

Social Cohesion and Economic Justice: A Justification for Public-Sector Planning

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ABSTRACT

The current political context within the United States is imbued with fragmented and privatized conceptions of social good. Everyday Americans disagree about what is best for urban and rural communities, and they disagree about how government should interact with the environments in which people live, work, and play. These particularly postmodernist conditions challenge the relevance and need for public-sector urban planning. A justification for public-sector planning relies on a socially cohesive attitude toward social good, and economic justice may serve as a normative guide. Such a justification demands that planners assert themselves as specialized agents who are best equipped to achieve economic justice in the built environment, for they structurally and technically possess a unique ability to pair substantive expertise with community engagement – technical rationale with empathy – to inform policy and broad planning actions.

Over the years, government officials and academics have occasionally criticized urban planning efforts for intervention into the free enterprise system and called into question the relevance of planning as a public-sector agency. In the years, government officials and academics have occasionally criticized urban planning efforts for intervention into the free enterprise system and called into question the relevance of planning as a public-sector agency. Some critics within planning academia dismiss the public interest as a chimera because of its seemingly ambiguous or potentially elitist standards.¹ Others believe that market mechanisms more effectively signal consumer preferences for public goods (e.g., auto-centric goods) than do standardized forms of urban data, such as urban health assessments, and are therefore more reliable guides for managing interaction with the built environment.² They recognize the theoretical limitations of the market, yet they claim its shortcomings do not sufficiently justify centralized coordination.³ More recently, the Trump administration in the United States proposed to eliminate Community Development Block Grants

(CDBGs) and the Choice Neighborhoods Initiative from the federal budget, along with other funding programs that cities use to rehabilitate and upgrade affordable housing and community services in distressed areas.⁴ Despite popular frustration with the market's real inability to provide an equitable and adequate standard of living for all members of society,⁵ the outcome of the 2016 United States presidential election demonstrates that certain constituents vote for a political party that disparages explicit government effort toward social equity. All in all, Americans perniciously disagree about what is best for community and the environments in which they live, work, and play.

Justifying the relevance and need for public-sector urban planning within the current political context in the United States requires a two-fold discussion. First, it demands an assessment of the postmodern era and the problems of fragmented and privatized conceptions of social good. Justification for an activity inherently relies on shared – not fragmented – beliefs about the good in any end that action

strives to meet. Therefore, I present the importance of economic justice as one of the normative goods to which public-sector planning must aspire. Secondly, justification of the relevance of public-sector planning requires recognition of the planner as a specialized government agent who is best equipped to use this normative good in the urban environment. Where non-planning government officials could presumably attempt to absorb the responsibilities of the planner, the planning profession must assert its concentrated uniqueness: a structural relief from the worries of re-election and an ability to pair substantive expertise with community engagement – technical rationale with empathy – to inform policy and broad planning actions. A reconstructed understanding of normative social good provides an effective justification for public-sector urban planning and, furthermore, describes how the planner bridges micro- and macro-urban narratives, which anchor technical government intervention in ethical guidance toward equity and sustainability for all members of society.

THE PROBLEM OF POSTMODERN FRAGMENTATION

We cannot justify a social practice like planning if there is widespread hostility toward reason. Postmodernist thinkers, who may or may not explicitly realize their postmodernist perspectives, point to the complexities of social reality and use them as a basis for eschewing universal truths and challenging authority. As a reaction to the somewhat utopian, geometrical ethos of modernist thought, postmodernists attempt to turn modernism on its head and celebrate the idiosyncrasies of fragmentation.

While wariness toward universal truth and undisputed power is fundamental to individual liberty, extreme confidence in one's own beliefs is just as threatening to a free society. Similarly, extreme paranoia toward legitimate sources of information leaves the thinker to selectively affirm beliefs that may be harmful to other members of the broader group. Philosopher Hilary Putnam characterizes as problematic the view that "notions of justification, good reason, warrant and the like are primarily repressive gestures" and goes on to call that view "dangerous because it provides aid and comfort for extremists."⁶ Although the postmodernist thinker alone may not threaten public-sector planning as much as the decision-making of a political agent of immense and exploitative power, the permeation of postmodernist bias through our social, political, and cultural institutions challenges the power of social cohesion to solve social problems.

Postmodernism's backbone of fragmentation and hostility toward reason forgets the cohesive function and importance of equality and equity as social norms. Historically, the United States has made grave mistakes in explicitly or callously allowing unequal distribution of resources and opportunities across different social groups. Moreover, local communities may indicate consumer market signals that do not act in the best interest of the regional public. Now, instead of ushering in an era where the people and their representatives work to establish equity as an undeniably American norm, a political divisiveness permeates the government, as well as the fabric of daily social life, and challenges the ethical aspirations of the public-sector planner.

Postmodernism, however, does have redeeming qualities. As Harper and Stein note, “the rejection of metanarrative, the distrust of rigid methodology, the celebration of plurality, [and] the recognition that all voices have a right to be heard are important if planning is to legitimately express liberal ideals.”⁷ For example, in the United States, social pressure against racism in mortgage lending and other powerful institutions is crucial for racism’s removal from public and private practices, and there is still work to be done. That notwithstanding, postmodernism in its pervasive influence can disrupt our sense of shared trust in a public institution’s ability to understand general tenets of social good, to learn from constituents and from past mistakes, and to pursue progress. Forfeiture of trust is withdrawal from a basis for legitimate action, and it is *merely a hope* that economic, social, and environmental justice in our urban world will win out in the end.

A social good that holds together a basis for justified public-sector planning action is economic justice, which I define as the equitable distribution of wealth, knowledge, and skills. As an integral component of planning, however, economic justice is not a technically derived solution but rather a guiding attitude. This social attitude originates from familiar American notions that individuals are autonomous, that their values are subjective, and that they are free to pursue their happiness to the extent that it does not prevent other individuals from doing the same. Rawls’ thought experiment of the original position¹⁰ presents a case of legitimacy for ethical economic judgements without subscribing to absolute modernist or postmodernist ideas:

[Rawls] makes no appeal to any absolute transcendent foundation independent of our social or cultural framework. [He] does not intend the moral principles he develops to be universally valid in the sense that they are derived from a foundational conception of rationality. He does intend them to be universally valid in that they apply to all people.¹¹

According to the Rawlsian account, a critical responsibility of government is to facilitate individual pursuits toward happiness while ensuring that distributive justice is upheld¹² Economic justice, as an ethical attitude, takes the American notions of individual autonomy, subjectivity, and happiness and aims to manage them in the field of economic decision-making. It celebrates individual well-being, yet it carefully appraises the appropriate weight of particular interests. And within the planning offices of government, the functions of which inextricably extend into the homes of block clubs and private corporations alike, economic justice ought to guide our competing motives and creatively fuse our mutual interests. Although public-sector urban planning should not attempt to justify itself as a replacement or correction for the market, it should assert how the planning specialization is not only able to empathize with individual concerns, but also make substantive evaluations of broader planning actions in ways in which pure politics and market mechanisms are unreliable.

THE PECULIARITY OF THE PLANNER

A general purpose of government is to sensibly manage private and public interests. That is nothing new, and I do not expect such a statement to grant

profundity. However, the structure of our politics and the gleam of postmodernism throughout our cultural institutions have altered the measure for normative management. Just as a nutritionist who is trained in the shifts of dietetics may assert the proportional food groups necessary for a healthy diet, so does government use culture and technical expertise to craft the valuation of different public actions. That mechanism notwithstanding, the privatization of postmodernism culture challenges the authority of expertise and disrupts the management act, leaving us to seek reasonable guidance. The peculiarity of public-sector planning is its ability to use structural and specialized advantages to pair substantive expertise with community engagement - technical rationale with empathy - to inform policy and broad planning actions, despite a current glitch in the normative metric.

For example, the planner's position as a non-elected official provides a structural advantage. Departments or head executives hire public-sector planners, freeing them from the need to raise campaign funds and ingratiate themselves with special-interest groups. Although public service officials ought to address the concerns of their constituents, one can imagine a campaigning official ravenous for votes, forfeiting technical judgment for more sycophantic alternatives. Planners, while still accountable for their actions, have a structural advantage to focus on the expertise of their training, not on their pocketbook or the polling station, for their decision making.

The various realms in which public-sector planning operates is another unique feature of the agency. Their practices span various geographies and communities. They meet

with neighborhood association members, block clubs, and small business owners along with large commercial groups, banks, and other government agencies. In each of these offices of operation, each of which planners call home, they listen, negotiate, and influence outcomes of various breadth and depth. In this structural capacity, they are fundamentally concerned with both resident activity on a street corner and voices in the corporate boardroom.

These realms of activity not only enhance positions of leverage but also require peculiar behavior, which helps to characterize a specialization of the planning field. Professional training equips planners with the ability to wear two hats: that of the technical and critical decision maker, and that of the community empathizer. By employing these two roles, public-sector planning can navigate those various realms of influence and put the attitude of economic justice to work. As empathizers, agents regularly bear witness to the far depths of policy outcomes in neighborhoods and homes, giving communities the chance to express feedback about their physical and social environments. Participatory planning, which invariably involves the planner as facilitator, handles this task well, and the approach is certainly included as a responsible step in the planning process. As a cultural feedback loop, public participation shapes the way in which we understand and articulate social problems. But the role of critical decision maker moves beyond mere facilitation. It involves mitigating conflict, crafting mutual solutions, and applying technical standards of economic justice as a normative and attitudinal basis for managing social good. This role relies on the planner's ability to use data, broader policy objectives, and equitable ethics from

training to determine best possible courses of planning action. Therefore, the planner as advocate may not be the most effective style for the public sector. Advocates can use data to support claims, but the passion of advocacy can interfere with decision making in times of controversy. If public-sector planners choose to advocate, then they should advocate on behalf of their substantive expertise.

CONCLUSION

A justification for public-sector urban planning is the realization that in an increasingly fragmented society, in which individuals may vote to suppress others or vote against their own best interest, the public sector needs an agent that is free from ethical impairment and the grasps of super political action committees. It needs an agent that interacts directly with constituents, because no one understands a community like a member. And especially in times of conflict, the government needs a planner that encourages participation of all voices – but not uncritically. Returning to Harper & Stein:

While the past error was that the wealthy and powerful forced their ideas on other communities, it is equally erroneous to assume that every community is right and should never be challenged or changed. We should respect plurality and difference, but not to the point of giving up on communication or abandoning the search for consensus, and not to the point of conceptual and moral relativism.¹³

If the planning profession wants to gain legitimacy as a public-sector agency working toward the public interest, it needs to focus on holding society together. ■

Endnotes

1. Heather Campbell and Robert Marshall, "Utilitarianism's Bad Breath? A Re-Evaluation of the Public Interest Justification for Planning," *Planning Theory* 163, no. 1 (2002): 173.
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4. "The Budget for Fiscal Year 2018," Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/omb/budget/fy2018/hud.pdf>.
5. Richard E. Klosterman, "Arguments for and Against Planning," *Town Planning Review* 56, no.1 (January 1985): 10.
6. Thomas L. Harper and Stanley M. Stein, "Out of the Postmodern Abyss: Preserving the Rationale for Liberal Planning," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 14 (1995): 235.
7. *Ibid.*, 240.
8. Jordan Weissmann, "Countrywide's Racist Lending Practices Were Fueled by Greed," *The Atlantic*, December 23, 2011, <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/12/countrywides-racist-lending-practices-were-fueled-by-greed/250424/>.
9. Campbell and Marshall, "Utilitarianism's Bad Breath," 178.
10. Samuel Freeman, "Original Position," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), accessed February 1, 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/original-position/>.
11. Harper and Stein, "Postmodern Abyss," 241.
12. Campbell and Marshall, "Utilitarianism's Bad Breath," 178.
13. Harper and Stein, "Postmodern Abyss," 239.