Presentation 8-9 minutes

**Should planning and policy gather around.**

**the concept of "community of disagreement"?**

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**One question: Should** planning and policy gather around the concept of "community of disagreement"?

**One answer:** YES! Capital letters, exclamation marks.

One of the most important tasks of societal planning is to support, preferably strengthen, democracy in society. A necessary, if not sufficient, condition is that planning practitioners and researchers respect the need for disagreement in politics.

The choice of question and the reason for my answer may have something to do with the fact that I have worked in parallel, my whole life, with planning and politics, am fascinated by both activities, believe that they are mutually dependent on each other to succeed in managing and attempting to improve, at least not worsen, the situation for people and nature.

The planning field tends to have consensus building as a guiding inspiration. Politics, on the other hand, is an activity characterised by disagreement and competition over ideology, values, knowledge, and planning solutions.

Since, or if we in the planning field today are concerned with giving politicians a leading position, we must recognise the need for politicians to highlight disagreement. Only then will planning become a tool for political governance and for strengthening democracy.

Here are **a few points – five points - taken from my 6500-word paper**, a paper in which I present some main positions in the field of planning theory regarding handling professional and political disagreements and then introduce the concept «communities of disagreement”, as it is defined and discussed in the book Communities of disagreement: perspectives on democratic interaction.

**Point 1: I will argue that politicians are given too little attention in the field of planning**. When attention is given, it is more that politics and politicians are part of the problem rather than part of the solution. The field of planning, with its focus on striving for agreement and consensus, seems to find it difficult to incorporate politics' inherent need to highlight disagreement with other politicians and political parties, and to compete for perception of reality, goals and means of action. I have experiences from my own research on local and regional planning, that this normative pressure to achieve consensus weakens planning's position in societies by making the activities less interesting and relevant for people - citizens - voters.

**Point 2: Many of the leading planning theorists from the 1960s have focused primarily on developing the normative aspects of planning**. This has led their theoretical development away from practice rather than attempts to understand and respect practice. Charles Lindblom is an exception with his criticism of rationalist planning theories and models inspired by Edvard C. Banfield. In a reality characterized by uncertainty and disagreement about what constitutes valid knowledge, by conflict of interests and political disagreement, we should choose what can be politically implemented given the prevailing power relations. Bent Flyvbjerg is another exception, who claims that the Habermas-inspired communicative planning theories draw attention away from fundamental power relations. This is unfortunate because attention to power relations is a prerequisite for a living democracy. Both Flyvbjerg and Lindblom ask us not to overlook, or develop theories away from politics, from reality. (Of course, there are a lot more expectations than these two).

**Point 3: The concept of "community of disagreement" is used in various areas in Norway,** especially related to democracy, education, and culture. In Lars Laird Iversen's book "Community of Disagreement: A Look at Democratic Interaction" he defines the term as a group of people who come together around a common theme, problem, or goal but have different or conflicting views on how this theme, problem, or goal should be handled.

Iversen is concerned with several ways to normalise and demystify disagreement, including value disagreement, so that individually and collectively, we become better at living with all this disagreement. This reminds me of the discussion we have within planning regarding wicked problems (Rittel and Webber, 1973). The point is that 'living with' is often a wiser strategy for practice than seeking to solve these types of problems, which is precisely why they are labeled 'wicked.'

Iversen argues that free debates, and a positive approach to disagreement stimulate new thinking and innovation.

Iversen therefore disagrees with Habermas on the view of rationality. Habermas argues for freedom from power in public discourse because the best arguments will then prevail. This is not necessarily the case in a community of disagreement". Within the community of disagreement, the arguments for open, free, real discussions are that multiple voices provide a greater diversity of ideas, more innovation.

Iversen points out that the community of disagreement closely resembles Chantal Mouffe's theory of political leadership and agonistic politics. The agonistic perspective recognizes, namely, that conflict is an inevitable part of a lively, engaging democracy.

**Point 4: Implications for planning practice by not adopting the “community of disagreement” perspective.** Consensus ambition can suppress political debate, as it encourages compromise and agreement rather than highlighting and addressing political divides and ideological differences. It can contribute to overlooking or smoothing over fundamental differences and conflicts in society. This can make it harder for voters to see clear differences between parties, thereby weakening parties' ability to profile themselves and mobilize voters based on clear political alternatives. Voters might get the impression that politicians do not have real power over the most important decisions. The real power lies with the planners. Finally, consensus-driven planning processes can also hinder political innovation, as compromises often lead to radical or innovative ideas being toned down to achieve broad agreement.

**Point 5: Three planning theory positions relevant to the community of disagreement.**

**Position one** is to look at planning as **a rhetorical activity,** is about communicating successfully, not about finding or jointly developing objectively correct answers. Rhetoric is a practical logic, a prescriptive model, - that gives advice. "Planners should strive, not to be good and be right and get things done, but to create, sustain and participate in a public, democratic discourse that enables them (and others) to argue persuasively and coherently about contestable views of what is good, right, and feasible" (Throgmorton, 1996:54). Sometimes this leads to agreed positions/consensus, other times to clarified disagreement. It is then important for all those participating in such planning processes to be good at “storytelling.” This is a well-known acknowledgment for politicians.

**Position two is innovative planning** - increasingly, planning theorists argued throughout the nineties that creativity and innovation are restricted, even hindered, by planning theories and methods that rely heavily on either the analysis perspective (Hillier, 2008) or the communicative perspective (Mäntysalo, 2002). Mäntysalo (2002) argues that Habermas's concept for dialogue is too narrow, too static, and not creative enough. Others claim that planning theory with communicative ideals does not allow and can even stifle creativity and innovation (Stein & Harper, 2012).Planning that accepts and values ​​disagreement is far more politically relevant than traditional consensus-seeking planning (Hagen and Higdem, 2023).

**Position three is agonistic planning** - recognises and embraces conflict as an inevitable and productive part of democratic politics. Agonistic theories aim to open and provide a new approach to democracy, where the rules of democracy are always open to questioning, competition, disagreement, discussion, negotiation, and changes over time. The same ambitions must also be used as a basis in planning processes. It is important that planning reflects the diversity of today's society in terms of opinions and interests. The agonistic approach is less focused on achieving consensus than in communicative planning theory. It is more concerned with how to make decisions in planning processes (Pløger, 2018: 265), which can later be accepted and implemented in the community, even though there is disagreement. Developing good processes and procedures for voting, and how to work further afterwards in situations with winners and losers.

We must realise that we cannot plan our way out of many disagreements, only hide them by, for example by forcing a minority to remain silent. This is ethically and democratically reprehensible, and overall, simply counterproductive, or simply stupid.

**Thanks for listening.**