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Book Review: John Friedmann 2011: Insurgencies: essays in planning theory. Abingdon: Routledge

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Friedmann, J. 2011 *Insurgencies: Essays in Planning Theory*.
Abingdon: Routledge

One of the themes running through this collection is the importance of being aware of the institutional context in which planning theory and practice takes place. To this end, it is notable that this intellectual journey has been taken against the long backdrop of the rise and dominance of neo-liberal politics across much of the world – albeit manifested in various ways in different national settings. For prominent advocates of neo-liberalism such as Hayek, the project was founded in an intellectual and biographical lifeworld informed by the practice of a particular, grand-scale, central state planning. The individual papers in the collection reflect the challenges that the neo-liberal project has posed planning, both its theory and practice.

Friedmann seeks to maintain the link between theory and practice as, over an extended period, he works through a rationale for planning – a ‘pragmatic utopia’ of the city as facilitating our higher aspirations. In this collection he offers a direct challenge to the neo-liberal focus on homo-economicus, the self-interested individual seeking to maximise utility in any given situation. Notwithstanding Friedmann’s higher normative ambition for planning, we are also offered alternatives for day to day practice – how can we plan better within existing constraints? Most famously, Friedmann stands as an early advocate for focussing on the discursive rather than the technocratic aspect of the planning process – recognising planning as constituting as much the opening up of possibilities, of continuing debate as much as it is about closing down and final decision making.

The collection follows Friedmann’s thinking through from his ‘eureka moment’ moving away from his formal training in rational planning through to a more

discursive and holistic view that raises, for Friedmann a series of, still contemporary, questions about the planning process and the ability of theory to address these. This is not a linear account of a process of hypothesis testing and refinement, leading to some 'inevitable' improvement of professional practice. Rather it reads as a truly reflective collection, more iterative than sequential - an inductive journey communicating a genuine sense of open inquiry. This approach, and Friedmann's advocacy of transactional planning would no doubt have fallen foul of another of planning's many staunch critics, Karl Popper, who's definition of scientific rigour Friedmann recognises and challenges as part of developing his thinking on the range of experience and knowledge that might inform the planning process. Indeed, one of the many positive aspects of the book is the way in which Friedmann moves deftly between more general social theory and planning theory – in Faludi's terms, theories of and theories for planning. As a book that is first and foremost concerned with theories for planning it is these with which we engage most fully as Friedmann traces both their development and limits - as rooted in a particular Euro-American tradition. While the book is a record of Friedmann's engagement with planning theory it retains a contemporary edge; for example, when in a 1998 piece he states that, "The call is out for many planning theories, not one" (136). Throughout his career Friedman has engaged with planning internationally (including early and formative experience in Peru) and this informs an awareness of the cultural base on which he draws. Friedmann starts to take up his own challenge for many theories in *The Many Cultures of Planning* a chapter in which he seeks to review practice in a range of settings including in the global south.

The introduction to each chapter provides the reader with a useful vignette. Here Friedmann sets out concisely the development in his thinking, as well as related events and/or projects, that led to the original piece. We are, therefore, provided with an all-important context for each piece that is particularly useful in a collection that spans several decades. In a retrospective such as this there is the danger that the writer might provide a tidied-up account that tracks a smooth and logical development in the author's thinking over the period covered. Here Friedmann is supported in avoiding this pitfall through the very nature of his approach to the questions he raises; he sets out provisional solutions rather than seeking definitive answers. As a result the collection reads as an authentic insight into an individual's thinking as Friedmann nuances a series of recurring motives; the role of theory in a practice based activity such as planning, the importance of a discursive, inclusive approach to the planning process and the nature of planning as a professional activity.

Other collections offer a broader overview of contemporary issues confronting planning theory (for example the more expansive and expensive Ashgate Companion to Planning Theory edited by Hillier and Healey) and of the modern historical development of planning theory (such as Readings in Planning Theory edited by Fainstein and Campbell). Given that this book provides a record of his developing thinking across a range of ideas, there are places where the treatment appears unsatisfactorily brief - the comparative overview of international practice being one example; but this would be to underestimate the appeal of this particular book. What Friedmann offers here is something quite different from the more expansive edited works cited. Taken as a piece, this is a highly engaging account of a personal journey spanning over forty years during which time planning has been under constant

challenge from the neo-liberal project. Rather than emerging jaded from the enterprise Friedmann communicates a refreshing enthusiasm for the continuing planning project. At one point Friedmann offers a personal justification for pursuing planning theory – that it is fun; his fascination is communicated to the reader throughout.

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