester sees as the dominant paradigm of planning practice, is clearly not capable of assessing the practical context of

power relations and political economic structures. The veil of neutrality blinds technical planners to these relationships by casting an illusion that science, not democracy, holds the answers for political problems. In this way, the dominant political-economic structure restricts fulfillment of participatory ideals.

Forester poses critical practice as the solution to these restrictions. Armed with a clear assessment of power and economic structures, planners should "be responsible to anticipate and counteract alterable, misleading, and disabling claims, and learn to nurture well-informed, genuinely democratic politics and discourse instead" (Forester 1989: 22). Planners should, in short, filter and clarify information in order to promote democracy.

Information is, for Forester, a key source of power in the public planning process and one that planners can have some role in controlling. In particular, planners need to anticipate and be prepared to deal with distortions, some of which are "inevitable" and some of which are "unnecessary" (Forester 1989: 33). Inevitable distortions are those elements of indeterminacy and randomness that so preoccupied the liberal critics of rational planning and gave rise to such concepts as "muddling through" and "bounded rationality" (March and Simon 1958, Lindblom 1959). Unnecessary distortions, on the other hand, relate to "constraints that are contingent on mere relations of custom, status, or power that are hardly inevitable or immutable" (Forester 1989: 36). Forester urges planners to concentrate on the unnecessary— but avoidable—distortions, offering four examples of how planners can play this role: by educating and informing citizens; by assisting community organizing; by encouraging local autonomy as a balance to professional power, and by broadening potential alternatives. (Forester 1989: 79).

Forester's work leaves several questions unresolved, most importantly the basis for labeling something as "distorted communication" and the meaning of a "clear assessment" of social and economic structures. These unresolved questions are the starting point for progressives as they seek to construct an alternative form of local government. Forester's book is not directly about transforming the workplace or changing the distribution of wealth and ownership. Rather, it is about how to liberate interaction within small groups of people, placing great emphasis on "distorted communication."

Forester clearly recognizes the need for improvement. He simply does not pursue it himself, noting:

> Misinformation and systematic distortions of communication may be anticipated in a variety of political-economies, and our analysis here attempts only to provide a framework for research that suggests the dimensions in which hegemonic misinformation and communicative distortion can be

expected to occur. It remains for analysts of planning in capitalist, bureaucratic socialist, and other political-economies to specify the contents of expectable misinformation generated in those institutional settings (Forester 1989: 215).

But the assessment of what to expect in different institutional settings must include not only an analysis of what to expect in the current institutional setting but also a construction of an alternative program, and an analysis of exactly how information will and will not work in that institutional setting. In the next section, I therefore discuss Clavel's brand of progressive planning practice to show that critical practice only becomes progressive practice when it is attached to an agenda and a critique of political-economic institutions.

Progressive Cities, Progressive Planning

Many recent observers of politics in American cities have argued that business dominates affairs so totally that it steamrolls any opposition and rules practically without question as a "growth machine" (Molotch 1976, Logan and Molotch 1987). These observers seemed interested in local politics only as an example of the limits of local actors in the face of larger economic trends that lay entirely beyond their control. This is true both of radicals (e.g., Gottdiener 1987) and of those with roots in public choice theory (most notably, Peterson 1981).

The history of the 1980s, however, raises serious questions about the existence of any growth "machine," though the potency of pro-growth coalitions is nearly impossible to refute (Mollenkopf 1983, 1993; Elkin 1987; Stone 1989). In several major U.S. cities, in fact, the 1980s have seen successful challenges by political coalitions against the candidates and policies of big business and real estate.[1] In Mollenkopf's view, this record of success among "liberal, inclusive coalitions" requires one to explain the staying power of the (relatively) conservative Ed Koch, rather than the election of David Dinkins (Mollenkopf 1993: 194).

In San Francisco, city planning was a key arena of struggle and success for the progressive coalition. DeLeon (1992) provides convincing evidence that San Francisco progressives built their coalition out of three different groups—neighborhood activists, environmentalists, and traditional liberals—around successive and ultimately successful ballot initiatives to cap downtown office growth. Following their victory in 1986 with a ballot initiative capping the growth of office space, progressives elected Art Agnos to the Mayor's office.

With the exception of the San Francisco ballot measures, the case studies of progressive coalitions have dwelt only superficially with the role of planning in progressive city government. One important exception is Clavel's (1986) comparative study of progressive cities. Clavel outlines three themes that, for him, characterize progressive planning practice. Planners worked toward public ownership of their cities'

productive resources and investments. They did so, second, in a spirit of opposition that pitted "the interests of city residents against corporate and suburban interests" (Clavel 1986: 191). Third,

> progressive planners took methodological positions that specifically recognized the presence and interests of present residents in the city–in contrast to earlier political methodologies, which focused on such activities as the location of factories, shopping centers, or residential districts, and assumed that the interests of individuals would somehow be derived from these locational economic patterns (Clavel 1986: 191-92).

Clavel draws these generalizations from his observation of Hartford, Cleveland, Berkeley, Santa Monica, and Burlington between 1969 and 1984. In most cases, minority and progressive coalitions achieved electoral success and then initiated progressive planning practice; the important exception is Cleveland. But whether city planning departments became progressive on their own account or were motivated by elected officials and their constituents, Clavel argues that planners were crucially important in the success of progressive agendas because they constitute a vital link with the public. The role of planners in these cities, he writes, "was to nurture a movement culture that could sustain both administration and popular participation, while the city government kept operating" (Clavel 1986: 18). In this way, planners operated politically, and successfully, toward progressive goals.

Critical Practice and Progressive Planning Have Not Met

Despite Clavel's interest in mass participation, he spends little time discussing the true meaning and content of that participation. He seeks progress toward a future that includes specific material gains, i.e., toward the implementation of an agenda based on a critique of existing conditions. Forester, on the other hand, seems concerned almost exclusively with "methodological positions that specifically recognized the presence and interests of present residents in the city," as Clavel puts it (1986: 191). Forester leaves to others the tasks of developing a critique of institutions and formulating a responsive agenda.

In the next two sections I examine examples of both critical practice and progressive planning. One of Clavel's "progressive planners," Norman Krumholz, seems "progressive," but his practices do not appear to meet the criteria of critical practice. Conversely, the examples from the literature drawing on Forester (and on his inspiration, Habermas) have not developed a critique or agenda, even though critical practice requires both critique and reconstruction. The examples seem more akin to simple honest communication and interpersonal relations than to critical practice as developed in *Planning in the Face of Power*.

Progressive Planning is not Necessarily Critical Practice

Reading Krumholz (1978, 1990), it seems that the means and end of planning in Cleveland under his directorship were always clear: use State power to help the poor. In this sense, one might contend that although Krumholz was political and a progressive, he did not engage in critical practice.

Krumholz presided over the Cleveland planning department in the difficult years of deindustrialization in the late 1970s. Faced with the decline of the city's traditional manufacturing-based economy, planners there could do little to blunt a decline in living standards. But there was some political support for ameliorative activity, and Krumholz attempted where he could to open up additional windows of opportunity for intervention. In Krumholz's view, these examples point out several things about the "responsibilities of planners in the declining central city," including to "fight off wasteful or counterproductive uses for public money, . . . point out what is possible and what is probably impossible to accomplish in the declining central city, [and] . . . address the most pressing problems of its residents" (Krumholz et al. 1978: 35-36).

The point was not necessarily political mobilization per se, but rather to achieve a specific "equity agenda." Referring to the planners working in Cleveland, Krumholz and Forester write (1990: 64):

> The strategies we developed over the years were negotiating strategies, designed not to stop development but to trade, to give in order to get. We sought not merely to make deals, but to pursue our equity agenda. In all of these cases we were being asked to 'give'—zoning adjustments, consent agreements, subsidies, and so on—so why not hope to get the best we could for the city in return?

Krumholz distinguishes this approach from traditional planning:

> In Cleveland we have focused upon advocating the interests of the City's low- and moderate-income residents. This goal was not given to us; we chose it for ourselves . . . While the political process demands that goals remain ambiguous, the planning process requires that they be clearly defined. Unless planners are prepared to set goals for themselves, they will flounder aimlessly in search of direction or serve as rationalizers and expediters for the narrow and shifting interests of others (Krumholz et al. 1978: 36-37).

Krumholz and his staff acted, in other words, in a manner consistent with the means-end rationality of the systems-rational framework. Because no one else set clear goals for them, the planners became the decision-makers and set goals for themselves. From that point on, their actions—though politically savvy—were much more instrumental than "critical" in the sense that Forester understands. Even Cleveland's planners mobilized the poor, they did not seek dialogue and unconstrained

processes. Rather, they discovered and employed the methods that would get them clearly to their desired end. In this light, Krumholz's and Forester's *post hoc* rationalization and attempts to cast the Cleveland experience as a "critical planning" exercise seems labored:

> By defining city needs, organizing potential beneficiaries, and articulating strategies too, the planners helped to create the political space to do [their] work. Long before "solving" any problems, these planners worked through coalitions, task forces, the media, and neighborhood groups to formulate problems and solutions, to call both public and decision-makers' attention to equity-related issues of displacement, threatened urban services, transit needs, and more (Krumholz and Forester 1990: 219-220).

But neither Krumholz's 1978 article, written while he was still Cleveland's planning director, nor *Making Equity Planning Work*, written 12 years later, offers convincing examples of Cleveland planners' working "through coalitions, task forces, the media, and neighborhood groups *to formulate problems*" (Krumholz and Forester 1990: 219, my emphasis). Indeed, as noted above, the planners chose their goals themselves; speaking of the planning department, Krumholz refers to "our agenda" (Krumholz and Forester 1990: 62).

There may have been indirect evidence from popular voting and even from urban riots that the poor wanted more attention. Krumholz and Forester strain credibility, however, when they claim that Cleveland's planners engaged in critical practice, if critical practice requires that planners bring all interested parties to the table and allow them to participate in a dialogue that defines problems before moving on to solutions. Asking a neighborhood group what it wants and mobilizing its residents to demand it sounds like good old fashioned politics to me, not transformative dialogue.

Critical Practice is not Necessarily Progressive

Examples of how planning practice can be critical in Forester's sense have begun only recently to appear in the literature. Those studying planning practice have found examples of "undistorted communication" and transformative dialogue. But the literature offers no evidence that critical practice leads toward progressive goals.

Marshall and Peters (1985), for example, introduce the idea of the "ideal learning community," an idea with some of the same roots as Forester's.[2] In such a community, participants share an "underlying and intersubjective agreement involved in rule-making" and a concern with both "questioning and changing particular rules and practices and how, in general, to question and change rules and practices" (Marshall and Peters 1985: 278). The authors fail to specify, however, exactly who participates and in what stages of the evaluation process, nor do they describe an institutional framework or pose an agenda for alterna-

tives. Without this specification, we cannot call this "ideal learning community" a progressive one.

Other recent work following ideas consistent with *Planning in the Face of Power* focuses directly on participants in the process, but usually these participants are planners. Healey, for example, notes that

> Both knowledge production and exchange are infused with ideological and political practices that protect the powerful and confuse the powerless. Planning, if it is to contribute to the enterprise of democratic social change, must avoid such practices, and find ways of challenging the production of what Forester refers to as "misinformation" (Healey 1992: 10).

But in the development of her article, Healey has no basis on which to identify "political practices that protect the powerful and confuse the powerless" (Healey 1992: 10). After examining the daily interactions of a particular city planner, Healey seems to equate honesty and openness with critical practice, concluding:

> The [assistant chief planning officer] actively sought to change the framework by making local government more open and sensitive to all clients than had traditionally been the case . . . He helped to change his context, particularly by showing how senior public officials could operate interactively to increase the transparency of bureaucratic systems (Healey 1992: 18-19).

Healey and Marshall and Peters cannot tell us whether these examples of critical practice actually meet the goals of undistorted communication and democracy that Forester sets out. Even less evident is the connection between these professionals' practice and the progressive goals of community protection, public ownership of community resources, and opposition to the forces of big business.

Alternative Futures for Critical Practice

Thus far, the best examples of progressive planning practice demonstrate that planners achieved progressive goals not by constructing "ideal learning communities," but by controlling information and using it very strategically toward specific ends. Instances of critical practice that appear thus far in the literature, conversely, seem disconnected from progressive goals, despite Forester's explicit call for analysis of these concerns.

This is not to say that progressive planning must remain divorced from critical practice. I believe that it is possible, but that those who would develop it need to identify the source of, and the cure for, structural distortions. Lacking a clear agenda, critical practice will result in the arbitrary and chaotic use (and therefore, potential abuse) of information. It may also simply result in endless analysis of communication itself. The latter possibility is already manifest in poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism: A Celebration of Discourses

Many planning theorists have recently begun to make use of post-structuralist analysis. Poststructuralism poses a total critique of modernity (and is also, therefore, known as postmodernism); its leading proponent, Michel Foucault, is principally concerned with the "discourses," "texts" and "practices" that reveal the expansion of power that has taken place in the modern age (Rabinow 1984: 7; Bernstein 1992: 146). As part of its critique, poststructuralism also calls attention to discourses that have been systematically silenced, including those of women (DeLauretis 1987: 1; Sandercock and Forsythe 1990: 68), blacks, prisoners, gays (Bernstein 1992: 160), and others.

One can immediately see a connection between Forester's and Healey's practice stories and the poststructuralists' fascination with discourse. The voices of practicing planners, and their unique stories, constitute a part of the planning discourse that has been absent (even if it has not been actively silenced) from recent planning theory. Mandelbaum argues that "if we will not (or cannot) maintain multiple stories then we weaken the competing communities of our hearts or (less judgmentally) alter the balance between them" (Mandelbaum 1991: 210). Planners and policy-makers need these stories to make moral decisions.

But successful as it may be as critique, and interesting as it may be as a source of stories, most of the planning theory that has developed out of poststructuralism lacks an agenda. Although it opens our eyes to layers of power relationships, and convinces us that both power and resistance are omnipresent, poststructuralism gives us no criteria that allow us to decide among those points of power or resistance (see esp. Bernstein 1992: 161). Lacking that basis, the only logical response is a return to liberalism, perhaps a version of advocacy planning in which we are satisfied if everyone gets a turn at the podium. We get a hint of this when Mandelbaum tells us, "Planning executives (and those who write about them) may, quite reasonably be underwhelmed to discover that their sensibilities are 'postmodern' and that they are eclectic pluralists in their bones" (Mandelbaum 1991: 209). His observation is interesting in its explicit connection of postmodernism (poststructuralism) and pluralism.

In a response to a postmodern critic of *Planning in the Face of Power*, Forester agrees that poststructuralism may be a blind alley. He also renews his call for advancing the "tasks of social re-construction":

> Imagine . . . that the Foucaultians are right; power is everywhere: in apartheid, in a lover's most tender kiss, in a process of democratic participation as free as possible of exclusions based on gender, race, and class. Well, now that we know that power's ever-present, do not we want to distinguish how some forms may be more oppressive, exclusive,

> dominating, sexist, (etc) than others? How will we make
> such distinctions between respecting others and demeaning
> them? Once we recognize simply that power is everywhere,
> once we enter this new age of post-innocence, we still need
> to think critically about, to evaluate—and thus to develop
> pragmatic criteria regarding—modes of self-knowledge, ra-
> tionality, legitimacy, democratic discourse and so on . . .
> We need practically and politically to address our tasks of
> social re-construction—now (Forester 1990: 56).

Thus far, however, none of the work that Forester has inspired
seems to address those tasks. This is not a fatal flaw, but if no one
combines Forester's recommended style of planning with analyses of
real institutions and development of real alternatives, his legacy may
be only the proliferation and celebration of "discourses" instead of the
project of reconstruction he claims to want.

Future II: Progressive Practice

An unexplored future for critical planning practice would connect
the interactions that interest Forester with the politics that interest
Clavel, DeLeon, Mollenkopf and others. Most of these astute observers
of city politics have a well-developed sense of the sources of bias and
misinformation in local government. If Mollenkopf is correct, then we
should see an increased number of progressive city governments,
though they will always suffer from internal contradictions as they at-
tempt to reconcile the groups they rely on to govern effectively with
those they depend on for votes.[3] Clavel points toward, but does not
explore exhaustively, the importance of how city planners do their job
in the ability of progressive governments to reconcile these two. Even
in places that are not governed by "progressives," planners can be
guided by the same ideals that Clavel and others highlight in progres-
sive locations.

Thus far, there have been no convincing attempts to explore
whether and how critical practice and the pursuit of a progressive
agenda support or contradict one another. Forester offers an excellent
framework for that exploration, one that no one else has matched. I
hope that, amidst the proliferating discourses, progressive planners and
critical theorists alike begin to address one another more directly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

[1]For a review of Chicago under Harold Washington, see Clavel and Wiewel 1991 and Goldsmith and Blakely 1992; on San Francisco under Art Agnos, see DeLeon 1992; on New York, see Mollenkopf 1993.

[2]Forester relies and builds on certain of Jürgen Habermas' works. See generally *Planning Theory Newsletter* Winter 1990, discussion of *Planning in the Face of Power.*

[3]In short, elected officials (Mayor Koch, in the case of New York) normally require support from business and other elites to enable them to govern, but to stay in power must mobilize electoral majorities that sometimes differ dramatically from the elites that fund campaigns and facilitate policy-making. See Mollenkopf 1993, and especially Stone 1989 and Elkin 1987 on the relationship between local elected officials and the business community in New York, Atlanta, and Dallas respectively.

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