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## **Learning through Conflict at Oxford**

by

James A. Throgmorton

Over the past 10-15 years, a diverse mix of planning and policy-related scholars have been claiming that planning and the policy sciences have made an argumentative, rhetorical, neo-pragmatic, or -- more broadly -- communicative turn (see Forester, 1989; Forester and Fischer, 1993; Harper and Stein, 1995; Healey, 1997; Hoch, 1994; Innes, 1995; Mandelbaum, Mazza, and Burchell, 1996; and Throgmorton, 1996.) Judy Innes made the claim most directly when she argued in her 1995 paper that "a new type of [communicative] planning theorist is beginning to dominate the field" (p. 183).

I think it is fair to say that a clear majority of the planning scholars who attended the Oxford conference on planning theory in April 1998 rejected Innes' strong claim. Most of the participants wanted to replace communicative theory with their own preferred theoretical approaches. Some argued, for example, that planning should be based on the principles of ecological sustainability. Others argued that it should be based on spatial processes and the regulation of space. Still others promoted a return to Rationality. And so on. In the end, the conference participants proffered such an array of theoretical approaches that resolution of differences between them would require imposing one of them on all the others or else devising a process which would enable them to engage one another constructively. Ironically, it is just this need to engage others constructively that has led to the increasing interest in communicative theory. As best I could tell, the irony seemed to escape most of the conference participants.

After Oxford, those who advocate a communicative approach to planning will continue to make their case, while those who reject that approach will continue to promote their own perspectives. I will not, therefore, try to present a complete summary of "what happened" at Oxford as if I were an unbiased reporter. Rather, let me simply offer a few observations that might be of value to fellow communicative theorists and which might facilitate future dialogues about planning theory.

First, communicative theorists should back away from any strong claim to "dominate" the planning theory field. Though Innes and other communicative theorists surely do not aspire to rule or control the planning theory domain, planning scholars who do not embrace the communication action perspective evidently fear having that perspective imposed on them. In that context, to speak of dominating is to evoke a social relationship to which we should not aspire. Moreover, the diversity of opinion expressed at Oxford amply undercuts the empirical base of any claim to dominance.

Second, the diversity of theoretical perspectives expressed at Oxford reinforces the communicative theorists' claim that any viable and meritorious approach to planning must include a process which enables differing people with differing theoretical perspectives and substantive interests to engage their differences constructively.

Many of the participants at Oxford claimed that communicative theorists privilege process over substantive issues that are grounded in actual contexts. Communicative theorists should respond by striving to produce more case studies which are clearly grounded in temporal, spatial, institutional, political, and socio-economic contexts. Bent Flyvbjerg's (1997) study of planning in Aalborg provides one fine example. (True, Flyvbjerg's case emphasizes "the dark side" of planning and tends to reject the idea of rooting planning too firmly in the

utopianism of Habermasian communicative ethics. Even so, it presents a very rich and deep analysis of communicative acts within the Aalborg planning context.) My own (1996) study of electric power planning in the Chicago area provides another. We need more grounded studies of communicative planning in action.

During the closing session at Oxford one of the attendees from Africa argued that the conference had been dominated by a Northern perspective. He suggested that it is time to hold a conference which looks at planning (and perhaps planning theory as well) in a Southern context. His point is important. It suggests that the South could provide very fruitful ground for studies which are based on a communicative understanding of planning.

A fourth and related point is that communicative theorists need to complement their valuable stress on collaborative processes and consensus-building (see, for example, Healey's and Innes' work) with research that shows how communicative processes can counteract premature and illegitimate claims to consensus and which shows how marginalized groups can draw upon an array of communicative acts to promote their visions of social justice, ecological sustainability, and so on. Perhaps this marks a point at which communicative theorists and critical "dark side" theorists (e.g., Yiftachel, 1998) could most fruitfully learn from one another. I see no reason why the insights of communicative theorists cannot be used to study, inform, and aid the activities of groups that feel oppressed. A protest demonstration is as much of a communicative act as is a formally adopted city plan.<sup>1</sup> Silence is too.

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<sup>1</sup> One reviewer argued that "protest is not communicative action," and that "to conflate them both strips the latter of its meaning and distorts reality." I would argue that a protest, say a march against bombing Iraq, is a *reply* to a *claim* and

Communicative theorists should also clarify that not all of their work is rooted in Habermasian communicative ethics. Much valuable work has drawn on Habermas (especially Forester, 1989), and it should continue. But communicative theory has roots that spread well beyond the fertile soil of Jurgen Habermas. From a rhetorical perspective, for example, one might focus on the inherently contestable meanings of key concepts, account for ways in which audiences and contexts shape communications, and analyze the flow of argumentation (i.e., claiming, responding, and rebutting) within specific contexts (see Crosswhite, 1996, and Throgmorton, 1996).<sup>2</sup>

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hence is a communicative action. Why use that form of reply rather than, say a polite letter to their elected representatives in Congress? Perhaps because they believe the protest will be more persuasive. Persuasive to whom? The larger public. Or perhaps because they believe the protest will be constitutive; that is, help recruit new members to the protesters' cause and hence strengthen their hand in later political conflicts. In either case, their response is a communicative action, or -- from a rhetorical point of view -- a persuasive and constitutive act.

<sup>2</sup> This point can be applied to a reviewer's critique of the North-South distinction made earlier in this paper. That reviewer rightly noted that I did not provide detailed justification for making such a distinction. Space constraints do not permit me to elaborate at length on that point here. In brief reply, I would say first that "the Southern" context differs from "the Northern" one and that those differences might be worthy of close scrutiny by planning theorists. Examples of how those contextual differences play out can be seen in the global debates over how to develop "sustainably" and how (and where) to reduce emissions of "greenhouse gases." Perhaps more important from a planning theory point of view, I would reply that I do not mean to claim that there are real entities called

Much remains to be done, most of it in the face of powerful opposition from people who would oppose any form of planning which holds out the hope of making our world more just and sustainable. Let us get on with that work, each in our own ways, while being open to learning from one another.

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"the North" and "the South." Rather, I see them as social constructs which have practical but inherently contestable meanings. Just as many scholars at the Oxford conference used the trope of "light" and "dark" to rhetorically construct an understanding of planning whose genealogy extends back from Foucault to Nietzsche and Macchiavelli, so too other planning theorists could construct an understanding of planning that begins with a difference between "the North" and "the South." What would planning theory be like if we took that difference as being important?

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