Social Planning as a Political Process*

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Planning As A Political Process

Social planning is a political process. This insight is integral to the *practice* of competent community professionals but rarely is given recognition in the form of *theoretical* perspectives. The resultant discrepancy between theory and practice provides great discomfort to practitioners who somehow feel that what they *must do* diverges significantly from an ideal aspiration of what their practice *should be.*

The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of this theory-practice hiatus and suggest an approach to more realistic linkages between action and guiding ideas.

The study of politics is the study of interactions which result in the governance of the social order, its institutions and organizations. Governance implies order and hierarchy in some structures, a process for the continuing evolution of goals to set the directions of what must be accomplished socially, philosophies which guide the determination of social goals and the means for exercising power so that goals can be translated into implementing actions.

Power can be viewed as the ability to command or influence the processes by which resources are procured and allocated for the accomplishment of social goals. Power in a fundamental sense is coercive. . .it is the ability of one group of participants in a social order to impose their will on others.[1]

Political processes are typified by conflict in the exercise of power as groupings of people engage each other in a never-ending struggle of differing interests, values and ideological convictions. Social conflict is as eternal a phenomenon as are death and taxes.

Planning is an essential element of social existence; it is the effort to infuse social activity with consistency and conscious purpose.[2]

Planning is a political process in that it is integral to governance. Planning requires the exercise of power both to obtain the sanction necessary for its initiation and direction as well as to realize the visions of the future which are created. Resource allocation is necessary for planning itself to move ahead, again requiring the political infusion of sanction and funding. Planning is typified by conflict at its various stages of development, and these conflicts are indeed the conflicts of interests, values and ideologies.

Planning is essential if communities are to establish communal goals and structures and work towards their realization. Planning is required if communal affairs are to move from irrational and random conflicts to more rational efforts marked by a greater sense of mastery over the stresses of social existence.

As the American Jewish community confronts its future, one is struck with a sense of the largeness of the issues which require planning within the context of unclear priorities and uncertain events. One wonders whether the present sense of crisis in direction-setting for the American Jewish

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[1] For a discussion of this view of the fundamentally coercive nature of power, see Max Weber's writings in Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 180-181.

[2] This definition of planning is based upon the views of Alan Altschuler, *The City Planning Process.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 409.

community is an extension of the tensions of thousands of years of Jewish history or whether we are at a genuine turning point marked by historical difference. Bernstein and Perlmutter suggest the latter in their comment that "we are living in a critical time when extreme pressures are experienced by the Jewish community. . . ."[3]

An Agenda of Communal Issues Require Planning

Chernin suggests an approach to planning through the development of a schema for ordering the importance of pressures facing the Jewish community, thus developing an agenda for action.[4] A listing of these pressures should reinforce the need for understanding the process of planning in which agenda building is but one vital step:

Continuity or survival? As we examine this question, *survival* becomes a target lacking in life and unreal as it implies an effort to keep things as they are. *Continuity* means evolution and development because it embraces the necessity and richness of the potential for change. What forms of social life enhance continuity?

Continuity and succession: How will Jewish life succeed itself? What sources of renewal are there as communities mature, old people pass away and new populations take their place? What priority should be given to Jewish education for both young people and adults?

Size: Given the continued influence of the majority culture, intermarriage will remain a real threat to succession. Given both intermarriage and the shrinking birth-rate, we need to plan for smaller communities. As we get smaller, internecine warfare among organizations may intensify as jurisdictions become cloudy and the communal resource base

shrinks. How can we *consolidate* what we have rather than use up our resources to keep organizational shells alive?

Communal structure: Federations are not communities, nor are neighborhoods and towns necessarily communities. Federation structure is not necessarily community structure. Shall we strive to lessen the gap? If so, how should this affect decision-making and participation? Who decides what is good for the community? How? What do we mean by community?

Vulnerable populations: We will witness the growth of new populations vulnerable to socially induced risk at the same time as old populations in need wither away slowly. How aggressive will we be in searching out these new areas of need? Will we try to use the census as a tool for identifying such groups and individuals? Will we know in time that we are not helping enough blind people; enough single parents; enough mentally retarded young adults? Will we have to rediscover poverty in our midst? Will we involve key community leaders in such discussions and such efforts? Will we be able to search out the reports of our agencies for clues and will we welcome suggestions from them as to new areas of need they perceive? How will we deal with current programs serving vulnerable populations in the light of the discovery and legitimation of new areas of need?

American social policy: Nationally as well as locally, will we be involved forcefully and creatively in the evolution of new and progressive policies to meet pressing social needs? Will we recognize that Jewish community dollars can only supplement public dollars in areas of fundamental social need and will we try to influence responsibly the policies that govern the expenditure of these dollars? Will we continue to maintain our position of compassionate concern for the welfare of all minority groups, as we protect our own welfare? Welfare reform is liable to turn to be fiscal relief for states and localities, eliminating any improvement of the lot of the poor. Health insurance is liable to be government assistance to private insurance companies,

[3] Morris Bernstein and Felice Perlmutter, "The Unique Jewish Family Agency," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LIV, No. 4 (Summer 1978), p. 319.

[4] Albert T. Chernin, "Jewish Community Relations—Boundaries and Priorities," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, (Summer 1978), Vol. LIV, No. 4, p. 277-281.

rather than a brand new way to organize health care so that the entire population may benefit. Will *we* be involved in trying to make a difference? Will we involve our communities?

Domestic vs. overseas needs: What will be the balance? What happens if peace comes to Israel, in whole or in part? What happens if war breaks out again? Shall we attempt to influence the peace policies of the Israeli government? If so, how? Shall we permit or encourage our communities to debate these policies? If so, how? Shall *we* resettle more Soviet Jews? What portion of our resources should be devoted to this purpose?

Domestic needs vs. domestic needs: Kosansky argues forcefully for the "very special" nature of Jewish community centers at the same time as other authors make a case for the uniqueness and value of Jewish family agencies.[5] Continued funding of hospitals is criticized by those who would reallocate Jewish communal funds to what they regard as uniquely Jewish purposes. Within agencies the battle rages as well. For instance, many Jewish community centers worry about the inherent allocative conflict of dollars for physical education against the need for dollars to subsidize specifically Jewish cultural activities.

Male and female: Expected social roles in both family and communal affairs are shifting as women claim the right to equality in both spheres of life. Enormous stress is experienced by individuals and families as well as organizations as the impact of this significant social change is felt and efforts made to foster understanding.

Family life: Families continue to be the major social mechanism for the transmission of values. What happens to this function of family life when the dominant values of society appear to stress man vs. man and continue to erode a sense of social purpose?

American anti-Semitism: Clearly, many in the Jewish community regard such manifesta-

tions with alarm! What shall be our communal response? What structures need to be created? Reinforced? How do we deal with those within our own ranks who would resort to violence in order to counter-threat?

Why Is Planning Such A Source of Professional Discomfort?

There continues to be doubt and confusion about what is meant by social planning in our country. In our capitalist economy, the major corporations are actively engaged in planning. Many of the large companies have planning staffs working as long as 25 years ahead to define a vision of the future which can aid the executives in present day decision-making. Yet government is highly constrained in its planning activities and private philanthropy even more constrained in its ability to envision the future and shape current activities.

Doubt and confusion about planning is reflected in Jewish communal services as well. At almost every gathering of Jewish communal professionals, sessions are held to clarify what is meant by planning, the planning process, and to debate different and sometimes contradictory approaches to planning.

We suggest that such a constant need to address the question of planning without an apparent sense of satisfaction reflects a great feeling of discomfort, which has a number of sources. Discomfort can arise through failure to tease out underlying problems that exist in the social structure, thus reinforcing a conviction that the problem really lies with us as planners. One should acknowledge these underlying problems as a precondition for understanding the limits as well as the challenges of the planning process. The discomforts of planning would then stem from an appreciation of its complexities rather than from an inappropriate absorption of self-blame.

Planning is an effort to provide for saneness in an insane world. Planning strives for patterning when chaos appears to be the rule. Communal professionals continue to be pressed for rational solutions to seemingly

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5 Harry Kosansky, "The Jewish Community Center—We May Not Be Unique, But We Are Very Special," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service,* (Summer 1978), Vol. LIV, No. 4, p.303-308.

irrational problems.

Planning is an organizational function which is continually at war with other functions. The demand to allocate resources for long-term purposes is in conflict with efforts to meet current and pressing organizational needs which demand answers *now*. The time and energy invested in planning represent an opportunity-cost in the present which subtracts from resources available to meet current needs.

Planning requires research into past activities inquiring into their conduct so that the future can be guided by both past errors and accomplishments. Planning impinges upon the present by requiring that there should be a systematic and orderly record of events and actions which occur in a discordant fashion. Yet *present* needs demand only that "bottom line" accounting take place with other forms of recording deemed superfluous. Discipline in recording demands the whole story and science tells us that valuable learning can come from the review of failure as well as success. Yet reluctance marks the recounting of failure since it inevitably carries with it an imputation of blame. To force the facts into the open is an act which frequently requires the expenditure of stores of rather scarce political credits. Evidently, the political costs are not usually outweighed by the political gains of precise recording and recounting activities.

Planning requires a spelling out of goals and a creation of an orderly hierarchy of goals. In contrast, ambiguity as to goals and their hierarchal relationship permits ambitious administrators greater latitude. Thus, planning restricts the free wheeling ability of decision-makers in taking advantage of opportunities suddenly created by the force of events. Planning requires one to face the uncertainty of the future at the same time as dealing with the certainty of present day demands. Planning is "guesstimating" at a time when the present demands clarity and firmness in decision-making.

Planning is a vision of the future constructed out of data from the past which attempts to guide present day activities. We are uncertain as to how to let this leap of vision happen. Planning is by its very nature uncertain. Its avowed goal of mastery and prevention of drift is often viewed as highly compromised by the common sense knowledge that the future contains many unpredictable events. Planning is, in this sense, a mass of contradictions. Questions about planning will continue to plague us and a sense of completeness in planning will continue to be the brass ring on the merry-go-round just out of our reach.

The essential contradiction in planning is that while all organizations strive for predictability, the force of events flowing from conflicts and contradictions within the social order disrupts the capacity of social welfare organizations to achieve real certainty about the future.[6] It is impossible for planning within one social welfare organization to be a controlled process in an economy which is unplanned.[7]

Organizational integrity continues to be punctured by the force and flow of events in near and far environments. Planning in this sense is an organizational function which helps to deal with this continuing rupture of organizational life. Planning is a necessary function but one which can never be implemented in a complete or final sense. For these reasons, planning is by definition a continual source of frustration and discomfort.

A basic irony of organizational life lies in the need for stability in the context of change. Social life demands change; indeed, our professional lives confirm the observation that everything is forever changing. Stability can

[6] Max Weber viewed bureaucracy as a technically superior form of human organization. He included among the traits of superiority the following: precision, speed, lack of ambiguity, continuity, steadiness and calculable rules. See Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *op.cit.*, Chapter VIII.

[7] Economic thought now includes the possibility that we will back into much more of a planned economy out of our need to control inflation. For a view which suggests that this might be necessary, see Robert Heilbroner, *Beyond Boom and Crash.* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978).

only be assured through controlled change. Controlling and patterning change is the contribution made by planning to an organization's ability to survive. Implementing and guiding change projected by planning efforts is a major responsibility of administrations.

Planning is both long-range and short-range. The shorter the time scope of the plan, the more detailed it can become. Long-range plans constantly require up-dating—a euphemism for planned modification because conditions change and goals are altered, partly because of new information accruing from experience with short-range elements of the plan. It is these complexities which bring us back time after time to inquire: what is planning and how can we do it? The question should really be: how can we do it better? It is inescapable that the planning function should somehow be implemented. The questions then become: with what foresight, with what energy, with what resources, with what values, with what importance, and, finally, with what methodology.

Planning can be done intuitively by the seat of one's pants. It can be done mechanically through arbitrary definition of incremental additions to costs and revenues. Planning can be done methodically and systematically. In any case, we cannot escape the organizational necessity of paying attention to the planning function and its attendant processes.

Planning Process

At least in our own country, comprehensive planning seems a mistaken idea. The prerequisites of comprehensive planning include 1) a clear and comprehensive statement of the problem which requires planning and 2) availability of comprehensive data which accurately define the problem in question. In most questions of social policy, we lack such a comprehensive data base. Information is time costly, manpower costly and politically costly. In addition, most problems which cry out for planning solutions rarely stand still for data analysis. The time necessary to gather such comprehensive data often results in the availability of information which easily runs the risk

of being considered outdated.

If comprehensive planning lacks realism, it cannot serve as a basis for modeling the expectations of service-oriented professionals. We require theoretical constructs which both describe and explain reality as a guide for realistic action. We must derive such constructs from our practice, constantly enriching them from experience and constantly examining the "fit" between theory and practice.

Our experience tells us that planning is incremental—that is, it proceeds from the present and offers modifications of what exists as alternatives to decision-makers. Planning is disjointed, as the need for planning arises from disjointed events and takes place in the context of a continued flow of conflictual forces. "Disjointed incrementalism" is the term coined by Braybrooke and Lindblom for social planning.[8]

Our experience tells us that this is an apt description of planning process. Professional discomfort arises from the expectation that, somehow, this ought not to be the case and the continued experience of disjointedness indicates some lack in professional understanding or performance. Nothing could be further from the truth. If we take our experience as a guide, rather than some lovely symmetrical model developed in a dream world, we would recognize that irritation is the source of planning. Planning begins with the realization that something is awry. Awareness of this fact always takes place later than in the events themselves, a fact which illuminates some of the difficulties of planning. As an effort to overtake and shape events, it begins with being *behind*.

The second stage of the process is legitimation.[9] A community not only needs to be

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[8] The concept of "disjointed incrementalism" as a realistic alternative to comprehensive planning was developed by David Braybrooke and Charles Lindblom in *A Strategy of Decision*. (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963).

[9] For a discussion of the place of *legitimation* as a stage in the process of collective definition of a social problem, see Herbert Blumer, "Social Problems as Collective Behavior," *Social Problems,* Vol. 18, No. 3 (Winter 1971), p. 301.

aware of a problem but also must come to the realization that the problem is of sufficient significance to warrant action. Even the act of investigating problems enough to create a basis of understanding represents an expenditure of scarce resources.

Assuming legitimation, a series of alternative proposals for dealing with the problem must be developed. The consequences of adopting each alternative must be weighed. The consequences include the costing out of alternative solutions since resources allocated for this problem will not be available for dealing with other problems.

The fourth stage involves the evolution of consensus with respect to the choice of alternatives. This is a step in the process which is much easier said than done in communal life. The various individuals and groups with a stake in the problem and its resolution must come together and compromise sufficiently to enable a clear communal view to emerge.

The fifth step involves the devising of a program to carry out the plan and the actual diversion of resources to such a program. Again, much easier said than done.

The next step involves implementation and monitoring of implementation. Goals, plans, and program must be realistic and communication lines must be open to feed back the results of implementation. Feedback may result in program modification as the nature and extent of the problem are clarified as a result of efforts to deal with it. Linkage to other problems and to other communal efforts will become clearer as the program progresses and this in turn will require change in communal structure and program.

Feedback over time makes evaluation possible. Evaluation may make possible change at every level of this process including the retention, expansion, modification or elimination of the program.

Each step in this process from awareness to evaluation involves the politics of community life. Each stage is subject to the power relationships and processes of a community since each stage of the planning process requires the allocation of resources. Budgets,

according to Aaron Wildavsky, are schemas for deciding who gets what within an organization or collectivity of organizations.[10] Planning involves the creation of guidelines for who will get what in the future—based upon estimates of who will give what. Wildavsky spoke about the "politics of the budgetary process." Surely, we have to acknowledge as a source of professional discomfort, the politics of the planning process.

In a nutshell, planning is about change. It is about the politics of change in who gets what and who gives what. Change is difficult; some groups may be hurt by change or, equally significant, may believe they will be hurt by change.

Despite the emphasis on power transactions, there are many opportunities for choice and influence by the professional. Do we want the political process to be open? Do we want the people who will be affected by change to become aware of the problem and the alternatives for resolution? Do we want their ideas even if they are not important contributors of funds? Do we want them involved in the planning process in any way?

Another aspect of planning process is needs definition and needs assessment. Needs constantly emerge from changes in the social fabric of life. Not only do needs change, but understanding of needs changes as well. A constant tension exists between service needs and services actually intended to meet such needs . . . the fit must be constantly tested. Both services and needs are *relative* rather than *absolute* questions.[11] Planning is concerned

10 In Wildavsky's view, budgets are links between financial resources and human behavior which have, as their aim, achievement of policy objectives. Budgeting, in his view, is concerned with the translation of financial issues into human purposes . . . requiring the definition of goals with price tags attached. See Aaron Wildavsky, *The Politics of the Budgetary Process.* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1964).

11 The relative nature of both needs and services is discussed by Richard M. Titmuss, *Essays on the Welfare State.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 39-44.

with changing needs and must be able to suggest services to meet emerging needs.

Needs assessment can begin with an estimate of the total population which in theory may experience a particular need.[12] What follows is a process of estimation which prunes down from the total to a statement of those who can be considered to be vulnerable. A further estimate—still lower—must be made of those considered to be actually in need over a given period of time. The fourth step is to count all those who are receiving the assistance intended for this group.

The difference between those estimated to be in need (step three) and those actually receiving aid (step four) is the *service gap*. These gaps must be continually presented to community policy-makers as issues which must be considered in an allocations process.

Going from step one to step four epitomizes the analysis of planning as a political process. These steps involve potential conflict in conceptualization, in values, in definition of service patterns and finally in assessment of the effectiveness of services.

[12] This approach to calculation of unmet needs is being utilized by New York City in its Title XX planning. It is drawn from Lee Williams and associates, *Social Services Planning Manual*. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1976).

Conclusion

Planning is an old story in history despite recent advances in planning technology. It represents a very human hunger for rationality, for order and stability in our lives. As our social order becomes more complex, planning efforts seem both to liberate us and ensnare us. We become ambivalent about the value of planning since it both offers the vision of a better future and disrupts the certainty of the present.

Because of this ambivalence, we have to keep relearning how planning can contribute to the quality of our lives. We keep encountering the basic truth that without planning, we give greater weight to the irrational in the social order and permit an anarchic conjunction of forces and events to determine how we shall live.

In today's world every nation seems to be ambivalent about the understanding that such anarchy can undermine the very basis of what we mean by human existence. The American Jewish community is now involved in many significant efforts designed to foster the changes of enduring succession. We can only ignore the need for effective social planning at the peril of our very existence.