THE LANGUAGE OF PLANNING: A Look at the Uses of Critical and Feminist Theory

Lisa J. Servon

The point of engaging in political struggles . . . is to alter power relations. —Paul Rabinow

Planning theory is an ill-defined body of literature that is supposed to guide planning practice. The object of this paper is to challenge the appropriateness of traditional planning theory, to expose the places where it grows thin, and to begin the question-asking process that can lead to change. John Friedmann (1987: 318) writes recently of a "crisis in planning," marked by an apparent failure of scientific and technical reason. In planning, recognition of the inadequacy of the "rational" branch of theory arises from the recognition that planning is messy business, that values vie with facts in a decision-making arena dominated by politics rather than rational objectivity. Acknowledging the political nature of planning entails asking questions about power, about the fault lines along which decisions get made and through which the allocation of resources takes place.

Critical theory, which involves challenging generally accepted institutions, power structures, and ways of analyzing the world, has recently garnered support in planning circles as a tool that might help to correct this imbalance. John Forester, the leading advocate of critical practice in planning today, has formulated a strategy of communicative action for planners to improve their own practice:

> By recognizing planning as normatively role-structured communication action which distorts, covers up, or reveals to the public the prospects and possibilities they face, a critical theory of planning aids us practically and ethically as well (Forester 1980: 283).

I begin this essay by examining the historical and theoretical roots of critical theory and practice, looking specifically at the contributions of Michel Foucault, and explaining some of the basic concepts. I further discuss the problematic aspects of Foucault's conception of power, moving to an illustration of how feminist theory has been much more usefully explicit about power. I then illustrate how feminist theorists have begun to use these concepts in their work in order to show how planners and planning theorists may similarly appropriate these ideas. I also explain how planning theorists, such as John Forester (1980, 1982, 1991), Ann Forsyth and Leonie Sandercock (1990), have begun to translate these theories into practical strategies that planners can and

should include in their methodological toolkits. I close by providing an agenda for moving from theory to practice.

Historical Roots of Critical Theory

According to Manuel Castells, ". . .history and society. . .are formed by an articulation of production, experience, and power," the last of which is "founded upon the state" (Castells 1983: 306). In Foucault's work, power links up with disciplinary control, which is historically related to the rise of capitalism.[1] The accumulation of capital, as Foucault describes it, depended upon (among other things) the availability of techniques of documentation making possible "the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts, the calculation of the gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given 'population'" (Foucault, quoted in Rabinow 1984: 21). In other words, statistics, literally translated to mean "the science of the state." The development of these techniques in the 19th century enabled the state "to produce an increasingly totalizing web of control. . .intertwined with and dependent on its ability to produce an increasing specification of individuality" (Rabinow 1984: 21). Where exactly does discipline fit in to the capitalist program? Its aim, according to Foucault, is to forge "a docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, quoted in Rabinow 1984: 17). The dangerous part of this self-conscious molding of people is its covert nature. Discipline becomes exercised so subtly that individuals cannot separate what is truly "them" from what is not.

Rabinow discusses how power continued to be deployed into the 20th century, citing particularly the example of Hubert Lyautey, Governor-general of Morocco from 1912 to 1925. Lyautey and his architect-planners saw their task as conceiving of and producing a new social ordonnance that could be applied to men in different cultural and social circumstances. "Their goal, a kind of technocratic self-colonization, was to develop a new form of power relations where 'healthy' social, economic, and cultural relations could unfold" (Rabinow 1986: 260-261).

For Foucault, then, power is productive—productive of particular kinds of behaviors, and productive of knowledge.[2] Foucault's methodology is to foreground the accepted truths manufactured by the state and, beginning with the assumption that these truths are socially constructed, to understand their history, i.e., what historical set of circumstances made these things "true?" It is this attitudinal approach and methodology that informs critical theory and practice.

What is Critical Theory/Practice?

Critical theory takes from Foucauldian thought the assumption that all knowledge is socially constructed. Knowledge is produced with an eye to upholding and maintaining current positions of power; it is

shaped and distorted in order to preserve the status quo. Knowledge that is processed, communicated, and subsequently ingested and accepted by society hides as much as it discloses. Critical theory recognizes that no methodology is value-neutral, that even the seeming objectivity of science can be and sometimes is manipulated to achieve specific ends.

Critical theory advocates searching for the truth[3] that underlies these power relationships, challenging institutional arrangements and hierarchies, and giving voice to the concerns of the disenfranchised. It also requires that the knowledge-producer, be she scientist, journalist, or planner, go through a process of self-reflection to understand and make conscious motivations which she may have repressed.

Self-reflection combines with discourse to provide the critical practitioner with her two most powerful tools. Discourse is a tricky term. Most simply, we can think of it as a kind of conversation or argument between languages in which different opinions or viewpoints compete for primacy and acceptance. In order to understand the more complex connotation of the term as it relates to critical theory, however, it becomes necessary here to make a slight digression in order to discuss yet another term that figures significantly in this line of thinking—language.[4]

Language, like knowledge, is socially constructed. Analysis of language, therefore, requires that we historicize its ways of establishing meaning and representing the world. This analytical exercise results in our understanding that meaning is not given, *a prior*, but rather resides in a state of flux and transformation, open to contestation, unstable rather than fixed. Using one language as a lens with which to view the world operates to maintain and perpetuate conventional models into which the world is fit, a process that sometimes becomes the equivalent of jamming a round peg into a square hole.

Discourse allows for the surfacing of alternative views, but only if the conversation allows for the participation of languages, rather than one privileged Language.[5] Poststructuralists, who have provided critical theorists with fodder for discussion, maintain that "there is no basic or ultimate correspondence between language and the world" (Scott 1988: 35); no one best way of describing or understanding. Languages as meaning-systems are created, appropriated, and manipulated by those in power usually to maintain, but sometimes to alter, the status quo.

If language is seemingly stable and unified, albeit falsely and sometimes only for brief periods, discourse makes no such pretenses (and herein lies its power) —it moves constantly and continuously changes rhythm and shape. In establishing meaning, languages within the discursive process appeal to "truths"—universals or absolutes—that are "assumed to be outside human invention, either already known or dis-

coverable through scientific inquiry" (Scott 1988: 35). The power of these truths derives from our taking them as given and framing arguments around them rather than beginning discussions by questioning their validity.

The methodologies planners use to understand and to solve (or resolve) problems fit the above definition of language, in the sense that they constitute and construct meaning. Methodologies function as meaning-systems to package and present the world—they provide us with models for making sense of that which goes on around us. If we can construct a situation in which discourse is allowed to operate properly—that is, in which other languages are voiced and heard equally—we can use this tool (discourse) to dissolve the glue that binds language (read methodology) to the world, breaking the hold on truth that the technical/rational, scientific methodology claims.[6]

The Difference Gender Makes

At the outset, a word about the importance of looking at planning theory and practice through a gendered lens is required. I understand gender to be a social technology,[7] one that is embedded throughout culture "both as a material, social institution and as a set of ideologies" (di Leonardo 1991: 30).[8] I contend that the social technology of gender pervades all institutional relationships, and that the ways in which it plays itself out in planning contexts bears closer examination.

It is important to distinguish between the terms "feminine" and "feminist" because they sometimes get mixed up in planning literature and elsewhere. "Feminist" I use here as an adjective, modifying the noun "theory." Feminist theory figures significantly into this discussion because of the way feminist theorists have employed critical theory, a way I believe offers potentially useful information to planning theorists and practitioners. "Feminine" in this discussion refers to a set of ways of knowing about the world, ways that critical practice values. Thus far, planning theorists have confused these two concepts, and have been much more comfortable incorporating feminine ways of knowing into their work than feminist theory.

One of the ways in which feminist theory has been most useful has been in the more careful articulation and explication of power relationships. Foucault accepts rather than questions power. According to Nancy Fraser, this absence of standards regarding uses and abuses of power creates a situation in which "power is productive, ineliminable, and therefore normatively neutral" (Fraser 1989: 31). Feminist theory teases out the complexity and embeddedness of power relationships, and notes that winners and losers often fall out along gender lines. Planners could usefully apply this technique to planning problems. The standard methodologies, however, are of little use in this endeavor.

In their recent paper entitled, "Gender: A New Agenda for Planning Theory," Ann Forsyth and Leonie Sandercock (1990) begin to ferret out the elements of what might grow to be a new methodology for planners. Forsyth and Sandercock argue for an expansion of the "knowledge" part of the knowledge/action equation. Such an expansion, they maintain, would involve adding "connected" ways of knowing to the scientific/technical ways that the discipline currently privileges (Forsyth and Sandercock 1990: 21). Examples of the kinds of information they propose to include are: talking; listening; tacit/intuitive knowledge; creating symbolic forms of art; and acting.[9] I argue that these ways of knowing are not necessarily more "connected" than scientific ways; the point being that the objectivity that science tries to create through *dis*connection is false. Those who promote the interpretive method of inquiry and interactive practice acknowledge the inherently subjective nature of knowledge. Forsyth and Sandercock take this claim one step further, pointing out the dialogic, or discursive character of knowledge fabrication:

> . . . knowledge is a social construction. Different knowledges must be shared, through communication, to construct meaning. The construction of knowledge involves communication, politics, passion. It is an unfinished business (Forsythe and Sandercock 1990: 21).

Recent consideration among social scientists of the above and other alternative ways of knowing challenges the exclusive emphasis on scientific and technical ways of knowing. This challenge could, in turn, lead to a rethinking of how we go about research in planning, and the ultimate formation of a new, more open methodology, one that presents itself as less seamless and impermeable than those currently employed.

And this is where critical theory, and its link to Foucauldian thought, enters back into the discussion. A methodology meeting the demands of the one described above would enter the discursive field with the first task of de-centering, or displacing, concepts around which planners' arguments often revolve—concepts such as community and individualism, equity and efficiency, public and private.[10] Before discussing these concepts, the planner would first have to endeavor to understand the multiple meanings with which she, as well as the other stakeholders in the decision-making process, had loaded the terms.

This idea derives directly from feminist theory, which argues for the creation of new spaces of discourse, and the definition of the terms of another perspective. Teresa DeLauretis calls this alternative perspective "a view from 'elsewhere'":

> I think of it as spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions

> and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparati . . . in the micropolitical practices of daily life and daily resistances that afford both agency and sources of power or empowering investments . . . in counter-practices and new forms of community (DeLauretis 1987: 26).

The description of places within which an alternative theory could take root acknowledges that the movement would not be wholly separate from the current power structure. The structure need not be viewed as a stranglehold operating to paralyze movements for change, which is what many people take away from poststructuralist theory[11]; DeLauretis, Scott, and others employ it instead in a way that opens up the opportunity for social change. Scott, for example, views Foucauldian thought to be taken "more appropriately as a warning against simple solutions to difficult problems, as advising human actors to think strategically and more self-consciously about the philosophical and political implications and meanings of the programs they endorse" (Scott 1988: 36). We can therefore take the lessons learned from critical theory and use them to shift the discourse in a way that illuminates the many-sidedness of reality rather than reifying the status quo.

From Practice to Theory and Back Again

> *But theory must be of a certain kind, if it is to be useful. It must speak to purposes, and not about inevitable forces. It must not be esoteric, but be clear enough to be useful to all sorts of actors.* —Kevin Lynch

When is critical practice appropriate in planning practice? I find it difficult to imagine a situation in which critical practice, with its joint emphases on self-reflection and discourse, would not be desirable. Even in a well-functioning system—one that successfully elicits participation from all sectors of the community, that provides participants with equal access to information, that garners background consensus on relevant issues, and that is not characterized by domination or coercion—these tools can be employed to ensure the continued good workings of the system. I realize that this view may be somewhat idealistic, however, and that there do exist situations in which critical practice may not be given the necessary space in which to work—systems beset by corruption, or in which certain sectors of society refuse to or cannot participate, for example. For critical practice truly to work, there must be listening as well as talking, and a willingness to compromise as well as to contribute.

While it may not be possible to package critical practice and send the planner off to employ it wholesale, I believe it offers the following valuable techniques of action for planning practice, as well as ways of producing knowledge for planning theorists.

Practice:

- The planner should endeavor always to understand her motivations, as well as the values she brings to an issue or decision-making process.
- The planning process must encourage not only participation from populations who have been historically underrepresented, but also validate their ways of participating.[12]
- The planner should expect contradictions, and use the planning process as a learning process to expose, rather than eradicate, such contradictions.
- The planner must use practical action as well as theory to inform the planning process, incorporating the notion of praxis.

Theory:

- Planning theory must make room for alternative ways of knowing about the world, and provide the planner with tools that can help her decide which methodology(ies) are appropriate for the context.
- In understanding knowledge and institutions as socially constructed, critical theory opens up the possibility for change. If it is a truism that we continue to re-make our situation, then we can change it.

The most ambitious of roles that critical theory assigns to the planner is that of change-agent, one who must create the necessary conditions for positive communication, a job that may include altering institutions. Inarguably, a tall order to fill. At the least—and perhaps this is both all and everything we could possibly hope for—the planner within this theory is a manager of discourse, akin to Mel Webber's permissive planner, who is a "facilitator of debate" rather than a substantive expert (Webber 1978: 159).

Forsyth and Sandercock understand planning theory to be political, contested terrain, with little agreement as to what exactly constitutes planning theory (Forsyth and Sandercock 1990: 3). Critical theory may be only a stage within the development of planning theory, perhaps a stopping-place on the way to a better way to *do* planning. John Friedmann writes of a "crisis in planning," marked by an apparent failure of scientific and technical reason (Friedmann 1987: 318). Critical theory has responded to this crisis, not by replacing the technical/rational model with something "new and improved," but by admitting the validity of alternative ways of knowing, and helping us to understand the importance of learning the advantages and drawbacks of any methodology. Perhaps, then, as Marshall McLuhan has stated, we "need a counter-environment as a means of perceiving the dominant one" (McLuhan 1969: 5). Perhaps, too, the crisis of which Friedmann speaks is best thought of as an opportunity, one that will illuminate the seams and cracks in the discourses in which planning theory has been caught, and create a legitimate place for other ways of knowing.

NOTES

[1]The following discussion of Foucault's position rests heavily on Rabinow's interpretation of Foucault's work (see especially Rabinow's "Introduction" in *The Foucault Reader*), although I shall later incorporate readings of Foucault with which Rabinow might not agree.

[2]Some theorists, particularly feminist theorists, take objection with the Foucauldian view of power as productive, and hence as positive. Teresa DeLauretis argues that, "While it would be difficult to disprove that power is productive of knowledges, meanings, and values, it seems obvious enough that we have to make distinctions between the positive effects and the oppressive effects of such production" (DeLauretis 1987: 18).

[3]Whether or not such "truth" exists constitutes a serious debate in planning theory; once you take apart and understand the present system, is there really anything underneath? The important part, I argue, is not end but the means—the process of questioning and unraveling the current system that critical theory emphasizes. Allowing alternatives to surface is the critical issue; any alternative that is adopted will, of course, likewise contain some power source.

[4]Not all critical theorists foreground this concept of language. Yet Foucault and the feminist theorists, who critical theorists and practitioners cite, do weight heavily discussions of language. I believe that such an understanding adds richness and depth to perceptions of the historical and potential role of discourse, which is an important element of critical theory. Additionally, it figures importantly into my own ideas of the possibilities and limitations for critical practice in the context of planning.

[5]M.M. Bakhtin (1981) uses the term "heteroglossia" to describe a situation in which a central, unitary language and an unlimited number of peripheral dialects exist. Too often, according to Bakhtin, we allow these dialects only limited space in which to speak; we seek unity in diversity in the service of Eurocentric agendas. The result of this imposition of unity is to suppress and marginalize these dialects rather than allowing them to shift the terms of discourse.

[6]It could be argued that any methodology claims some sort of superiority over others, but only the scientific/rational one widely has been acknowledged as such since the Enlightenment.

[7]My use of this term rests on Teresa DeLauretis' endeavor to "think of gender along the lines of Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality as a 'technology of sex' and to propose that gender, too, both as representation and as self-representation, is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, and of institutionalized discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life." DeLauretis goes on to assert that, "Like sexuality, . . . gender is not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings, but 'the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations,' in Foucault's words, by the deployment of a 'complex political technology'" (DeLauretis 1987).

[8]di Leonardo goes on to say that "recognizing the embedded nature of gender involves as well an understanding that women must be seen not only in rela-

tion to men but to one another. In any particular population, major social divisions—race/ethnicity, class, religion, age, sexual preference, nationality—will crosscut and influence the meanings of gender division."

[9]These ways of knowing closely parallel the types of action Habermas promotes, which include dramaturgical action and communicative action.

[10]Indeed, economic and planning debates regularly center these terms in the form of binary oppositions. The black/white, yes/no manner in which these oppositions are presented masks the complexity of the relationships between the two terms. Planners often confront these oppositions in the course of their decision-making processes and therefore end up making choices between things that need not be either/or.

[11]This is perhaps one of the most valuable contributions of feminist theory to planning theory. Many people encounter difficulty on a first reading of Foucault because his work can interpreted as offering little hope of escaping from the powerful web of control that the state constructs and maintains.

[12]I am reminded here of recent editorial in *The Nation* describing the current state of women in politics: the author states that there may be a "femalization" in politics but there is as yet no "feminization." In other words, women have begun to participate in increasing numbers, but the system only allows them to play the game if they play by its rules.

REFERENCES

Bakhtin, M.M. 1981. "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Michael Holquist, ed. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Castells, Manuel. 1983. *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements*. Berkeley: UC Press.

DeLauretis, Teresa. 1987. "The Technology of Gender," in *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*. Indiana Press.

di Leonardo, Micaela. 1991. *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Forester, John. 1991. "Practice Stories and the Priority of Practical Judgment," ACSP Conference, unpublished.

_____. 1982. "Planning in the Face of Power," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 48: 67-80.

_____. 1980. "Critical Theory and Planning Practice," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 46: 275-286.

Forsyth, Ann and Leonie Sandercock. 1990. "Gender: A New Agenda for Planning Theory." *Working Paper 521*, IURD, University of California at Berkeley, July.

Fraser, Nancy. 1989. *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Friedmann, John. 1987. *Planning in the Public Domain: From Knowledge to Action*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1969. *Counterblast.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.

Rabinow, Paul. 1984. *The Foucault Reader.* New York: Pantheon Books.

_____. 1986. "Representations are Social Facts: Modernity and Post-Modernity in Anthropology," in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Scott, Joan W. 1988. "Deconstructing Equality-Versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism." *Feminist Studies* 14: 33-50.

Webber, Melvin M. 1978. "A Difference Paradigm for Planning," in Robert W. Burchell and George Sternlieb, *Planning Theory in the 1980's: A Search for Future Directions.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University.