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Goodspeed, Robert

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Commentary

The Death and Life of Collaborative Planning Theory

Robert Goodspeed

A. Alfred Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2069, USA;
E-Mail: rgoodspe@umich.edu

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Abstract

It has been over 20 years since Judith Innes proclaimed communicative action to be the “emerging paradigm” for planning theory, a theoretical perspective which has been developed into what is known as collaborative planning theory (CPT). With planning theory shifting to a new generation of scholars, this commentary considers the fate of this intellectual movement within planning. CPT never achieved the paradigmatic status its advocates desired because of its internal diversity and limited scope. However, its useful combination of analytical and normative insights is attracting the interest of a new generation of researchers, who are subjecting it to rigorous empirical testing and addressing longstanding theoretical weaknesses. Like Jane Jacob’s classic book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, CPT has made an enduring impact on planning theory, even as it has failed to achieve a total revolution in thinking.

Keywords

collaborative planning theory; communicative action; Jürgen Habermas; planning theory

Issue

This commentary is part of the issue “Paradigm Shifts in Urban Planning”, edited by Matthias Drilling (University of Applied Sciences and the Arts Northwestern Switzerland, Switzerland), Efrat Eizenberg (Israel Institute of Technology, Israel), Janet Stanley (University of Melbourne, Australia), Lee Boon Thong (Nilai University, Malaysia) and Andreas Wesener (Lincoln University Canterbury, New Zealand).

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1. Introduction

In 1995, Judith Innes, at the time a full professor of planning at UC Berkeley, proclaimed communicative action to be the emerging paradigm for planning theory (Innes, 1995). In her telling, this new paradigm was taking the place of an earlier generation of “systematic,” largely positivist thinkers. Replacing them was a new group of scholars who studied planning as a “interactive, communicative activity,” (Innes, 1995, p. 183). Their work drew on various theoretical perspectives, but especially ideas from Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984, 1987), which she argued was the work most likely to “provide the principle framework for the new planning theory” (Innes, 1995, p. 186). Her proclamation was met with a combination of disinterest and theoretical counter-arguments, such as those by Huxley and Yiftachel (2000) and Fainstein (2000), who argued that the new ideas neglected adequate accounts of power, the

state, and political economy. In the years since, many practitioners have found the ideas to be abstract and difficult to connect with their concerns, and most planning academics eschewed the paradigm for a range of alternative perspectives, even as a group of scholars have continued to develop a body of scholarship which has come to be called collaborative planning theory (CPT). The purpose of this article is to reflect on the general development of CPT in the ensuing two decades, and investigate what life remains in CPT or whether it is destined for a quiet death as it is eclipsed by new ideas.

2. Collaborative Planning Theory Defined

Since there is no single classic work which defines CPT, I begin with a description of its central ingredients, before providing a brief overview of the distinctive characteristics of several influential CPT theorists. However, it should be noted this section is necessarily incomplete,

and not all theorists mentioned even use (or would accept) the term “collaborative planning theory” to describe their work. CPT shares several ingredients: 1) a focus on deliberation as the primary activity through which planning is accomplished, 2) the use of Habermas’s ideas to analyze this deliberation and propose normative advice for professionals, and 3) an adoption of Habermas’ concept of communicative rationality in the place of instrumental rationality.

The classic works in the field share almost as many differences as similarities. John Forester’s works (1989, 1999) carefully examined professionals’ activities, engaging with questions of professional practice and ethics. However, his theoretical discussions are deeply submerged in the footnotes of his classic books. In subsequent years, Forester’s work (2013) has migrated towards expanding the set of issues he considers by drawing on interviews with practitioners. In contrast, Innes and her frequent co-author Booher, both based in California, primarily studied large, multi-year projects with standing stakeholder committees, such as the CALFED Bay-Delta Program (Booher & Innes, 2002; Innes & Booher, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). They are interested in how such groups operate, and how stakeholder groups can often create new solutions through extended deliberations. Their empirical research has culminated in what they call the DIAD model: achieving collaborative rationality within a planning process requires a Diversity of interests, Interdependence of interests, and Authentic Dialogue (Booher & Innes, 2002). However, their publications have involved a string of insightful but mostly theoretical articles, only culminating in a book in 2010 (Innes & Booher, 2010). Recently they have urged theorists to overcome “dividing discourses,” yet only describe several areas where further theoretical work is needed (Innes & Booher, 2015). Finally, Healey’s 1997 book *Collaborative Planning* is probably the intellectually richest version of CPT. Where Forester, Innes and Booher can be fairly critiqued for their primary focus on deliberation within planning conference rooms, Healey’s intellectual scope is more expansive. Her book contains chapters on the spatial, economic, and environmental dimensions of planning, and her account of social processes draws not only on Habermas, but also the sociologist Anthony Giddens and other institutional theorists. But such eclecticism makes her defy simple characterization, and the wide scope makes it hard to distill into principles for practice or further scholarly development.

In addition to these four authors, a variety of other scholars have also contributed to the development of CPT. Although a full accounting is beyond the scope of this article, this group includes Stein and Harper, who have developed ideas they call “dialogical planning” (Harper & Stein, 2006; Stein & Harper, 2003), Charles Hoch, who contributed insights from pragmatic philosophy to CPT (Hoch, 2007), Tore Sager, whose work on social choice theory in planning often discussed CPT (Sager, 2002), and Richard Margerum, who devel-

oped practical insights from empirical cases (Margerum, 2002, 2011).

3. The Death...

With many of these theorists nearing retirement age (Healey and Innes are already emeritus), we might wonder about the fate of this intellectual movement. One would be hard-pressed to identify many planning scholars in the next generation following in this tradition, for three primary reasons: CPT’s focus on planning practice, use of abstruse theory, and normative content. CPT mostly describes practice, and seemingly neglects substantive issues—which many continue to believe form the core of planning. In addition, the reliance on Habermas’ dense and confusing philosophy may have made it off-putting for scholars seeking broad scholarly audiences. Finally, and most importantly, CPT is both normative and analytical. That means it purports to guide analysis—by suggesting relationships between independent variables and outcomes and providing analytically useful concepts—as well as provide guidance about how to define good planning practice. To an outsider, it might seem obvious that planning needs such a theory. However, this normative content is a further reason it has been shunned in the academy, where similarly abstract but less prescriptive theorists like Foucault are seemingly a better fit in academic culture of critique (Flyvbjerg & Richardson, 2002). However, this choice provides little guidance for professionals, who must work within existing flawed institutional contexts.

4. ...and Life

However, as is often the case, the eclipse of the first generation of this intellectual movement has been followed by new work contributing fresh perspectives. While not all parts of CPT are suited for empirical testing, younger scholars are pushing in that direction. Carissa Schively Slotterback showed that clever use of surveys could provide empirical evidence of the elusive concept of collaborative learning (Schively, 2007). Drawing on surveys of groups engaged in transportation planning activities, Deyle and Wiedenman seem practically surprised when their data finds that “nearly all of the hypotheses” arising in the CPT literature were confirmed (Deyle & Wiedenman, 2014, p. 269). These papers suggest that empirical investigations of the planning process informed by CPT, although difficult, are possible.

The theoretical foundation is also seeing needed attention. One problematic issue is the theory’s seeming relativism. CPT does not describe how to reconcile local collaborative agreements with external perspectives. Goldstein describes one such example of this, when the scientific judgements made by a collaborative group for a habitat conservation plan were rejected during an unexpected external scientific peer review (Goldstein, 2010). His practical conclusion is that planners must serve as

epistemic mediators, working to ensure the results of collaboration are tailored for multiple anticipated audiences. Another typical mismatch is between the normative positions reached through collaborative dialog, and those held by external audiences. The concept of the public interest, which is missing from Habermas' concept of communicative rationality, continues to play an important role for practitioners since it provides a useful external normative viewpoint on planning missing from CPT. Hanna Mattila has tackled this point head-on in a recent interesting recent article in *Planning Theory*, which suggests CPT could be revised to include the concept of "generalizable interest" developed in later works by Habermas and feminist scholars (Mattila, 2016).

Another empirical critique of CPT is the acrimonious and frankly political nature of planning debate, where the authentic dialogue called for by CPT is difficult to find. Two theorists have attempted to address this question. First, Peter Matthews agrees in a recent article that "it may be naïve to assume that intersubjective understanding can be reached in a rapidly moving planning and policymaking process" (2013, p. 151), however the article concludes that over the 20-year history of community activity in two neighborhoods targeted for regeneration, Habermas' ideas did describe how activists successfully used deliberation to critique outside assumptions about issues such as the causes of youth antisocial behavior and the scope of regeneration activities itself. Second, if planning frequently involves frankly political choices, then a more suitable perspective would be social choice theory, which accounts for self-interested, strategic behavior. In a string of thoughtful articles and books, Tore Sager has argued that while social choice theory can apply to some planning situations, in others collaborative rationality can serve as a needed complement. In a recent book, he considers not only how planners should respond to strategic pressures, but also suggests CPT could encompass greater attention to substantive criteria (Sager, 2013). In the view of one reviewer, the result is a CPT which is "less theoretically pure but practically stronger and theoretically richer" (Fischler, 2014, p. 325).

Another neglected issue has been whether CPT applies only to rich, liberal democratic societies. While it may logically apply best to liberal democratic states where power is widely dispersed and speech rights are protected by laws and norms, it seems that at least some of the ideas could be adapted for applications in the Global South. A recent article has pushed in this direction, using collaborative ideas to analyze the leadership activities of the mayor of Surakarta, Indonesia during the process to successfully move a market (Fahmi, Prawira, Hudalah, & Firman, 2016). Ironically, considering how CPT might be applied across diverse nations may clarify issues neglected in existing CPT scholarship, such as this article's useful discussion of leadership.

For my part, I have always been disturbed by the deep disinterest within CPT about the use of technol-

ogy. Surely good planning today requires not only talk, but also on drawing on the best information, which is increasingly done through the use of computer databases and models. It also seems obvious that those who wield technical analysis skills often do so to promote particular values or alternatives, often resulting in epistemological conflicts. However, technical analysis is often portrayed as a simple add-on to collaborative planning, something which is external to deliberation. I attempt to explain why this is problematic in theoretical terms in a recent article in the *Journal of Planning Theory & Practice*, where I question Habermas' assumption that technology is exclusively associated with instrumental rationality and conclude discourse ethics alone is insufficient to prevent systematic domination by knowledge technologies (Goodspeed, 2016).

5. Conclusion

Will collaborative planning ever become planning theory's dominant paradigm? This brief review suggests that it may not. However, CPT has also proved more durable than perhaps some have thought. The articles cited above show new scholars who are pushing CPT into new intellectual territory, even as planning theory as a whole remains very diverse. It seems inappropriate and unlikely for planning to coalesce around a *single* paradigm. CPT may play a similar role as Jane Jacobs classic book referenced by this article's title, *The Death and Life of American Cities*. Both this book and early CPT were framed as an overthrow of an intellectual status quo (for Jacobs it was the flawed urban renewal policies of "orthodox city planning theory"), both were widely read and influenced practice, but neither resulted in the wholesale reconstruction of the field that their most ardent supporters desired.

Therefore, it's hard to say what the future will hold. Perhaps in the face of the growing severity of climate change, widening economic inequality, and stagnating development in the Global South, theorists will cast aside the mushy business of collaboration in lieu of theories which justify urban policies aimed at these problems. However, as Booher and Innes have observed, social and technical shifts may have the opposite effect (Booher & Innes, 2002). No matter what formal style of politics a country is said to have, the number and variety of voices is expanding everywhere. The diffusion of communication technologies and social media has resulted in a fragmented, volatile political culture worldwide. Within such a culture, the premium earned for achieving consensus will continue to grow and the places which can marshal it will reap the rewards. In this future, even as the popularity of CPT as an analytic theory may continue to languish, its appeal as a practical one will only increase.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Robert Goodspeed is an Assistant Professor of Urban Planning at the University of Michigan's Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. His research investigates the use of new information technologies for planning and community development, and he teaches courses in geographic information systems, collaborative planning, and scenario planning theory and methods.