Losing Its Religion: Planning as Faith

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This paper makes the claim that planning is fueled by the same optimistic faith in human reason as the modern sciences generally. At times, this faith takes on the contours of a religion. The excesses of urban renewal projects challenged the core of this faith, however, serving as planning's reformation. Planning remains heavily indebted to its central tenets. Science remains the lodestar, but this is placed in dynamic tension with an effort at making decisions that comport with the public interest, which is difficult if not impossible to measure via the tools of science. As a result, planning remains animated by a progressivism that resembles faith, but one that is thoroughly demystified.

When the devout religion of mine eye
Maintaines such falshood, then turne teares to fire.

-Shakespeare, Romeo & Juliet, Act I Scene ii

Part I: Introduction

In this paper, I argue that planning is impelled by an optimism that mirrors faith. Like a religion, planning has an historical cannon and, mirroring the trajectory of the Reformation, survived a crisis of faith—the urban renewal of the post-war years. Latter day planning is no less driven by its convictions, but it is far more modest regarding doctrinal certainty. As I explore below, planning's origin in the modern project implies both its certainty and its skepticism. For just as surely as the early moderns were driven to create a new science as a bulwark against the arbitrariness of the divine right of kings, they also recognized the need to create a new authority—a new god as it were—that could supplant the hegemony of church and throne that had erstwhile served as the sources of social coordination. Planning is heir to this optimism. Planning is animated (if not haunted) by the specter of its scientism, blind adherence to which is the source of many of its woes. At the same time, planners have come to recognize the limits of their discipline and the pitfalls of blind adherence to its faith.

My argument advances as follows: I first outline (or is the proper word "caricature"?) the approach to knowledge and science to which planning is an heir. I then show the limits of the scientific model as they pertain to the world of public affairs. If the model is taken to be the statement of faith, the recognition of the limits of this faith is planning's moment of reformation, which I outline next. Finally, I reflect on the utility of the analogy of religion and whether planning fits into this idiom.

Part II: Baptism in Modernism, Or the Articles of Faith

Modernity, of course, did not simply awaken one day. The steady erosion of despotic kingly rule and the grip of the church in Europe was punctuated with cataclysms and acts of violence too numerous to mention. That said, the turn that unquestionably occurred was a gradual awakening to the power of human knowledge and the capacity of ordinary people to create a legacy of understanding—an episteme—far more powerful than the capriciousness of kings and clerics. For, as the early proselytes of this new faith understood, this new way of being was centered, not on inflexible dogmas, but on the extraordinary power of the scientific method. As Descartes argued, the old order placed God at the center. Human knowledge was dictated (if not held in check) by the Holy Scripture as revealed to and interpreted by the ecclesiastical authorities. Audaciously, Descartes declared that the old order should be sloughed off like tattered rags and that a new science should emerge that allowed humans to take their rightful place as the "masters and possessors of nature." Descartes and others who sought to establish this new way of being succeeded in subverting the powers that had jealously guarded knowledge as a means of keeping the masses in their thrall. Indeed, the subversion would be accomplished by radically democratizing access to knowledge.

The cornerstone of this new secular order is the scientific method. As Descartes proclaimed, "In order to make our knowledge complete, every single thing relating to understanding must be surveyed in a continuous and wholly uninterrupted sweep of thought, and be included in a sufficient and well-ordered enumeration" (Descartes 1985, 25). The goal of human liberation was to be accomplished, in Descartes' view, by unleashing the human intellect and imagination. This required the foundation of a new science, meaning a commitment to the rigors of a new, non-religious discipline. As Bacon, a contemporary, put it, "There was but one course left, therefore,—to try the whole thing anew upon a better plan, and to commence a total reconstruction of the sciences, arts, and all human knowledge, raised upon the proper foundations" (Bacon 1980, 2). Bacon's optimism that human reason could create certain knowledge upon which to base decisions is the hallmark of modern faith. That faith was far from unchallenged prior to the dawn of the social sciences in the nineteenth century. Notwithstanding much refinement and agonizing introspection, the commitment to human reason remained intact.

The centrality of self-critique is vital. Unlike blind faith, the goal of perfected human sciences articulated by Descartes and Bacon rests on the ruthless scrutiny and introspection that make discovery possible. The ideology of science is not wholly inflexible and resistant to change. However, the people and institutions that operate in its name often are. As Kuhn points out in his account of paradigm change, "concepts—whether in the natural or social world—are the possession of communities (cultures or subcultures)" (Klemke et al. 1998, 130). The embeddedness of science in human discourse and the shifting sands of politico-academic intrigue mean that new knowledge necessarily dislodges and disrupts. The authority of old ideas begins to break down and new ones arise to take their place, often only with much anguish. (Bernstein 1976, 84-93).

Popper idealizes an organic model of human inquiry that challenges any specific instantiation of science while retaining the optimistic article of faith. For Popper, the "truth" that science constantly reveals is that "Truth" is never to be attained. "I too hold that hypotheses cannot be asserted to be 'true' statements, but that they are 'provisional conjectures' (or something of the sort)…" (Popper 1935, 264). As such, the god of the new science is a constantly evolving and moving target. A science

that is worth its salt is constantly undermining confidence in itself. And the sort of truth that emerges is never hard and fast: "Our science is not knowledge (epistēmē): it can never claim to have attained the truth, or even a substitute for it such as probability…We do not know: we can only guess" (Popper 1935, 278). Despite this cautious and self-critical core, truth remains the lodestar for the sciences. Even though truth is elusive and certainty is always in doubt, the goal of truth (provisional though it may be) still impels the sciences. We may dislodge such certainty with a new one, à la Khun, but, until disproved, the provisional truths function as tenets and justify action by their adherents. Even though foregrounded by Popper's methodical skepticism, the social sciences are not immune to the allure of provisional truths. As Bernstein explains, "[a]t the core of this naturalistic interpretation is the conviction that the aim of the social sciences is the same as the natural sciences…. At the heart of scientific explanation there must be discovery of and appeal to laws or nomological statements" (Bernstein 1976, 43). Naturally, there are questioners and critics of importing the natural scientific method wholesale into the study of human affairs, events and institutions. For example, Kuhn argues that there is no guiding paradigm in the human sciences, meaning that the attachment to the naturalistic approach is incomplete (if not improper) (Klemke et al. 1978, 133). Notwithstanding such trenchant accounts of the tensions and dualities at its core, the scientific paradigm reigns supreme across the contemporary academy and within the planning practice. As such, the faith at the core of this method continues to animate the approach of social scientists, planners among them. And, as we shall see below, the wholesale application of this faith in addressing the pathologies of urban living was prone to the same metaphysical myopia (and violence) that plagued the rest of the sciences.

Part III: The Engineering Model, Or Planning's Blind Faith

So far, I have discussed in general terms how planning is heir to a tradition that functions in many ways like a community of faith. The next matter is to explore how planning does or does not follow the same trajectory of other sciences. Planning is at its heart an ambiguity, straddling as it does the border between physical sciences (given its focus on land use and rationalization of space) and the social sciences (given its simultaneous focus on social institutions and improvement). Insofar as planning has tended to uncritically embrace the modes of inquiry and action it has inherited, its adherents fall prey to the same excesses as its cousins. As was the case with the other social sciences, planning's attempts to establish itself as a rigorous discipline in the twentieth century led it to the limits of its foundational optimism.

From the outset planning was prone to embrace the positivist method. The consequence of such an embrace is summarized by Bernstein: "Anything that cannot…satisfy the severe standards set by these disciplines…is to be viewed with suspicion" (Bernstein 1976, 5). The clearest embodiment of the positivist approach to planning is the movement toward synoptic planning, a notion that the planner can understand (or should even attempt to understand) all the contingencies and vagaries that surround a plan and that the scientific method will produce "rational" plans that function to fulfill "the public interest." The scientific ancillary to this comprehensive approach, of course, was the folly of policy analysis or the basic conceit that social scientific methodology can produce certain absolute, theoretical understanding, distilled through the apolitical sanctity of the academy. Indeed, by the mid-twentieth century, planners were captivated by the model of bureaucratic and scientific perfection that would enable science to distill unified "goals for society" from the cacophony of needs, interests, and voices that make up the public sphere. As Altshuler describes it: "Comprehensive planning requires of planners that they understand the overall goals of their communities…. [T]he explicit claims of practicing planners often suggests that a fair approximation of genuine comprehensiveness is currently attainable" (Altshuler 1965, 186-187). Thus, the importation of positivism into the applied

social sciences was essentially the re-inscribing of the engineering model into the social domain. Harris explains the stakes: "The desires and goals of society as a whole are the controlling factor in the whole planning process" (Harris 1967, 324), which, of course, presupposes that the planning process can comprehend and operate on the basis of these goals.

When planning's hubris finally reached its apotheosis in the urban renewal experiments in the '50s and '60s, many recognized that the headlong embrace of modern science's articles of faith may have been in error. The ballyhooed role for a perfected science of planning and social engineering was a product of its time, of course. With the combined awesome displays of social and physical engineering that put an end to the Depression and harnessed the power of the atom, it is understandable that such optimism carried the day. And, as was the case with Icarus, such hubris must ultimately be visited by a painful crashing to the recalcitrant ground of stubborn human nature.

The conflict between doctrinaire adherents of the scientific approach and advocates of a "normative" approach (Bernstein 1976, 42-45) was not simply academic. At the same time, the capacity of either entrenched system of belief and practice was only to provide questionable assistance to practitioners at best. At its worst, blind adherence to technocracy and the dictates of science turned cities to rubble in the hopes of recreating and perfecting them. But when the realities of the political and budgetary processes set in, science was only able to deconstruct and rubble was all that was left.

Part IV: God is Dead: The Crisis of Faith

It would be an error to say that social scientists failed to see the crisis coming. From the very outset of the social sciences, foundational thinkers recognized the limitations inherent in their approach. For example, Weber was quite aware of the limitations of a dogmatic and inflexible positivism. Weber claimed that social solidarity is built upon a basic unencoded code of what is reasonable (Weber 1978). On his reading, modernity is characterized by a near-universal internalization of instrumental rationality—we are unified via various formalizing things, such as the market, in which we operate to maximize our individually determined best interests, and the state, which treats us as abstract bearers of rights and organizations. Without thinking about it, we understand ourselves as our social security numbers and our credit scores. This cognitive glue that cements modern societies is in many respects the same form of rationality that enables its intellectual pursuits (i.e., the instrumental reason of positivism). Thus, Weber suggests that the embrace of positivism is hardly a necessity, but it is the stubborn frame of reference for the denizens of the modern world and is therefore difficult to displace. In fact, alternative forms of rationality and solidarity do, or at least should, exist (as we shall see below through Habermas). The challenge is for social science to explain the residual: that which remains unexplained by its tools.

We can see that, far from being unified and unequivocal, the proselytes of the new sciences, especially those applied to studies of humans and their institutions, recognized the checks on their approach. This cautionary posture is certainly at the heart of much of the debate regarding planning's role in the post-Urban Renewal years. Indeed, public policy and planning professionals took great heed of Simon's denunciation of a "comprehensive science." Against this, Simon argued for a concept of "bounded rationality," the notion that "one doesn't have to make choices that are infinitely deep in time, that encompass the whole range of human values, and in which each problem is interconnected with all the other problems of the world" (Simon 1983, 19). As Forester describes, this recognition relieved constraints for policy developers, as it legitimated the already existing practice of "satisficing" or modifying decisions "to meet lowered expectations, expectations that could then be satisfied rather than optimized" (Forester 1993, 7).

Similarly, Lindblom famously argues for attenuating the goals of planning. The incremental approach he advocates lowers the sights from the ideals of the scientism that had carried the day earlier in the century. Lindblom denounced the hubris of synoptic planning: "Achieving impossible feats of synopsis is a bootless, unproductive ideal" (Lindblom 1979, 318). Lindblom's articulation of this quietistic approach suggests that the large-scale, comprehensive vision of planning was too prone to make large mistakes. His essential understanding is that administrators are not in a position to act upon the plan that maximizes benefits holding all things constant, because things are never constant. Decisions do not occur in the perfected vacuum of the laboratory. Rather, "prescribed functions and constraints—the politically or legally possible—restrict their attention to relatively few values and relatively few alternative policies among the countless alternatives that might be imagined" (Lindblom 1959, 80). Since this fact of life for decision-makers always and everywhere is the one that is practiced, students of policy should focus on such institutional frameworks and constraints rather than the idealized possible set of alternatives. Thus, Lindblom was at the vanguard of a movement to push social scientific thinking away from the heavens of the theoretically possible into the mundane world of actual decision-making frameworks.

Both Lindblom and Simon owe a debt to the pragmatism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As is the case with these post-religious inclinations in planning in the '50s and '60s, pragmatism attempted to steer clear of certainty in the social sciences, offering instead a vision for understanding the connection of the past to what we can do in the present. In a deeper sense than that of the contextualism inherent in Lindblom, Dewey and others recognized that experience is always embedded in tradition and language in ways that make it inextricable. As such, apperception is always already determined (or at least influenced) by "the ways in which a common and objective world is enmeshed in our experience" (Bernstein 1966, 67). In making such assertions, Dewey separates himself from the scientism of Descartes and Bacon and the trajectory of modern science, which so often occlude the potentially dislodging problem of the perspective of the scientist. Pragmatists sought to focus on the "hereness and nowness"—i.e., the non-metaphysicalness—of decisions. In so doing, they distinguished themselves from the strand of modern science (i.e., methodology) that persistently focuses on the means by which knowledge is attained. For Dewey, experience is always borne by language, institutions, and, most importantly, schools. This means that no "pure" science is possible. Rather than putting stock in this false idol, Dewey hoped to return to an Aristotelian notion of experiential wisdom. This meant being steeped, not in the timeless truth of scientific "law," but in the everyday meanderings of politics, the mechanics by which actual decisions are made, and the particularities of historical context.

Hoch explains the effort at driving the gods from the temple: "The pragmatists, like many current postmodern thinkers, worry that the quest for certainty becomes a power trip as those with little democratic sensibility use Rationality to subject others to purposes that masquerade as necessary and inevitable conditions" (Hoch 1984, 55). Against this, pragmatists stressed the need for a dialogical path, engaged with the world in which person and person forge decisions through the practice of decision-making. As they saw it, focusing on such matters was essential to safeguarding democratic institutions from the creeping despotism of technocracy, which stresses the conformity of a decision to the calculus of costs and benefits at the expense of its conformity to the democratic process.

Of course, the pragmatists have been roundly and rightly accused of blindness to the essential ontological position that inspired their attempts at deontologizing the sciences. In other words, while hoping to purge the false god of scientific certainty, early pragmatists were simultaneously engaged in an attempt to foundationalize a form of practice that could only be sustained by a notion of

timelessness that borders on the divine. White convincingly argues that "individual pragmatists have not all been consistent about the scope of science and because the movement as a whole has been divided on this question, pragmatism has never been able to present a single face to the world on one of the central problems of modern philosophy" (White 1973, 109). As such, early pragmatism, on which the knee-jerk position of much post-war planning theory has rested, has itself rested on a shaky foundation. The effort to dislodge the hegemony of the "god of science," then, has always been weakened by its own inclinations. As we will see, there are some grounds for thinking that more contemporary versions of pragmatism, particularly that of Habermas, might provide a relief from this metaphysical mushiness.

Part V: Redemption via Ecumenism: Planning's Deontological Turn

In the post-halcyon days of urban renewal, planning retreated to a less certain (but probably no more modest) position. Planning (and academics who study planning) attempt to put into motion processes that occur in the real world of human affairs. There are manifold and complex organizations, institutions, histories, and legitimate claims for what ought to be done. With such complexity, no certain science of the "right" or "rational" plan is possible. The real question is how we create consensus regarding what is best, given that trade-offs will always have to be made. After the excesses of planning's "engineering" misadventures, alternative paths were explored that attempted to broaden participation and, ideally, conformance of plans to the public interest. This trend was occasioned (and foreordained) by trends in the human sciences that attempted to historicize and contextualize knowledge, "bracketing" what is known and knowable and thoroughly problematizing the possibility of a "science" of the social world.

A crucial insight into the curious position of planning (and other applied social sciences) was a return to the basics of democratic politics (and theory). As an antidote to the univocal authority and manifest excesses of statist planning (as conducted both in the West and in Eastern Europe) in the early- to mid-twentieth century, a variety of voices arose to assert the importance of civil society. As part of this general tendency, many planning theorists see in Habermas' theory of civil society a middle path between abandoning the hope for a legitimate role for a robust public sector and the uncritical embrace of western science and metaphysics. For Habermas, first and foremost, the public sector engages a world that is always operating in ways that no public official can fully address (or plan for), nor any science ever adequately characterize. "The public sphere cannot be conceived as an intuition and certainly not as an organization. It is not even a framework of norms with differentiated competencies and roles. The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view" (Habermas 1996, 360). Habermas sees this extraordinarily complex and functionally inchoate mass of communicative acts as forming a "far-flung network of sensors" that effectively alert the state to the wishes of the various individuals and organizations that constitute it and, simultaneously, render transparent to the latter whether or not the state is functioning legitimately (i.e., with respect to ensuring democratic access and procedure in rendering its decisions) (Habermas 1996, 1984).

For Habermas, the measuring stick by which we can evaluate the legitimacy of decisions (and therefore the validity of the planning process) is not the degree to which it squares with technical, scientific rationality. Rather, what is crucial are the procedures by which decisions are rendered. As Bernstein describes it, Habermas is attempting to create a modern standard for inculcating the civic discourse with a shared notion of experiential wisdom: "The capacity of practical philosophy is

phronēsis, a prudent understanding of the situation, and on this the tradition of classical politics has continued to base itself, by way of the prudential of Cicero, down to Burke's "prudence'" (Bernstein 1976, 186). That practical wisdom is grounded in an understanding common to all the denizens of the modern world, according to Habermas. Following Weber's notions of rationality and the ubiquity of the understanding of instrumental reason, Habermas posits a parallel and equally ubiquitous form of reason—communicative rationality. According to Habermas, we moderns evaluate the truth of fact claims via the extraordinarily powerful methods and syntax of scientific reason. When we are disputing an empirical question, then, it is always sufficient to appeal to facts. But when the time comes to address the "wicked" problems of overlapping and contested questions of politics, we appeal to a different standard. Namely, when facts are insufficient to forge a common understanding and consensus, all we have left is the legitimacy of procedure.

As such, Habermas argues that a "universal pragmatics" pervades, providing us with the potential means to measure the legitimacy of procedures and outcomes rendered by public authorities. For example, planning encountered its limit during urban renewal precisely due to technocratic myopia that systematically excluded input from those who were most affected. Since the process of planning and decision-making made no effort to accommodate these voices, the outcry of the public was sufficient (albeit too late) to stop the process dead in its tracks. The critical theory of Habermas, then, is an effort to check the authoritarian inclinations of religion as science: "Theoretical work is, like religion or art, an activity distinguished by its reflexivity; the fact that it makes an explicit theme of the interpretive processes on which the researcher draws does not dissolve its situational ties" (Habermas 1984, 126). By this reading, the very scientific approach that earlier planning took to heart as its identity is a form of bad faith.

Habermas' basic premise is that science cannot redeem validity claims regarding norms. No amount of laboratory research will yield truth in such matters. Rather, "the Habermasian rational actor is a practical communicative agent who makes claims in a community of affected persons, claims for which he or she would be willing to offer justifications and arguments in discourses where (in principle) only the force of the better argument may prevail" (Forester 1976, 78). For Habermas, decisions are never (or very rarely) actually made in such a manner, of course, but such a counterfactual provides a background idealized procedure that we more or less embody as citizens in a democratic society. The standards, rights, and freedoms in which citizens are steeped require at least the veil of legitimacy (sometimes called window dressing) that we see in the effort to encourage public participation in the planning process. To fail to do so runs the risk of a legitimacy crisis—the undermining of public support.

As critical as he is of the modern project, Habermas remains true to its optimism. As such, Habermas is a thinker of profound faith. The central tenet of faith is the capacity of human reason, even if based on an understanding of reason quite different from that of Descartes. For Habermas, we all act on the basis of communicative and instrumental rationality, balancing the two in our everyday lives. But the core, the principle of faith, is that reason permeates all. Habermas is unapologetically an acolyte of modernity's faith in this regard.

Part VI: Faith and Religion

So, is planning a religion? The answer seems to be "yes, no, and maybe." There are certainly times (and always will be) when the planner approaches the challenge of providing for the public benefit with a certainty that approaches the fervor of the converted. And, indeed, that fervor's origin in the

dawn of the explosion of scientific progress continues to enthrall us. The advances made possible by the steady evolution of the sciences have made even the most modest among us live better than the pharaohs (at least by some measures). But the enticing patina of that approach also fails to capture the complete story. A crucial distinction should be made between faith in the tools and techniques that have evolved since modernity's dawn and adherence to the strict doctrines of religion. Planning's overweening devotion to its science led to the disasters of urban renewal. To carry the analogy, then, planning's elevation to a doctrine fell short. Continued faith in the progress science can make possible, however, is the crux of planning's relevance.

Rittel and Webber speak of "wicked" problems. They claim that in their haste to cure the abundant problems of urban life, planners at the dawn of the profession latched on to the scientific, engineering approach. By doing so, they were able to resolve many of the problems that conformed to these rigors. But "now that these relatively easy problems have been dealt with, we have been turning our attention to others that are much more stubborn…The professionalized cognitive and occupational styles that were refined in the first half of this century, based on Newtonian mechanistic physics, are not readily adapted to contemporary conceptions of interacting open systems and to contemporary concerns with equity" (Rittel and Webber 1973, 166). The zeal and fervor with which early planners meshed the gods of the scientific approach to the manifest pathologies of urban life met their limit. No amount of demolishing in order to rebuild a better inner city could overcome the violence inherent in urban renewal. No calculus of "rationality" in the best-trained planning mind could overcome urban civic complexity. As such, planning had to abandon its god—the facile embrace of Newtonian physics as a panacea for social ills. A latter-day, demystified god has transcended this inevitable twilight of the idols. Planners are still motivated by the conviction that attempting to address these "wicked" problems is their vocation. It is obeisance to the mundane that now serves as planning's sublimation.

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