

Initial praises for
***“The Planning Theory:
 from the Political Debate to the Methodological Reconstruction***

by Franco Archibugi
 [published in English (Stringer) and in Italian (Alinea)]

‘To me this book makes two really compelling arguments: Firstly, that planning theory has lost its focus on the planning process itself and how it can be used effectively to help people figure out what they want, how to get it, and why.... Secondly, that planning theory also has lost its focus on the institutional interconnections of planning processes from national, to state or regional, to local levels, and back up again. I think the author is quite right on both counts. I also think the author’s rehabilitation, critique, and use of Andreas Faludi’s 1973 work is very good and interesting.’

‘.... It strikes me that what is needed now is an integration of macro and micro perspectives, which is a point that the book makes at various stages... I agree with the author’s main point that, somehow, the two ought to be joined and I think this case would be made more forcefully in this book if the author were a bit less strident in his denunciation of the “wrong turn” planning theory has taken. Speaking for myself, I don’t think that it was a wrong turn so much as simply a needed counter balance, and now we need a new integration. I also think, however, that in trying to produce an integration in practice it is crucial to recognize the limits of institutional design, and the limits of rationality must be recognized.’

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‘Dissatisfaction with current planning theory. In this book Archibugi criticises current planning theory literature and the current planning debate. His idea is that many authors use a notion of planning that is too ample and generic, with the consequence that their theory of planning is itself too ample and generic, and consequently of scant operative use for practitioners. Instead of a theory *of* planning (and *in* planning) we therefore have, today, some kind of theory *on* planning or *about* planning; a sort of meta-analysis or meta-debate that takes us nowhere. This is, in Archibugi’s view, the main reason of the limited advances we have had in this field and of the loss of identity we — as planners and planning theorists — frequently experience.’

‘Unfortunately, the term ‘planning’ is, in itself, a really elusive and ambiguous one;¹ and the planners and planning theorists have in effect never done very much to clarify its meaning.²’

To find a remedy for this situation, Archibugi proposes returning to the idea of planning as a method of making rational decision; a method that is, to some extent, common to many areas. He explicitly refers to Edward Banfield's (1959) original definition of planning as a rational procedure of choosing among alternative options and to Andreas Faludi's (1973) first attempt to systematise this idea.'

'*An idea of planning.* In this perspective, Archibugi proposes a series of provocative and original stances on planning and planning theory (where planning is intended as a rational decisional activity carried out, in particular, by an officially legitimate collective entity — an institution). I begin by briefly recalling three main points regarding planning itself.

Planning presupposes a kind of *ex-ante analysis* and not a form of ex-post analysis. Ex-post analysis is not simply the reverse of the same coin, but another thing altogether. Ex-ante and ex-post analyses are not two kinds of simply symmetrical activities — directly learning from each other — but two strictly different practices depending on different points of view and dealing with totally different problems. For example, to discover ex-post that certain decisions had *particular* unintended consequences has nothing to do with the problem of how to deal with the well-known *general* problem of unexpected results in ex-ante analysis (where, by definition, we have only partial data and information). In other words, ex-post analysis teaches us many important things, but this does not necessarily improve, *per se*, our ex-ante methodology.

Planning is a kind of strictly *voluntaristic activity*. In these terms planning decisions are and must be 'irrealistic'. In other words, planning decisions do not simply *reflects* forecasts or *follow* forecasts: they are part of a more general decisional model where possible courses of action are explicitly incorporated as essential variables. The reality on which planning decisions intervene is in fact a social reality influenced by the decisions themselves. This kind of reality is therefore non an *objective* reality but a *subjective* one. In this view, the social reality is not an independent variable but a dependent variable. We can conclude by saying that in planning nothing is simply *positive*, and all is entirely *normative*. Planning is essentially oriented toward *optimisation*. In the ex-ante voluntaristic perspective adopted, planning cannot be anything but an effort to achieve the best possible result, within given constraints, with regard to the objectives undertaken. In this view, looking for optimisation simply expresses the idea of looking for the maximum possible achievement, subject to the appropriate conditions. If optimisation is obtained or not in the real word (as we can only ascertain ex-post), is not the point for the ex-ante planning perspective. So, the celebrated but trivial idea of 'bounded rationality' (Simon, 1983) is methodologically irrelevant for ex-ante planning. Planners must simply do the best they can (subject to the constraints and the conditions of the case).

In this perspective, forms of participative, collaborative, co-operative planning are not a new mode or kind of planning, but, instead, they are procedures for a viable form of planning intended as a good decision process (not exactly new procedures, and yet still relevant in particular situations).

The role of planning theory. From this idea of planning we can derive some fundamental consequences for planning theory itself. I will mention three of them on which Archibugi insists.

Planning theory is not a philosophical, sociological or politological enterprise, but a *methodological* one. Planning theory can be seen as a theory dealing with the logical and operational frame of any planning procedure intended as a rational method of decision and choice. Directly quoting Banfield's work, Archibugi suggests that planning theory must concentrate itself on 'the method of making decisions' and on 'the logical structure of this method'. In this perspective, even if we can recognise that planning activities and practices can be conditioned by theories of societies and of social institutions, we can say that planning theory should not include any theory of society, as such.

Planning theory is a kind of theory constitutively based on *decisions* for acting. Planning theory is essentially interested in exploring and showing what is useful to correctly decide and act, and not simply how to know the world as it *is*. The crucial point in planning is not 'to know in order to decide', but 'to decide in order to be able to know'. The traditional idea that we need positive analysis to be able to decide must then be completely reversed: it is an explicit normative orientation that makes positive analysis possible and meaningful. This point (and the methodological consequences that derive from it) is the crucial one that planning theory has to teach us.

Planning theory has to be *general* or does not exist as a theory. Planning theory is only helpful where it is able to overcome the different nature of the various fields of application. In other words, planning theory must reflect on a methodology of planning that does not regard, *per se*, the peculiarity of each context and environment.

A crucial challenge. I think Archibugi's book is both stimulating and provocative, and also courageous in challenging many new orthodoxies in the planning field (note how criticising the rational approach has become a kind of universal sport). I believe he is completely right in saying that, if we do not clearly specify what planning *is* (and, in particular, whether it is a unique activity, quite different from others), we risk producing theories of/in planning that are too ample and generic: theories that are not (theories) *of/in* planning, but about everything and nothing.

The difficulty I see is that the definition of planning that Archibugi adopts is not the only one worthy of attention. I think, for example, that it is planning as a particular kind of public coordinative intervention via specific organisational rules³ that still needs more attention and theorisation (in order to recognise when this kind of intervention is helpful and when it is unhelpful or even detrimental — for example, in land-use issues). In other words, I believe it is a (particular) *control-centred* idea of planning more than a *decision-centred* idea of planning⁴ that still generates difficult, crucial problems — problems that are not only methodological, but, first of all, ethical and juridical.

Be that as it may, if we intend to make planning theory more relevant, we must surely accept Archibugi's challenge to clearly specify *what* we are really dealing with and *why*. It is not a question of 'essentialism' (concepts and notions — as 'planning' and every other — have no 'essence'⁵) but of indispensable rigour and

critical approach.⁶ It is true that sometimes the ambiguity of certain terms can be helpful in bringing fruitfully together very different areas of expertise and knowledge; but this is valid only at the start of some form of collective intellectual enterprise: surely not the situation of planning theory and planning itself after a century of debate and experimentation.

Notes

1. As Robbins (1937) observed some time ago.
2. See the severe criticisms of Jewkes (1968) on this point in the heyday of planning thought.
3. The kind of planning that Abercrombie (1943) deals with, for instance.
4. To apply the useful labels introduced by Faludi (1982).
5. Against any kind of 'essentialism', see Popper (1945).
6. On this point (and with explicit reference to planning), see Sartori (1987: 399 ff.). The relevance of this question beyond the mere academic has recently been forcefully underlined by McClendon (2003). See also Mazza (1999).

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