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'AGON'IZING OVER CONSENSUS: WHY HABERMASIAN IDEALS CANNOT BE 'REAL'

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Abstract I explore the core Habermasian concept of rational consensus-formation and its counterfactuality before introducing the possibility of permanence of conflict, non-reciprocity and domination (i.e. of agonism) which may productively explain some of the power-games enacted in planning decision-making. In so doing I draw on the concept of agonism and introduce the political into Habermas' moral theorization. Where the personal and the political intersect there is a role for psychology. I illustrate how Habermas' communicative theorizing was itself partly developed from a psychoanalytical tradition before introducing some of the concepts popularized by Jacques Lacan. I conclude that development of communicative planning theory could usefully retain some of Habermas' psychological foundations while turning to the work of Lacan as a basis for an enhanced understanding of the realities of planning practice.

Keywords   agonism, consensus, Habermas, Lacan

Introduction

> Political agonism seems to provide a welcome return to the repressed essence of democratic politics: conflict. (Villa, 1999: 108)

As a planning theorist interested in the potential of consensus-building I am concerned that, in the reality of practice, many planning strategies and/or disputes about development applications do not end in harmonious consensus. In this article I explore a different way of attempting to explain and help an understanding of non-consensus. In introducing and examining the concept of agonism I do not mean to infer that conflict is good or that every planning decision will be beset by conflict. Rather, I offer the article as a beginning attempt to understand why some consensus-formation strategies may have a tendency to break down.[1]

In the next section I explore the core Habermasian concept of rational consensus-formation and its counterfactuality before introducing the possibility of permanence of conflict, non-reciprocity and domination (i.e. of agonism), which, I believe, may productively explain some of the power-games enacted in planning decision-making. In so doing I draw on Chantal Mouffe's ideas about agonism and overtly introduce the political into what Habermas would regard as a moral basis for theorization.

Where the political and the personal intersect there is arguably a role for psychology in political theory. As I indicate below, Habermas' theory of communicative action itself owes a debt to Freudian psychoanalysis, while authors such as Butler (1997), Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 2002; Laclau, 1996; Mouffe, 2000) have drawn on the work of Jacques Lacan as a basis for their understandings of human agency and social processes.

Lacan was a post-Freudian, fascinated by aspects of language, decisions and different conceptions of the 'good'. I outline below his key notion of the Real, its impossibility and the ineradicable constitutive gap between the utopian Real and its representation in reality. I then apply the idea of the Real to the examination of Habermasian communicative rationality and consensus-formation. Lacanian analysis suggests that Real information, Real meaning and Real consensus are but unrecoverable presences: fantasies of our desire. There always remains the constitutive other of conflict.

In this article I aim to assess the theoretical spaces of argument between Habermas and Lacan. I conclude by suggesting that planning theory should be careful not to throw a Habermasian baby out with the bathwater, however. Rather, development of communicative planning theory could usefully retain some of Habermas' psychological foundations, supplemented by a Lacanian-informed understanding of the impossibility of completeness, to substitute a theory of agonic praxis for a counterfactual idealization of rational consensus-formation.

With regard to planning practice, this may entail planners recognizing

stakeholders' commitments to values to be a matter of identity and historical contingency rather than rationality. It may also entail development of contingent, circumstantially appropriate procedural principles of just treatment of stakeholders which serve to domesticate the destructiveness of antagonism to the potential constructiveness of agonism in which disagreement need not be construed as disrespect.

Planning decision-making in a plural democratic society has to come to terms with these dimensions of identity and conflict which are a consequence of what Lacan would regard as an ultimately irreducible plurality of values. Democratic planning decision-making is inevitably messy, time-consuming, turbulent, frustrating and exasperating. As Briand (1999: 199) tells us: 'expect chaos'.

On Consensus

> The impetus to consensus as the constitutive core of rationality. (Rescher, 1993: 26)

In western philosophy, consensus, agreement or uniformity of belief and evaluation, has tended to be regarded as 'a desideratum whose ultimate realisation can be taken as assured' (Rescher, 1993: 1). In the late 20th century, Jürgen Habermas' conception of consensus as vital to the very nature of rational communication became almost fundamental to what has become a communicative turn in planning theory. This article argues for dislodging an endorsement of the centrality of rational consensus, replacing it with a consideration of agonistic pluralism. I, nevertheless, recognize that consensus, both as a process and a product, is a social construct. It is something of an 'empty signifier' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2002), in which the content is provided by a plurality of demands; a matter of the substance of actors' views, hinging crucially on ideological and methodological commitments.

Given the importance of Habermas' writings to recent developments in planning theory, I concentrate on his idea(l)s of consensus. In what follows, I outline the core ideas of Habermasian communicative rationality and rational or idealized consensus before introducing some of the inherent tensions in what is essentially a moral, normative set of theories.

'Habermas co-ordinates communication with a quest for consensus' according to Rescher (1993: 25). Habermas argues that the point of communication is 'to bring about an agreement that terminates in the inter-subjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another. Agreement is based on recognition of the corresponding validity claims of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness, and rightness' (Habermas, 1979: 3). Such an agreement is by definition rational (reasoned). It is central to Habermas' conception of communicative rationality which 'carries with it connotations based

ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech' (Habermas, 1984: 10).

Such rational consensus is grounded in the communicative structure of rational discourse. It rests on the four universal validity claims listed above. As such, Habermasian communicative action is an essentially moral theory; morality being supplemented by regulation or law in order to maintain intersubjectivity of understanding in cases of action conflicts (Habermas, 1979: 99, 156).

Habermas recognizes the counterfactuality of the validity claims, however. He accepts that 'a set of unavoidable idealisations forms the counterfactual basis of an actual practice of reaching understanding' (Habermas, 1996: 4), suggesting any consensus thus reached to be idealized,[2] but which could provide a critical standard against which actual practices may be evaluated.

Habermas thus recognizes a tension between ideal and reality. I suggest such tensions in planning practice to potentially include, an ideal of all stakeholders participating in a communicative action process and a reality of some people being unwilling to take part; an ideal of all actors having an opportunity to speak and a reality of some being unwilling to listen; and an ideal of collaboration and reciprocity and a reality of actors habituated to adversarial practices.

Habermas actually refers to 'idealised' consensus as 'the extreme case of consensual interaction in a system of different types of social action' (Habermas, 1979: 208–9, n.2), distinguishing idealized or rational consensus from action oriented to reaching understanding and de facto agreements. Such a distinction indicates Habermas' awareness that mutual or reciprocal understanding between actors and consensus do not necessarily follow. He suggests that in such circumstances, it is probable that 'the conflict at issue is not a moral one at all' (Habermas, 1993: 158), but rather ethical-existential (affecting the self-understanding of a group of people) or pragmatic (a question of balancing opposed but nongeneralizable interests). It could be argued that most planning disputes fall into the pragmatic category and are therefore not likely to be resolvable by rational consensus-formation but rather through negotiation and compromise.

Habermas' theory of communicative action implies what McCarthy (1978: 278) terms a 'coherentist theory of truth'. What is true, or what is right, is determined by the consensus resulting from an uncoerced, free and open deliberative discussion between all relevant actors. Insofar as any given consensus is rational, its products are true or right. A consensual outcome or product can only be derived from communicatively rational processes and procedures (Habermas, 1990: 87–9). Habermas (1993: 58) dismisses objections that 'the procedure of argumentation cannot ensure the choice of correct answers solely on the basis of presuppositions of communication' as resting on 'either a pragmatically truncated concept of argumentation or a semantically truncated concept of justification, or both'.

As empirical research from planning practice (e.g. Flyvbjerg, 1998; McGuirk, 2001; Pløger, 2001; Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas, 1998) is increasingly demonstrating, however, the ideals of communicative rationality and consensus-formation are rarely achieved. Habermasian-framed consensus-formation processes often fail, as Gunder (2003) points out, because Habermasian theorizing is predicated on a metaphysical belief that an ideal communicative situation can create transcendental understanding and agreement for all participants. In reality, actors may see little benefit in behaving 'communicatively rationally' when strategic, instrumental power-plays and manipulation of information could result in more favourable outcomes for themselves.

Agonism and Conflict

> For the philosopher everything consensual becomes suspicious. (Badiou, 2000: 30)

Most democratic discussion and negotiation is not and cannot be based on visions of a communicatively rational, consensual, harmonious outcome. Conflicting differences between different groups' conceptions of the 'good' are not negatives to be eliminated but rather diverse values to be recognized in decision-processes.

Planning practice in a liberal democratic system, while fostering value pluralism, cannot equate all values in consensus-building since decisions require some form of sorting values which prefers some values to the relative repression and/or exclusion of others. The 'consensus' arrived at thus cannot exist without an 'outside' which leaves the decision open to challenge. In other words, 'democracy without institutionalised normative disagreement is simply not democracy' (Shiffman, 2002: 182).

Rationalism thus disintegrates and opens up the possibility of a 'passionate' (Mouffe, 2001–2: 11) interpretation of speech acts. Space becomes agonistic rather than necessarily consensual. Agonistic space is 'a competitive space, in which one competes for recognition, precedence and acclaim' (Benhabib, 1992: 78). It is the view of space engaged by Nietzsche (1954), Arendt (1958) and Foucault (1982, 1984) and by subsequent authors such as Connolly (1991), Mouffe (1993, 1996, 1999), Young (1995, 1997), Mansbridge (1995) and Wolin (1996).

Agonistic decision-making requires the indeterminacy and contingency that characterize political discourse and practice. Liberal moral and/or legalistic projects, such as those of Habermas, are generally unrealizably Utopian on anything but a small scale. They 'abolish' or 'sterilise' politics (Gray, 1995: 126) and replace politics by rules or laws.

Philosophy and practices of agonistic decision-making may offer 'a fruitful alternative to rationalist liberalism' (Mouffe, 2002: 98–9). As

Mouffe continues, such modes of decision-making afford central roles to practices, and can therefore be developed in a way that 'highlights the historical and contingent character of the discourses that construe our identities and constitute the language of our politics; language that is constantly modified, that is entangled with power and needs to be apprehended in terms of hegemonic relations' (Mouffe, 2002: 98–9).

Foucault, in particular, expresses the idea of discursively articulated power as agonism. He describes agonism as 'a gymnastic relation characterised by a play of interpretations and anticipations' (Foucault, 1994: 238). Foucault continues, moreover, that 'the art of the game is not to dominate an opposing actor, but to anticipate and exploit its interventions, and thus to make one's own intervention of (counter)-strategies' (Foucault, 1994: 238).

Given the above, Foucault is convinced that there cannot be a mediating horizon between actors which would make strategies either communicable or commensurable; rather only a 'continuous incorporation of contraries' (Pottage, 1998). The construction of consensus in such a situation would be, according to Foucault (1994: 236), 'a reign of violence' as it would suspend the active autonomy of the actors involved.

Foucault, however, denies that his agonistic conception of power is fatalistic. He suggests that the agonistic contest between autonomous actors is 'incessantly political'; a problematic of interrogation, engagement and negotiation (Connolly, 1998). Agonistic space, therefore, is a political space embracing legitimate and public contestation over access to resources (Wolin, 1996). Its pluralism is axiological, recognizing the impossibility of ever adjudicating without contest and without residue between competing visions (Mouffe, 1996).

Mouffe (1996) regards a possibility of belief in the final resolution of conflicts to be a dangerous and simplistic illusion. She argues that 'acting in concert' requires the construction of a 'we', a political unity, but that a fully inclusive political unity can never be realized since wherever there is a 'we', there must also be an excluded 'them', a constitutive outside. Any agreement reached will thus be partial, based on acts of social regulation and exclusion. The 'surplus of meaning' (Dyrberg, 1997: 196) that remains uncontrolled is liable to challenge from the excluded other. This does not necessarily imply that planners should not try to seek agreement between participants, however, but that they should recognize that some views will almost inevitably be suppressed and could resurface in conflict at a later date.

For Connolly (1991) and Mouffe (1997, 1999), a pluralist democracy must allow the expression of dissent and conflicting interests and values. Since we cannot eliminate antagonism, we need to domesticate it to a condition of agonism in which passion is mobilized constructively (rather than destructively) towards the promotion of democratic decisions that are partly consensual, but which also respectfully accept unresolvable disagreements.

While agonism is generally construed as a struggle *against*, it may also be construed as a struggle *for*. Hence, Foucault's (1984: 379) remark that 'one must not be for consensuality, but one must be against nonconsensuality.'

Tully (2001: 19–23) lends practical clarity to Foucault's remark by drawing on empirical material from Canada to characterize democratic struggle as intersubjective (actors' identities are subjectively constituted), multilogic (discussion is between many and varied actors – multilogues), continuous (demands are presented, others respond, the demand is reformulated, others respond, an agreement may be reached, some actors dissent, new demands are presented) and agonic (complex and unpredictable, but with mutable acknowledgement of actors' disclosures). Tully also argues that processes and outcomes are not a question of theoretical but of practical reason; a question raised by the actors themselves.

Rather than the 'solid modernity' (Bauman, 2000) of Habermasian moral mutual engagement and reciprocity, participatory decision-making would appear to resemble a 'liquid modernity' in which power relations are constructed upon a fragility of actor relationships, their in-built transience and a temporariness of commitment.

Agonistic space, then, does not eliminate power by subordinating it to rationality in a search for consensual agreement. There is always 'more than reason' with regard to strategic policy making, whether this be contestations of power, non-negotiable and axiomatic value differences, or the never-ending assertions of competition, conflict and alterity (Mouffe, 1996; Walzer, 1999). Once we consider the political dimension of deliberative policy making we may find that rational (rather than rationalized) outcomes are impossible to achieve. 'Why use the force of the better argument when force alone will suffice?' (Flyvbjerg, 1998: 80). What does this imply for democratic decision-making and planning?

Since attempts to establish a rational consensus may result either in a thin agreement at the lowest common denominator on the few issues about which parties can concur and/or be simply a 'front' (Allmendinger, 1999: 12) for powerful interests to maintain influence and capacity to get what they want while seeming to act more deliberatively, we need to understand and incorporate power and conflict into our framework. We need to provide channels of expression in which conflicts can be expressed while limiting the use of abusively confrontational antagonistic behaviour; channels that enable participants to move beyond potentially entrenched rights-based positions to constructively uncover each side's interests and expectations from outcomes and what aspects are critical to them; channels that offer more in various ways than participants might otherwise obtain by pursuing their interests in legal, political or other arenas. Competition and cooperation are often inextricably entwined in deliberative processes, as Innes and Gruber's (1999) empirical work confirms. The two often cannot be separated and 'neither denial nor discomfort will make it disappear' (Lax and Sebenius, 1986: 30).

Habermas has recently recognized that understanding between actors will only be possible if they 'expect to be able to learn from each other' and that reciprocity should probably have 'the more modest goal of mutual respect for the sincerely attested power of opposed traditions' (Habermas, 2001a: 34–5). He accepts, moreover, that 'there can always be *reasonable* dissent' (Habermas, 2001a: 40, emphasis added) about ethical questions and that 'in the case of controversial existential questions arising from different world views even the most rationally conducted discursive engagement will not lead to consensus' (Habermas, 2001a: 43). Conceding that it is 'reasonable to expect continuing disagreement' (Habermas, 2001a: 43) in such circumstances, Habermas suggests that a compromise is 'fair' if it: provides advantages to each party; tolerates no 'free riders'; and no one is exploited in such a way as to force them to give up more than they gain by compromise (Habermas, 1996: 165–7).

If we conceive of planning policy making as a political medium through which the antinomies of difference are expressed and contested and we accept a Habermasian consensual morality as counterfactual, what basis remains for development of an agonopluralistic ethic in theory and practice? I turn below to the realm of psychology. I illustrate how Habermas' communicative theorizing was itself partly developed from a psychoanalytical tradition before I introduce some of the concepts popularized by Jacques Lacan. I attempt to indicate the potential of Lacanian-inspired theory to contribute to planners' understandings of the realities of planning practice.

A psychotheoretical turn?

In order to survive, we do need a minimum of the real. (Zizek, 1997: 25)

With Habermas' roots in the Frankfurt School it is unsurprising that his early theorizing draws to some extent on a German intellectual tradition that includes Freudian psychoanalysis. To Habermas, the 'fundamental question of practical philosophy' (Habermas, 1979: 205) is a question of the procedures and presuppositions under which justifications have the power to produce consensus. 'The only promising program' which Habermas (1979: 205) could envisage in answer to this question was that of cognitive developmental psychology.

For Habermas (1971a), psychoanalysis is the prime example of critical theory. Psychoanalysts utilize interpretive techniques to go beyond the surface and access the patient's unconscious experiences and desires. Interpreting Freud's work as a theory of systematic distortion of communication and stating that 'we cannot "understand" the "what" . . . without at the same time "explaining" the "why"' (Habermas, 1971b: 138), Habermas developed his theory of (undistorted) communicative rationality.[3]

The development of Habermas' ideal speech situation, and its constituent validity claims, owes much to the psychological relationship between ego and communication. He regards the ego as the part of the self that mediates internal desires and their external possibilities for satisfaction (Habermas, 1971a, 1987). How we express our desires, therefore, is intrinsically related to who we are. Habermas' question is: 'what must we demand of the self if we wish our political life to be governed by talk rather than coercion, autonomous structures, or blind consensus?' (Warren, 1995: 194). This important question is one which critics of Habermas (including Elster, 1993; Rescher, 1993; Warren, 1995) claim that he does not answer satisfactorily.

Nevertheless, as Warren suggests, psychoanalysis does have a place in democratic theory; that 'discursive democracy, if it is not simply to assume autonomy, requires some kind of therapeutic dimension' (Warren, 1995: 188). I argue that aspects of Lacanian theory can offer us such a dimension that enables us to illuminate the ambiguity and uncertainty of planning decision-making arenas. In what follows I aim to explain some of the key Lacanian concepts (such as the Real, reality, lack and so on) and to relate these concepts to planning through consideration of the issue of consensus-formation.

The Real and reality

If we follow Mouffe's (1996) lead that achieving consensus is impossible in most instances of complex land use planning decisions; that there will always be a constitutive outside; and that conditions of agonism are 'as good as it gets', what does the introduction of Lacanian thought infer for a theory of discursive democratic decision-making and for planning practice?

Lacanian thought suggests that conceptions of the socio-political institution of society as a harmonious totality or of a public sphere with complete information are no more than a fantastic mirage. The ideas of complete information, a harmonious society and of consensus are the Lacanian impossible Real of utopian dreams rather than actual lived reality.

The Real is the non-space in which human identity, aspirations and desires reside (Lacan, 1977). The Real resists symbolization. It escapes knowledge and, specifically, human linguistic representation. Attempts to describe the Real are destined to simply distort it.

Lacanian 'reality' is 'the result of a certain historically specific set of discursive practices and power mechanisms' (Zizek, 2001: 66). It serves as the 'external boundary' of our lived experience that enables us to make out of it a close and coherent system. It is the social reality of actual people/actors. The Real, as described above, resists simple integration into our common reality. As Zizek suggests, the Real is but 'an "illusion" which "irrationally" persists against the pressure of reality' (Zizek, 2001: 166).

All too often, however, we blind ourselves to the irreducible gap between

reality and the Real in attempts to encounter the Real. The traumatic moment of attempting to know and to encounter the Real initiates a process of symbolization and the 'ever-present hegemonic play between different symbolisations of the Real' (Stavrakakis, 1999: 74). It is this 'play' which leads to the emergence of politics between the different symbolic viewpoints of what the 'world' should look like and to the political institution of a new fantasy (decision/accepted viewpoint, etc.) in place of a dislocated one.

In terms of consensus-formation, Lacan (1977: 118) suggests that it is illusory; that conflict, antagonism and contradiction are not breakdowns of the system but rather lie at the heart of society and social change (Tajbakhsh, 2001: 13). Planning decision-making as a political activity is therefore identical to political reality and political reality, as all reality, is supported by fantasy. It requires the symbolic reduction of the Real.

Lack

There is thus always an unbridgeable gap separating reality from the Real. This gap is known in Lacanian terms as the lack. There is always a gap or lack between the subject and its representation. (For instance, between what consensus is represented as being in idealized theory and what it is in practice; between what a planning officer is represented as being on their position description and what they are in person; between how planners represent themselves and how others see them.) There is no possibility of total self-presence, of a complete coincidence between essence and appearance (Tajbakhsh, 2001: 136). My identity is both what I am (a white woman) and what I am not (a woman of colour). There is an inevitable lack or 'constitutive outside' that undermines the completeness of my self-identity. I am only partially determined. There is always an excess of meaning that eludes representation.

Consider a community group, such as a Residents' Action Group, which often comments on local planning issues. There will be people excluded from the group, either through choice, as they do not identify with the group, or through exclusion because the group does not identify with them. An example could be property owners who join a Ratepayers' Association and private-sector tenants who tend not to belong to such associations. The Ratepayers' Association 'unity' is the result of powerful 'hegemonization' of a series of differences. But, since identity itself is incomplete, these differences cannot be eliminated. The tenants are not outside of the local planning decision-making system per se, but rather they are an 'excluded interior', not outside the structure but absent from it.

Newman (2001) suggests, however, that such exclusion or 'emptiness' may be creative. It can possibly provide a ground for resistance (to the dominant voice of the Ratepayers' Association). It can open the structure of subjectivity (the Ratepayers' Association as the 'community') to change

and contingency, allowing the invention of new political identities. A space is thus opened for politics.

The logic of the lack and the Real can be applied to the idea of consensus-formation. As suggested above, there is always an excess of meaning which escapes signification. Attempts at total consensus-formation are predestined to fail. Consensus is incomplete. There is a Real that remains unsymbolizable. Not fixed by any essence, the Real remains open to a range of political signifiers that try to 'fill' or 'suture' (Newman, 2001) this place. Consensus-building practices attempt to fill this fundamental lack and overcome its fundamental antagonism. However, as Newman (2001: 147) states, 'this is an impossibility: the Real of antagonism, which eludes representation, can never be overcome'.

In terms of planning practice, the system 'fails' (Tajbakhsh, 2001: 158) because dislocations resulting from the processes of commodification and bureaucratization of everyday life generate antagonistic forces which create multiple power actors who seek to hegemonize and structure their immediate relations. These antagonisms then provide the spaces within which subject positions crystallize. The 'subjects'/actors may act in response to the dislocations (e.g. a community organization acting in response to contradictory consumption and spatial relations). As Tajbakhsh (2001: 158) concludes, 'the space of collective identities . . . is a space that attempts, but that always fails, to reach a point beyond antagonism, to transform itself from a negative to a positive value. But since identities are relational in the first place, and derive their character from dislocations in the structure and in relation to other identities, this remains an unachievable goal.' The questions for planning become those of whether all issues stem from identity and difference, and whether the subsequent acceptance of differences between adversaries becomes a democratic solution.[4]

The public supposed to know and the public supposed to believe

> There are some things that it is better . . . not to know. (Lynn and Jay, 1981: 132)

Dean (2001) indicates the lack between reality and the Real of complete information. This lack is the realm of 'secrets'; withheld or unknown information. While there are secrets, there cannot be meaningful consensus-formation.

Dean (2001) also demonstrates the gap between the fantastic universal Real of the public supposed to (or having a right to) know and the reality of the public supposed to believe. Provision of information and public involvement in participatory strategies hold out the possibility of good decision-making to the public supposed to believe. Yet lack of information/the secret conceals the gap between the public supposed to know and the public supposed to believe. Reality is 'a reductive acceptance of the

way things are instead of a utopian embrace of the way things might be' (Dean, 2001: 630).

In this manner, information may be withheld from the public or manipulated for public consumption.[5] In such authoritarian logic, the identity of scientists (planners) and their 'facts' are 'essentialized' as intrinsically rational, good and truth-bearing. The public, alternatively, and its 'opinions' are essentialized as irrational and non-factual. Lacanian analysis resists such essential formations, opening up discussion to contingency and multiple interpretations.

Similarly, in participatory planning exercises, various actors may be 'economical with the truth', engaging in a 'dance' (Lacan, 1977) of deception or 'opportunistic manoeuvring' (Zizek, 2001: 155) and rivalry (Gallop, 1985). For instance, resource managers may understate potential levels of environmental harm caused by resource exploitation and environmental objectors may overstate the size of their support base.

Zizek compares his Lacanian interpretation of consensus-formation with that of a Habermasian 'ideal speech situation' in which participants theoretically speak truthfully. Yet truth is simply a fiction: 'there is a domain "beyond Truth" that is not simply the everyday domain of lies, deceptions and falsities, but the Void that sustains the place in which one can only formulate symbolic fictions that we call "truths" ' (Zizek, 1999: 161). Zizek suggests that the Habermasian version of communicative action is 'lacking' (Zizek, 1997: 25). It remains ultimately a fiction, a purely symbolic subject of strategic reasoning exemplified in rational-choice theory. Since information cannot be complete since there is no 'truth'; since language cannot totally convey what actors feel, and the unexpressed lack is the kernel of actors' subjectivity, meaning must always be a distortion of the Real. That meaning is a distortion, however, is that which must be overcome in Habermasian communicative rationality.

It is Habermas' emphasis on information and consensus-formation and his failure to maintain the split between the public supposed to know and the public supposed to believe that makes agonism and the secret central to democratic decision-making. The public supposed to know relies on knowledge/information, unerring judgement, reciprocity, dialogic reason, consensus and certainty. The public supposed to believe involves ritual and mystery. Habermas believes that the process of rational debate transforms the latter into the former. Deliberation is thus 'a kind of purification' (Dean, 2001: 639) which leads to consensus and certainty through critical reflection. Lacanians would argue that this is impossible.

No social fantasy of consensus or harmony can fill the lack around which society is always structured. The political, therefore, is not and cannot achieve the Real per se, but is rather one of the modalities in which we attempt an encounter with the Real and its constitutive lack. As Stavrakakis writes: 'the political is associated thus with the moment of contingency and undecidability marking the gap between the dislocation of one

socio-political identification and the creation of the desire for a new one' (Stavrakakis, 1999: 75).

Consensus-formation has become the grail of much participatory planning practice. However, the ultimate paradox of consensus is that society is 'held together' by the very antagonism that forever prevents its closure in a harmonious, rational whole (Zizek, 1991). Consensus functions, in its very absence, however, as a point of reference enabling us to locate participatory decision-making. Consensus is Real, in the Lacanian sense: 'an impediment which gives rise to ever-new symbolisations by means of which one endeavours to integrate and domesticate it ... but which simultaneously condemns these endeavours to ultimate failure' (Zizek, 1991: 100).

On big and little Others (the big Other and *l'objet petit a*)

The 'big Other' is an impersonal set of rules, a symbolic order or 'code of accepted fictions' (Zizek, 1999: 1), 'the force of dialectical mediation-appropriation' (Zizek, 2001: 153) such as behavioural ideals encouraged by planning law, officer Codes of Conduct, ground-rules governing communicative action or consensus-formation. As Zizek (2001: 155) writes, 'our response to the Other's call is never fully adequate'. There is an irreducible opposition between the ethicality and morality of the 'rules' and their performance in reality. The rules form the ground of undecidability, while political reality is the 'domain of decision(s), of taking the full risk of crossing the hiatus and translating this impossible ethical request for Messianic justice into a particular intervention that never lives up to this request, that is always unjust towards (some of the) others' (Zizek, 2001: 156).

For instance, Indigenous Aboriginal Australians living next to an area of remnant bushland subject to a development application may regard the open space as having spiritual significance and as inaccessible to the developer and potential future residents, but which is nevertheless threatened by them. In this case, the Other of Indigenous heritage protection legislation should act as Zizek's 'force of mediation-appropriation', yet political reality might result in pressure being placed on 'mediating' decision makers to declare the site 'insignificant'.

As suggested above, the notion of consensus-formation can be equated to the Lacanian Real. If this Real becomes visible 'as such', reality disintegrates. Therefore, in order to maintain the consistent edifice of reality, one of the elements of reality has to stand in for the Real. This element is the Lacanian *objet petit a*. It is the elusive make-believe, the mediator of desire for the big Other.

Are participatory planning strategies, therefore, merely a search for something that can best stand in for consensus-formation, the lost object of desire? Are inclusive stakeholder meetings the Lacanian *objet petit a* that

condenses the impossibility of consensus, serving as its stand-in and thereby enabling us to entertain a liveable relationship with it? Are they merely 'a certain "nothing at all" . . . which none the less, like the eye of a storm, causes a gigantic commotion all round'? (Zizek, 2001: 256). Attempting consensus-formation may be, as Dean (2001: 642) suggests, simply 'Haber-masochism'.

Desires and needs

'Desire is not bolstered by needs, but rather the contrary; needs are derived from desire' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1984, cited in Fuery, 1995: 97). For Lacan, desire and subjectivity are inseparable (Fuery, 1995). Actors' exist-ence in society is characterized by uncertainty, alienation and fragmen-tation/overdetermination. As such, desire to gain a sense of being, or a capacity to know, is inevitable. Actors desire some sort of control over the self, others and their environment. There are important differences between desire, need and demand. As Fuery (1995: 17) explains: 'whereas "need" and "demand" can be tied to specific objects and relations, "desire" always exceeds those objects'. Need and demand also differ. In fact, it is the gap between them that constitutes desire: 'desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need' (Lacan, 1977: 311).

Lacan (1977) would suggest that it is repressed desire that surfaces in actors, such as interest group members, manifest in a particular demand. Consider the example of a Residents' Action Group successfully lobbying to 'protect' a small area of beachfront from a development application for a refreshment kiosk. Research indicates that local middle-class property owners are more likely to participate in such interest groups.[6,7] It could be argued that such actors may be unlikely to 'need' ocean views, yet they demand them. In such a case the actors' identities are constituted by a potential prohibition of desire through its representation in the big Other of planning law and a zoning amendment.

In the above example desire has become politicized. Ocean views repre-sent the symbolized desire of a group of individuals with the ability to impose their opinion over others. As Gunder (2000: 5) writes, 'this is through imposing their own enjoyed delusions about reality via selected "distorted" knowledge and language. . .a successful will to *jouissance* beyond just material greed'[8] of maintaining property values. A failure of group members to 'protect' the views would likely have resulted in their externalization of political disappointment by blaming failures on the char-acter of power 'out there' rather than a search for the cause of disappoint-ment in their own social ranks (Brown, 1995: xii). Even though the views may have been 'saved' on this occasion, they may nevertheless be 'threat-ened' by some future application. The residents continue to live in a state of uncertainty, with their desires not fully satisfied.

Such decisions, ceding to the wishes of what is often a minority (e.g. a

Residents' Action Group), and oiling the so-called 'squeaky wheel', do not transform the structural causes of problems, but, as an image of a partici-patory 'free' decision, perform a mirror reversal. They often recycle or reinstate rather than transform the terms of domination that generated them. There is a paradox here in that the first imaginings of 'freedom' in participatory decision-making are constrained by and potentially even require the very structures of opposition (minority domination) that the local group's call for participation had emerged to oppose.

Planning practice: a space of becoming

If planning theories attempt to eliminate or negate the possibility of agonism in order to grasp consensus with its 'intact purity' of the Real, Torfing (1999: 128–9) proposes that we are simply being guided by an illusion. Negating the reality of agonism does not lead to the harmony and consensus of a fully constituted 'we', since agonism, if not antagonism, is constitutive of social identity itself. We then tend to misrecognize the true cause of our failure. Thinking that they are missing some kind of 'golden rule', planning theorists attempt to find and to follow normative 'golden rules' closely. Yet, as Zizek (1991) suggests, what such theorists misrecog-nize is that what is lacking cannot be pinpointed to any specific rule or symbolic feature.

Lacanians would suggest that, within planning practice what should differentiate democratic from other forms of decision-making would be the legitimization of conflict and the refusal to eliminate it through the estab-lishment of an authoritarian consensus. Additionally, we should not act as if we believe in perfect information or consensus. 'No inclusion, whether of groups or information, people or issues, will provide enough legitimacy to justify what is claimed in the name of the public' (Dean, 2001: 646). Within a Lacanian framework the diversity between different conceptions of the good is not regarded as something to be eliminated but as something to be 'valued and celebrated. This requires the presence of institutions that estab-lish a specific dynamic between consensus and dissent' (Mouffe, 1996: 8) rather than simply a Habermasian regulative idea of free unconstrained and perfectly informed communication.

However, Lacan is generally regarded as being unable to incorporate a complete understanding of capital, class, gender, race, etc. in structuring actions. Where does this leave the *Realpolitik* of planning practice? Is there hope for planners? Lacanians such as Zizek and Mouffe suggest that there might be. Zizek (1997) points out that the condition of impossibility is at the same time the condition of possibility; that the very condition that prevents us from achieving Real consensus is, at the same time, a positive condition of our attempting to understand and engage with it in praxis. The aim is to establish some form of agreement within an environment of conflict and diversity, to create a 'doubtful society, beset by productive

self-doubt' (Stavrakakis, 1999: 112); to create an ethos of practice associated with the mobilizations of passions and sentiments, the multiplication of practices, institutions and language games (Mouffe, 1996: 5–8) and which accepts the impossibility of reaching the rational consensual Real, but which strives to accommodate conflicting desires as reality. As Stavrakakis (1999: 112) asks, 'isn't it something worth fighting for?'

Assuming the answer to Stavrakakis' question is 'yes', we need to think about theory without agreements rather than agreements without theory. Some groups in society will only relate through conflict (Baum, 1997). While consensus-formation may be morally preferable, it still may not be possible. The rules are not the game.

Conclusions

> Partnerships are especially likely to grow and nurture fantasy when reality
> resists strongly held intentions. (Baum, 2000: 235)

I have described above how Habermasian consensus-formation stipulates that full, rational agreement under ideal conditions of communication constitutes a part of consensual closure for participatory decision-making. However, when set against the reality of politics, Habermasian ideals cannot be definitively reached.

Decision-making is constituted out of intersections between social and psychological reality, as Habermas himself recognized. As I demonstrate above, he suggests that systematic distortion of communication necessarily presupposes a theory of undistorted communication; i.e., of communicative rationality. As recent empirical research indicates, however, Habermas' conception is too restrictive to serve as a model of rational will formation and collaborative decision-making on all but a small scale. Much of the universal theorizing deployed by Habermas in construction of a rational consensus, such as his reliance on the validity claims of the ideal speech situation, is not necessary for collaborative behaviour to occur in planning practice (Gunder, 2003).

I suggest that our understanding of the gap between Habermasian communicative rational ideals and local-particular realities (Gunder, 2003) may be enhanced by turning to a Lacanian-inspired analysis of practice. While the Lacanian Real of consensus-formation may have become the driving force of much participatory communicative planning practice, what is achieved in practice is *reality*. The resulting plan or policy statement is a symbolic expression of the incompleteness of consensus-formation and the resulting pacification of the big Other. Lacanian theorizing suggests that it is important to recognize the difference and the lack or gap between Real consensus and its clumsy, incomplete imitation in reality.

Habermas' moral theorization of communicative action may be

compared with a more political Lacanian view of decision-making. Communicative action is predicated upon assumptions of shared rational norms, of mutual understanding/reciprocity, the possibility of communication without constraint and freedom from power-plays in order to reach common ground of consensus. Lacan, however, rejects the idea of common ground and sees 'the trauma of antagonism behind consensus, the rift between unity and cohesion' (Newman, 2001: 150). Lacanian thought stems from the individual as constructed with and by others. It is characterized by an acceptance of conflict.

Habermas attempts to theoretically repress the irrepressible lack between reality and the Real. He postulates the circumstances in which constraint-free communication would be possible and puts forward a rationality which would appear to separate problems, policies and 'truths' from the actors who are dealing with them, placing the issue at hand in the realm of juridico-discursive rationality. Lacanian logic, however, would suggest that this very attempt to exclude constraint and power from rational communication is itself the return of constraint and power. 'The Real of power has returned as the very conditions set up to exclude it, thus disrupting the identity of rational communication itself' (Newman, 2001: 150). The rational norms of communicative action, which Habermas claims as universal, are not universal, but grounded in a particular epistemological and cultural paradigm which resists difference and hybridity and which are the result of hegemonic articulations.

Lacanian thinking thus emphasizes a fundamental breakdown of the universal values and essentialist notions of Habermasian communicative action. Communicative action confers on the desired fantasies of actors the forms of universal legality, of equivalent dialogic exchange and of the reciprocity of equal rights and understandings. In reality, however, some rights are more equal and some discourses more equivalent than others. As Zizek (1991: 168), indicates, 'by definition, fantasies cannot coexist peacefully'. Lacanian analysis affirms rift and antagonism rather than consensus between actors. A key contribution to planning theory is that it indicates a logic of 'filling' the irreducible gap, the void of the Real of consensus, to be clearly hegemonic.

According to Lacanian analysis, consensus-formation is founded on a radical antagonism that constitutes it through its own impossibility (see Newman, 2001). Antagonism is the constitutive outside of consensus-formation. Exclusion is the constitutive outside of inclusive participation. They both subject consensus-forming exercises to the logic of undecidability, despite various political articulations that seek to overcome the fundamental lack or gap between reality and the Real.

There is a 'radical impossibility' in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985, 2002) terms, therefore, of Habermasian rational consensus-formation. It can never be completely fulfilled, not least because relations of power cannot disappear as they are constitutive of the social (Laclau and Mouffe, 2002).

However, this lack of fulfilment does not mean that we should not search for forms of robust agreements in planning decision-making. Rational agreement is 'something which will always need to be a project which we are going to fight for, but know that we will never be able to reach it' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2002: 129). Rather, the implication is that we could rethink the notions of consensus-formation and agreement in a different way, incorporating both collaboration and competition, both striving to understand and engage with consensus-formation while at the same time respecting differences of values and areas of disagreement.

It is useful at this point to consider Rubin's (1998) distinction between *resolution* of a debate, denoting an outcome which involves participants' attitudinal change and agreed issue resolution, and *settlement* of a debate in which the underlying attitudinal bases of conflict may not have been addressed. He also notes a shift in practice from a focus on resolution to settlement, which is generally regarded as being much easier and faster to achieve (see also Sager, 1994).

There is a need to disrupt the theoretical and political logics that limit thinking to utopian terms. A Lacanian analysis points to new and perhaps unpredictable possibilities. It can help planning officers to understand why certain actors behave as they do, to understand conflict and aggressive behaviour, to differentiate between actors' needs, demands and desires and to recognize that rules are never failsafe. It can help planners to recognize the symptoms of irreducible conflict and, rather than forge ahead with intended strategies of resolutionary consensus-formation, to think through strategies aimed at settlement.

Planning practice could become a journey from explanation to response (Tajbakhsh, 2001: 162). If officers recognize that any given identity, especially if it is institutionalized, inevitably rests on exclusion, then they may be able to think through not what interest group or actor X *is*, but what they are not, who they exclude and so on. Outreach strategies may then begin to reach some of these hitherto excluded voices. Similarly, with a so-called 'consensus' decision, or one taken for the 'public good', planning officers could perhaps abandon an idealization that consensus-formation and the public good are rational entities and begin from examination of what consensus or the public good do *not* manage to be. In this way, lack, exclusion, antagonism and undecidability may be recognized and action commenced for their reduction, mindful of the impossibility of their elimination.

There cannot, and should not, be any 'model' of agonistic democracy as ways of working need to be contingent on circumstances, time, place and stakeholders. As Flyvbjerg (1998: 234) writes, 'when we understand power we see that we cannot rely solely on democracy based on rationality to solve our problems.' There will always be something in planning decision-making practice that exceeds the definitions and boundaries laid down for it; 'something unpredictable, often antagonistic, fleeting and contingent' (Newman, 2001: 175). This is the outside to planning practice, its limitless limit.

In planning practice, 'consensus decision making offers a fantasy solution' (Baum, 1997: 145) to deep-rooted problems. In fact, as Gunder (2002, personal communication) suggests, is not the very nature of planning itself, as a praxis of 'what ought to be' or 'the good city', destined to be merely a fantasy? But this is Lacan's 'constituting fantasy': fantasy always associated with hope; something to live for, a desire for a future. How to deal with these fantasies is the ongoing question with which theory and practice will 'for ever be confronted and for which there can never be a final solution' (Mouffe, 2000: 139).

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. In some respects, however, my attempt is doomed to fail. As Michael Gunder has pointed out to me, in Lacanian terms there can never be complete understanding. Similarly, we as humans are never able to express exactly what we really want. It remains for me, therefore to set down my marker as best I can.
2. 'a hypothetical eventuation that would be reached under ideal conditions' (Rescher, 1993: 28)
3. It is important to note that at this stage, Habermas' (1979) conception of consensus is not immediately practical or political, but simply cognitive. It is in his later work (e.g. Habermas, 1991, 1996, 1998, 2001b) where he becomes concerned with the post-unification German state, that he politicizes his theorizations.
4. I am indebted to Alan March for these questions.
5. See for example the detailed investigation of the 'children overboard' photographs in Australia before the Federal election of 2001 (MacMillan, 2002), of Second World War experiments involving the injection of plutonium into human patients (Rampton and Stauber, 2002), of hazards involved in the use of 2,4,5-T herbicides, of the safety to consumers of British beef in the early 1990s (both Irwin, 1995) and Chomsky and Herman's *Manufacturing Consent* (1988).
6. See for example Eder (1996) and the volumes edited by Morris and Mueller (1992) and Johnston and Klandermans (1995).
7. It should be remembered that many other forms of interest groups exist, based around collective identities other than those of class and property ownership, including women's groups, gay and lesbian groups and so on.
8. *Jouissance* is a complex and ambiguous term. Lacan uses *jouissance* in a series of different contexts, in each of which the term acquires a different meaning

ranging from enjoyment and pleasure to desire and even the exercise of property rights (Evans, 1998: 1).

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