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Planning and plan evaluation: some well known and often neglected pitfalls

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I am pleased to be able to attend this symposium in honour of a scholar whom I consider as a master in the plan evaluation field, with some arguments concerning few well known pitfalls, or traps, which are however, in my opinion, often neglected or forgotten in the usual evaluation practices; which manifest damages not only to the result of evaluation, but to the credibility and reliability both of evaluation and, ultimately, planning itself.

These pitfalls to which I refer, and which are all logically inter-related, as we will see, could be named as follows: 1) logical indeterminateness; 2) systemic disconnectedness; 3) strategic insubordination; 4) auto-referencing; 5) sub-optimization; 6) bounded rationality¹.

This paper aims to highlight some of the negative consequences of the result of plan evaluation which are produced by the existence and neglect of such pitfalls; and to discuss how a conscious management of evaluation, if practised, can help to extend planning practices; an extension, which depends – on the one hand – the removal of the pitfalls themselves and – on the other – the development of a “true” planning science (or planology).

¹ The paper is in its first draft form. I hope in some comments and further comparison with other possible contributions.

1. Logical indeterminateness: evaluation *versus* values.

The first pitfall I wish to draw the attention to is that of *logical indeterminateness*, where it is stated that the evaluation process could be exempt from values, or “value-free”. This creates a series of misunderstandings which deserve to be discussed and enlight.

It is usual in whichever evaluation process to state that the contents of the evaluation pertains to some “values” which, in turn, correspond to some “value-judgements” and from which the evaluation cannot help but be influenced.

As it is well known the very same methodological reflection of political economy, in it’s own time and in it’s own way, assumed a logical “priority” of the “value” regarding the “evaluation,” either to state or research the “technical” *independence* and *neutrality* of the evaluation from the values², or to declare the *impossibility* of such independence and neutrality³

In other words a great, main, stream of economic thinking⁴ (made up of numerous strands) has sought to assert that the concept of “value” in the evaluation that concerns us is typically (and implicitly) “economic”; and that the behaviour of individuals, groups, and communities is ruled by a axiomatic logic of *utility* which explains the behaviour (and therefore studies and codifies it) leaving out the substantive values which determine such *utility*. An extreme example: the *utility* for a person could be to acquire goods, that for another person would be to donate, but both “utilities” (or choices or preferences) coming from different values, could be subject to the same behavioural rule, as the “decreasing marginal utility” of the goods⁵. Therefore, these rules are the proper realm of the economic science, whichever be the good/commodity exchanged.

² Economic thinking itself, from the very beginning, has researched an assessment “value free” but the author who comes to mind above any other for the specificity of the subject is Lionel Robbins (1935).

³ In the same way, economic research has always faced challengers of not only the possibility but even the unavoidability of a value free assessment and the author who comes to mind above any other for the vasiety of the engagement on the subject is Gunnar Myrdal (1953, 1958, 1972, 1980).

⁴ As well known, this stream is usually defined (by its opposers) as *main*, dominant *i. e.* “mainstream”, and – maybe a little ironic - “orthodox”.

⁵ According to which: the more the pleasure or need becomes satisfied, the more the utility of this good (and therefore its value) declines. In such cases orthodox do not hesitate to assert: if individuals aim to acquire the *good-wealth*, the value of the wealth declines with the growth of the wealth. But I am not sure that the same happens – according to their assertion - if in the place of the *good-wealth*, we introduce other goods of which individuals can feel the utility (pleasure or need): *good-solidarity*, *good-power*, *good-respect* (of themselves), *good-rectitude*, *good-affection*, *good-sociality*, *good-wisdom*, *good-success*, among others. Walter Isard, (1969) consistently with the logic of the neo-classical approach, called these goods “commodities,” *i.e.* subject of exchange.

Whereas another important stream⁶ (which is made up of more numerous individual strands than of those of the “main-stream”) contest the possibility of an economic theory to leave out from its formulations certain value premises: but nothing dramatic! It is sufficient - for this stream - to *explicit* values, and a good deal of its economic reflection or findings can be equally well grounded, but on the logical constraint of the assumed premises, and provided that they are not presented as “natural” and “objective” facts (in the way of natural sciences), independent from historical-institutional conditioning.

However, as stated, both the opposing streams of thinking, have a thing in common: both consider the value (neutral or implicit) as a basis for the evaluation.

Even in the more confined area of the planning theory and of the plan evaluation it is usual to start on the presupposition that evaluation cannot do anything but:

1. Either, leave out of consideration all values which are at the head of the choices of the decision makers, and confine planners to present “analysis of facts” or “technical evaluation” which allow the decision makers to make decisions on the grounds of values which they pursue; which should implicate the effort to build evaluation methods to be “neutral” in respect of the values.
2. Or, on the contrary, to urge decision makers “to make their values clearly explicit” (in terms of goals) and on their basis to construct the very same evaluation process; in such a case, the planner and/or the evaluator could find themselves being much less neutral, but strong partisans to the point of almost assuming a role of co-decision taker.

Both routes starting from analogous presupposition (*evaluation depends on the values*), involve two risks:

- that to construct biased evaluation, without being aware of it (in the first case);
- that to supply partisan evaluations, which could limit the prerogatives of the decision makers (in the second case).

It seems to me that both risks have been well perceived. For instance, Nat Lichfield, with his usual clarity states:

...a tidy distinction can be maintained between the politician’s values and the planner’s facts. But whereas it is important in practice constantly to have in

⁶ This stream is generically named as “heterodox” and we have the feeling that this qualification is not unwelcome by interested people. We all know that in economics different words have been used to oppose this stream to the “mainstream”: “historical school” (namely in Germany, in the 19th century) or “institutional economics” (like in USA the last century), or “evolutionary school” (everywhere after the 2nd World War). More vision in Hodgson (1994).

mind distinctions between fact, value and value judgement, it is very difficult to avoid overlap in practice. Politicians become aware of the substance of the planning and evaluation process and cannot be constrained in exercising their views; and even where the professional respects the prerogative of the politician on deciding on values, he cannot but reflect his own values in the professional contribution; in a sense he is arguing for a modification of values in the decision taking when he urges a change in decision through demonstrating the opportunity cost of the politician's inclinations. And since there is not homogeneity in planner's values, the argument for change will be diverse. Furthermore, the dialogue on these lines tends to modify the stance of each, as they *progressively work* [italics mine] over time through the planning and evaluation process (Lichfield, CIE, p. 198-99, italics mine).

He thinks then, that the two risks can be avoided in the process of planning when, as we proceed "progressively", the politician's modify their "stances" (we might also say, this could be the great educational function of the evaluation process, mainly if it adopts the CIE method).

But does not this change of stance also suggest a different stance of values in the planning process? Or a different concept: *i.e.* a concept that could allow us to overcome the possibility of the above evoked risks?

We have seen, up to now, that in an approach of "positivist" analysis, the choices (and preparatory evaluation) are developed on the grounds of values, based on the assumption: *evaluation depends on values*.

But in a programming (or planning or planological) approach, which is a *decisional* approach *i.e.* a decision-oriented, or action-oriented approach, should we not overturn the assumptions, and should we not test what would happen if we began from the assumption that: *values depend on evaluation*?

At this point it would be useful to come back briefly to the foundations of a "theory of value", on which entire generations of scholars, not only of economists, has been engaged and disputing.⁷

In fact to evaluate means to assign value to something. And it is hard to avoid posing the question, in order to be sufficiently critical: what is the value?

Now it has been said, and generally accepted, that the value is a property of the things but different from the colour or weight. The value of a thing is substantially derived from its ability to satisfy the need or the pleasure. The greater this ability the greater the value. However – this is the first step for a reconsideration of how the value is posed on the basis of the evaluation – the value is not a fixed and inherent property of the things. It's rather a variable property, the magnitude of which depends not only on the nature of the things in themselves, but also on whomever evaluates them and on the circumstances under which they are evaluated.

⁷ I rescue the reader here from exhaustive references. I note only a book which has been very useful to me as a compendium of the different positions regarding the problem, the book by Hutchinson (1964). For the analysis of the concept of values I have profited largely from K. Baier (1969).

In sum: I think there can be different values according to different goals, in different moments, for different persons, under different conditions (for instance, the physical environment within which the evaluator is), and in general terms under the different circumstances (personal, physical, psychological, social and political) of the evaluator – either political or professional – in the moment in which he evaluates.⁸

Then why don't we question ourselves: if the value is a variable property how can this be at the base of the evaluation, and then be a guide to the decision?

The answer is not hard if we found it on another important assumption: that the decisions and evaluations are never general and universal, and neither could they be. They always represent limited choices and evaluations which seem to be the best solution in respect of the problems that they face (in the so called "problem solving" approach). In other words, human problems tend to be specific and the decisions that concern them must also be specific. I think that this principle of evaluation specificity must never be forgotten.

Therefore, if the value doesn't exist by itself, but only because of the utility that it produces (or the needs and pleasures which it satisfies) even this utility exists in that, and in that moment, it is evaluated as such. Neither value nor utility exists without evaluation; moreover, they exist only at that moment of evaluation.

And whereas we are dealing with a *decision-oriented* evaluation (and not with an evaluation *tout court*) for our purposes the values also acquire concreteness only in the context of a decision. Even when we obtain general consensus about them (and in political life, at general level, such consensus can be obtained easily) people only truly appreciate the values of things and of actions in peculiar circumstances and situations, when these values can be compared with their practical feasibility and implementation; and this limits their capacity to "value" as such.

And whereas values can be appreciated concretely only in the course of the decisional process, their validity depend strongly from the process itself.

In conclusion, how good the value could be as a guide to decisions depends strongly not on the value in itself but on the circumstances and the ways in which decisions are taken.

All that puts us in the face of the *overturning* of a dominant paradigm, and of a new appropriate approach to the evaluation: is not the evaluation that depends on the values but rather the values that depend on the evaluation.

This recuperates the independence of the evaluation process from the

⁸ We can get a non conventional vision of the variability of the values in a classical work by Charles Morris (1956). In this work the problems are masterly discussed: of scales and dimensions of values; of the different determinants of the value, from that social, to that psychological and biological; and the meeting between the western and the eastern values (which are often neglected) are also discussed.

trap of a subordination to values, which is in turn translated in a indeterminateness of values themselves. In fact, it is not a matter of having to choice between values, but to assess between alternative decisions, from “stances” that may be different according to different circumstances.

This occurs through a re-visitation of the distinction, always required, between the role of the politicians (decision makers) and the role of the technicians of planning (planners). This distinction operates in a new way; it's not a matter of politicians, as porters of the power of decision, and technicians, as porters of the power of suggestion. The values, preexistent or not, in generic and/or ideological terms, *emerge in fact only within the evaluation process*, of which technicians (planners) are the designers and operational “guardians”, and politicians are the main actors (if you will, having in the scenario negotiation and partnership with the stakeholders). As the process perfects itself and assumes a more complex importance, the values take the form of their natural trade off achieving a kind of “optimality”.

It is rather a matter of a permanent interweaving between politician and planner in the evaluation of this kind of optimality.

2. Systemic disconnectedness

Another pitfall is also strictly related to the logical indeterminateness well represented by the examined relationship between values and evaluations: we have named it “systemic disconnectedness”.

This disconnectedness is produced when in an evaluation process (taking the dependency on values of the evaluation at face value, and forgetting the more intimate interweaving between evaluation and “formation of values”) people assume that to be able to base the evaluation on the assumption of certain values⁹ without such values having been “incorporated” in a previous or parallel evaluation process.

The “system” of values applied in the previous (level) or parallel (sectorial) evaluation process, and the resulting trade off obtained in the research of the optimality in that process, can be different from the system of actual processed values. The diversity of the two (or more) value systems, acknowledged by neither of the evaluation processes, can create situations of remarkable inconsistencies between the decisions to which such processes have lead at these two (or more) levels or sectors. This could be named a lack of systemic interconnection of these two (or more) evaluation processes.

Of course the same lack of inter-connection could occur not only between the two levels or sectors of evaluation and planning but also

⁹ If you will, expressed on the spur of the moment by the decision makers, maybe in a political document of guidelines or general preferences. The well known work of George Chadwick(1971) is a milestone in this analysis.

between two environments, two time periods, two issues which can be integrated in some way and for some reason in a system. And the same can be said of the n environments, time periods, sectors and issues of which any defined social community is composed.

It is necessary therefore, to try to *interconnect the systems* in order to make more explicit not only the values but also the evaluation criteria adopted at different scale or sector of application, not ignoring the necessity to respect some hierarchical criteria either logical or institutional, if it is the case.

3. Strategic insubordination

All that can be presented from another point of view under the guise of another pitfall of the evaluation: that of the lack of a “strategic consistency” between the goals and objectives which are assumed as evaluation criteria.

Whereas, in the planologic and systemic approach¹⁰, the value depends on the evaluations and not the opposite way round, we need to affirm a certain “hierarchy” between evaluations and between the criteria that are used in any evaluation process.

Therefore, it is strongly recommended that any evaluation process, instead of arriving at the end of the road to a conflict (which would mean having falling foul of the pitfalls of the “strategic insubordination”, as in the reality of the planning practices is occurring right now), should coordinate its own hypothesis on the strategic consistency with the other possible hierarchical superior level (or at least to make such hypothesis explicit, made by itself for the superior level).

The more decision-makers and planners (planners obviously have the most accountability in this matter) show awareness and willingness to avoid the risk of the strategic insubordination, the more they contribute to the general need to create networks of strategic planning. Within this network, when developed, some conflicts of jurisdiction and/or interest will inevitably exercise their negative roles; but through it the progress of knowledge and of a system of learning by doing could also have some unsuspected positive affects.¹¹

Certainly, if we could create a national and international planning

¹⁰ Again I refer to the basic work of George Chadwick (1971) to get more scope of this approach. At that time Chadwick based on the contribution of Lichfield his view on the relationship between evaluation and system approach (see chapter 11).

¹¹ It is a common place to state that information modern technologies are ready to facilitate these strategic planning networks. Let me recall that myself I have studied functional relationships between information technology and planning complaining that information systems have been not designed with rigorous adherence to the processing of a strategic planning framework, and non only a generic planning data base.(See for a beginning of this framework, Archibugi 1978 and 1993).

system, institutionally well established, the strategic consistency could be strongly facilitated¹². Through such a system we could be induced to elaborate some guidelines in which the fields and the strategic jurisdictional entitlement for each of the scales and levels of the decision-making should be better described; in such a way even the scale and level could also be more easily defined; and more appropriateness could be found for the definition of the criteria/objectives of every imaginable evaluation process.

In the absence of such a system, and of related deontological rules, something of this kind has been attempted with what has been called “subsidiary principle”, to regulate in abstract the relationship between different hierarchical levels; moreover to give a ratio to the specification and creation of the hierarchical levels themselves.

Something of this nature could be considered the task of methodological thinking to carry out (in this field we are very backward) exactly as “planning science” (or planology). (That could be one of the more useful and significant issues in order to characterize the proper field of planology)¹³.

The strategic planning experiences especially ongoing in the great and significant season of strategic planning within the American federal administration inaugurated in 1993 by the “Government performance and result act” (GPRA), and its implementation, are able to provide a very important contribution for defining ways and means of increasing this form of strategic co-operation in the planning field, and of creating a sort of planning system. All this would prevent planners from having to wait for the reforms of the political institutions in order to enter into an improved rational conception of public governance and to elaborate it.

Something could be made by theoretical reasoning, being applied to some concrete political cases, on behalf of the planner’s and evaluator’s scientific community.

For instance: in fixing the evaluation rules and criteria, what are the boundaries between what the object of individual preferences could be, and what instead the object of community or public preferences must be? And, to remain in the ambit of community or public preferences, what could the margins of autonomy be regarding community preferences according to different levels of sociality, territory, and public administration?

Whereas the evaluation cannot be disassociated, in a correctly conceived planning system, from the objective’s preliminary formulation, and cannot help but depend on the evaluation process itself, rather than on the general ideologies,¹⁴ the study of how a strategic evaluation system should be articulated by hierarchical levels will become, more and more,

¹² For more details on this topic see another paper of mine (Archibugi, 1998c).

¹³ Let me refer, for more details, to another paper of mine (Archibugi 1998b) where I have attempted to design a “model” for the general “system” of planning, in order to connect operationally the *procedural* and *substantive* planning (in terms of Faludi,1973).

¹⁴ Which become more and more generic as the societal planning techniques progress.

co-essential to an effective development of planning. How can the planner's scientific community neglect making this possible articulation one of its subjects of research, and then of didactic?

The lack of strategic connection gives way to another pitfall of the evaluation: that of self-referencing.

4. Self-referencing

The self-referencing is another insidious pitfall of the evaluation that derives directly from the disordered and chaotic system of planning. More than a pitfall, it is an endemic disease of the evaluation based on the unequal development assumed by practices of evaluation in respect to that of systemic planning. Self-referencing occurs when the results, performances, or effectiveness, of a plan, program, or design, are evaluated without assessment parameters derived by plans, programs, or designs of a scale and level superior in a program structuring.

Self-referencing represents the consequence of the lack of a logical consistency. Free from any constraints by superior planning which define performance objectives and goals, the plan evaluator accepts the parameters of assessment established by the plan itself, at face value, or he suggests them himself. This is common behavior of the majority of plan evaluation experiences that we have implemented everywhere in the history of evaluation. The lack of a more systemic network of multilevel and multi-sector planning, planners and plan evaluators have been reduced, in order to develop evaluation in limited terms, to the planning unit concerned or committing the (professional) task. This is what I call *self-referencing evaluation*.

In the best case, with the lack of sufficient constraints to use as parameters, conscious planners and plan evaluators have found a way to *simulate* by themselves those necessary constraints coming from other levels or sectors. But in this case, surely more advanced and required from a rational point of view, they have, however, created a circumstance in which, on one hand conflicting situations are easily avoided, but on the other hand, the evaluation has been rather a mystification, and the final result, from an operational or implementation point of view, has been enough a disaster.

Yet all the great seasons of the evaluation-without-planning have been marked by a diffused prevailing self-referencing evaluation, more or less effective at micro-level but without sense at a more general level. And for this reason no trace of this evaluation has been left behind.¹⁵

¹⁵ These seasons, for instance, have been those of the "cost-benefit analysis" of the project, especially in development policies in the developing countries (on behalf of the World Bank and other United Nations agencies); and those of the "environmental impact assessment," launched after 1970 in every country. In order not to speak of many other

The diffusion (syndrome) of the self-referencing evaluation has created a circumstance in which we are hardly able to perceive the tautology of certain evaluations, or certain absurdities¹⁶.

These attempts of past history of evaluation seemed to have had very poor success. Moreover, they seemed to be well known as failure stories. And seemed to have suggested their abandon, or their application only at much reduced scales, without any emphasis, in an effort to improve performance only in the ambit of the micro-designing.

Indeed, this is a mistake. These experiences had only a wrong approach to the evaluation, and they have discouraged their progressive enlargement; however, it is only by this enlargement itself that we could improved the context in which they could be more effective and more significant in the future.

In fact, what we have called self-referencing evaluation can be contrasted by applying as far as possible its opposite: the *etero-referencing*. This means finding as far as possible external references on which to base the ongoing evaluations.

All this brings us back to the need either of the systemic interconnection or of strategic consistency aforementioned.

5. Sub-optimization

The sub-optimization is in effect the comprehensive result to which the lack of systemic connection, of hierarchical consistency, and so on, leads to the usual evaluation processes whichever technique is being employed.

Whereas an optimization process will never be obtained under optimal rational conditions, and whereas even under the best conditions that we could forecast (on the basis of the peroration of the previous paragraphs: better or improved systemic connection, hierarchical consistency, and so on) a system will never achieve the striven perfection, hence our intellectual honesty impels us to acknowledge that even sub-optimization is a permanent or continuous characteristic of any planning or evaluation result.

However, such acknowledgement and assertion – to be expected at a superior critical level (meta-critical) - for nothing must affect the research of an improved optimality at operational level. The very risk in the abandon of awareness regarding the need of a systemic connection, hierarchical consistency, and so on, is to effectively abandon the research of optimality in more advanced possible frontiers. Therefore, the pitfall is not in the awareness of the limits of rationality, but rather in the abandon of the rationality itself, only because we have discovered its limit!

projects born out of the developing policies in every country, in an effort to carry out developing sectorial and/or territorial policies.

¹⁶ Which reminds me of the tale of Baron Von Munchausen who tried to save himself from the river into which he was falling by holding onto himself by his hair.

All that impels us to examine how, from a planological viewpoint, the theorem generally accepted of the bounded rationality, is not only “limited” in its heuristic validity, but is also absolutely useless from the operational point of view; moreover, it can constitute another general pitfall of planning through the suggestion (as is unfortunately happening) of abandoning the rational approach to planning.

6. Bounded rationality

For the most part, the meaning of the bounded rationality concept is born out of, as well known, the ascertainment that in whichever decision there are always limitations or boundaries of time (in decision taking) of resources, of informations, of intellectual capabilities, and so on. Obvious conclusion: decision making is always bound by something.

However, in this assertion another implicit belief is also incorporated. If there were no limitations the decision could be “rational” or “optimal”; in practice this decision could be “not bounded”. What could we call it? A “pure”, perfect decision, exempt from limitation?

At this point, however, we must ask ourselves: is there in the life of people, in their values, in their actions, in their thinking, anything that isn't *bounded*? Everywhere man or man's society, in whatever decision as in whichever thinking, will be limited in their strife for rationality. But what does all this tell us contrary to the rationality of which they become permanently “searchers” or “porters”, according to the cases? And what does this obvious fact tell us contrary to the other assertion that they should be in any way searchers and porters of such rationality?

Even the purest mathematical theorem is subject to the same knowledge limitation, by definition: if it wasn't for the respect of some further knowledge progression of the mathematics itself from which it has spread!

Imagine if we didn't take for granted that much of the modeling we elaborate in order to understand, and also to manage the reality of things in certain ways, or in order to give sense to our actions, was product of a bounded rationality! But if the rationality is bound by itself, there is no need to introduce the bounded rationality as limitation of the rationality itself.

On the other hand, in which way should or could our limited knowledge limit the search for knowledge itself? Would this mean, perhaps, that knowing the limitations of every human action in respect of goodness, we should not try to be good? or knowing the limitation of any aesthetic expression, should we not research the beautiful?

Indeed, research of the optimum or maximum (or minimum) “constrained” - which is also maximum given the limitations - includes the consciousness of the limitations. And is of little use to say that we will never know entirely these limitations, and therefore, any optimum will

never be a true optimum, an absolute optimum, but will always be relative to the limitations of which we have been able to take into account *pro tempore*. All this doesn't exempt us from the intellectual opportunity or duty to research that optimum, that maximum (or minimum) given the limitations (obviously acknowledged). Nor does all this exempt us from the intellectual utility and task for a deeper understanding of most of the limitations that we don't know, in order to make the research of this optimum more valid and significant.

Therefore, rather than emphasizing the obvious, *i.e.* that our rationale is limited, we should limit ourselves to deepen – I would say case by case – in whatever thing any proposition proposed to us in the name of rationality, is actually limited by conditions or constraints that are not included in the calculus. What does it mean that we should limit ourselves to explore, in whatever thing the outcome of the rational calculus has not been at the level of the rationality claimed.

In other terms it seemed to me that the rationality in its concrete manifestations or applications can be contested only in the name of a superior rationality. But accordingly this superior rationality must be demonstrated, by including new limitations to the calculus ignored from the proposition which we intend to contest; and not in the name of something like a general alternative to the rationality, which does not exist, if not in an act of anti-rational faith: *i.e.* in the name of an anti-rationality philosophy or irrationalism.¹⁷

But as it is not possible to deny the rationality through rational arguments, at the same time it is not possible to attribute to the research of the rationality the negative results of a bad application of the rationality. It is only in the name of the rationality that we can identify and contest its insufficient applications.

This vision here illustrated allows us to locate in the right dimension the limited role of the positive analysis in the strategic planning and in the programming approach.

In effect, the reflection and the “science” of the administrative and political behaviour can argue any kind of limitation to possible rational theorems of administration and political action only from a position of the *ex-post* analysis. Indeed, only in an *ex-post* analysis is it possible to evaluate how much an administrative or political action *has been* limited (or constrained or conditioned), which would pursue a rational principle of conduct. In fact, it is only by an *ex-post* analysis (say historical) that it is possible to identify those “new” conditions or constraints that have had a negative impact on the implementation and limited the success of this action. But are we sure that what has been registered as unforeseen factors

¹⁷ In spite of this, we need to acknowledge that this “fight against reason” and these “crepuscular” and obscure moments of the history of ideas is studded the entire history of human philosophy that we know, and the history of any civilised manifestation of mankind. But it is not my intention here to go beyond a certain “limit” about the dichotomic and dialectical destiny of philosophy.

in the past can be extrapolated for the future?

On the contrary, in a programming approach, what could be meant for the planner (planning theorist or the decision maker) by a bounded rationality? That at the time of the decision he should say: “*My preferred solution would be this(A), but I choose, or I suggest this other (B) that is not the best but of which I am equally satisfied; why? Don’t ask me because I don’t know.*”¹⁸ Indeed, if he knew, he would have been obliged to include the reason of this fact in the list of the objectives that he pursues, and within the trade off (*i.e.* optimisation procedure) between different objectives that any decisions unavoidably implicate.

It is admissible that, in practice, decision-makers could be *unconsciously unconscious*, or ignorant, of his preferences; but that he could be *consciously unconscious* of them is something that concerns maybe psychiatry, not even behavioural psychology! How can this concern the planner, who exists to render *explicit* and *conscious* the motivations and the goals of the decision-maker and of himself as planner; or how can all this concern, really!, the “planning theorist”, who should order the process through which to organize the decisional system in the best and most effective way, is an academic puzzle!

Here the more general doubt can be introduced on that which we can call a “positivist” pretension of an important part of the political and social sciences: can we elaborate some conduct principles or suggestions on the basis of an historical, *ex-post* evaluation of the examined past behaviours, assumed as an orientation principle for a future action?¹⁹

We know, obviously (and with great emphasis from the political and administration scientists), that the most rational decisions are always limited by an ignorance co-efficient (or knowledge and information limitation): then what can we extract from an *ex-post* analysis for an *ex-ante* decision? Could it not be better to leave out *ex-post* analysis – of little significance for the future – and to go *directly* to elaborate, not rules but decisions themselves, on the basis of a decisional process that could be the most rational possible: *i.e.* including (according to our vision above) the maximum possible of constraints, conditions, acknowledgeable limitations, given the circumstances, not received in the past but valid for the future.

This is the true “programming approach” inherited by Ragnar Frisch and the other founders of the planning methodology²⁰.

If we must talk of rules or guidelines, would it not be better if these were taken from the decisional process itself, trying to make it as far as possible well informed and technically advanced?

Would it not be better, dealing of the future, that the decision, and its

¹⁸ How much more exhilarating it would have been if he answered: “*Why? Because Professor Simon said that usually the decision makers like me think of satisfying and not optimising their preferences!*”

¹⁹ There is a certain amount of literature on this topic; my preferred references are still for Tinbergen (1971a e 1971b), Leontiev (1976), Frisch (1977), and Myrdal (1980).

²⁰ More detail on this topic in Archibugi (2000b).

process, (rather than explore the field of past behaviour of groups, communities, cultures etc. trying to assume it as a stable “theory”), would be based, on the contrary, on an evaluation of explored possible future behaviour, expressly studied or even only hypothesized?²¹ And would it not be better that the decision and its process, oriented in such a way, be active as a factor of affecting those behaviours?

To conclude, I think that according to this vision the strategic planning doesn’t need a “theory of the political and administrative behaviour” but simply (if you will) of a “planning theory”: a theory, however, only pragmatic and operational, decision oriented, it means oriented to the improvement of the rationality of the decisions and to an operational efficiency under every historical, geographical and cultural conditions.²²

Strategic planning therefore – as operational in the field of organisations, and more so in the field of public organisations – if understood correctly, represents a pillar, the main pillar perhaps, of that “planning science” (or planology) which is emerging as a confluence of a series of inter-disciplinary or trans-disciplinary fields of studies, and which, I believe, directs us toward a constitution of a new discipline,²³ of basic importance for public management and governance, at any level, geographical or territorial.

From this vision also comes the overcoming of any theory of the bounded rationality and a recuperation of the postulate that: an analysis or a decision or action-oriented analysis is fundamentally optimality-oriented. If the analysis is oriented to the action (*ex-ante*) any limitations fall outside of the reasoning: it cannot do anything other than to plan the *best result* given the constraints.²⁴ The limitations are incorporated in the planning optimal decision.

That in the *ex-post* reality, this “best result” given the limitations could not have occurred, or occurred in a limited way, has no importance for the

²¹ This future behaviour of groups stakeholders and politicians, which could constitute the real limit to the rationality of the process should be the object of the planning negotiations, but on the basis of an advanced systemic knowledge of the optimal decisions.

²² Naturally, as far as political and administrative sciences abandon the “objective” behavioural analysis approach (which we have defined as “positivist”) and adopt, on the contrary, a “programming approach”, decision-oriented, or functional to decision, then the roots of strategic planning on that sciences can be fully recognised, and disappear any need of demarcation of it from them. Moreover, it could be state that the strategic planning can identify itself in that political and administrative sciences. And the last can identify themselves in the first.

²³ See Archibugi (1992, 1996b). See also the Chap.9 of the already cited *Introduction to Strategic Planning* (Italian ed. 2001; English: in preparation)

²⁴ The word “optimisation” express in any language a concept of maximum constrained under conditions, which is the foundation of rationality, and which can be expressed also with the words *effectiveness*, *efficiency*, *productivity*, and so on. It is matter of a *relation* which has had and has different nomenclatures (all equivalent, for our discourse) among them we can recall, for instance: end/mean; objective/instrument; result/effort; output/input; outcome/resource; benefit/cost; performance/factor; and so on.

planning theorist. This can concern the analysis of *temporis acti* not the analysis of *temporis agendi*: It could concern the historian, or the historian of planning, or the kind of planning theorist that is not interested in creating new rational methods to improve planning but only to make a commentary of the mistakes of the past. But it could not concern the *planner*, the real methodologist planner (*planologist*) or – on the other hand -the decision maker²⁵.

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²⁵ Further considerations on my part, regarding the double separated routes open to the planning theorist community, see Archibugi (1998a).

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