

Habermas as an agonist? Communicative action and the ideals of agonist planning theory

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Communicative planning theories have been criticized already for years for their adherence to Habermasian ideal of 'rationally motivated consensus', and ideal that does not seem to meet the power-laden and irrational reality of planning, and also an ideal that does not seem to do justice to the irreducible pluralism in contemporary societies (see e.g. Hillier 2002; 2003; Ploger 2004; Purcell 2009). Agonist planning theory, in particular, has followed political theorists such as Chantal Mouffe, who has argued that the idea of consensus does not do justice to the space of 'the political', the space that is characterized by a condition of 'agony'. 'Agony', for Mouffe, does not refer to antagonism - a condition of struggle between enemies - but to a condition of struggle between adversaries (Mouffe 2013: 7). The target of Mouffe's criticism is the liberalist political philosophy in general, but she makes also explicit references to Habermas's ideas of consensus (Mouffe 2013).

Theorists of agonist planning have directed their attention especially to the ways in which planning could be more sensitive to difference and particular identities of people and groups, identities that are neglected in liberal political tradition and often suppressed in modern, neo-liberalizing societies (Purcell 2008; 2009; Hillier 2003). In the search and expression of identities, Habermasian transparent and understanding-oriented uses of language seem to fall short, whereas the 'ruptures' in language seem to open promising potentials for identity-searching and expression of suppressed needs (ibid.). In searching for alternative views on language, then, the theorists of agonist planning have turned to post-modern and psychoanalytic ideas of presented by philosophers such as Derrida and Lacan. Agonist respect for difference and 'strife' (Ploger 2004) is certainly a relevant ideal for planning in the age of pluralism, but

agonist planning theory has so far left it highly unclear what could be the role and position of creative expressivity and ruptures in language in action coordination. Agonist planning theory, after all, cannot escape the fact that when at issue is not only preserving the space for the political, but also moving forward and getting things done via temporary agreements (Hillier 2003: 41; Ploger 2004: 84; see also Mouffe 2013).

This paper revisits Habermas's ideas of communicative rationality and consensus, looking especially at the development of these ideas in *Between Facts and Norms* and *The Inclusion of the Other*, works that were published after *The Theory of Communicative Action* and ones that have not so far been well-known in the field of planning theory. In *Between Facts and Norms* Habermas makes it clear that there are actually very few questions in political discourses that hold out the prospect of consensus, although Habermas surely gives a central position precisely to those questions in the regulation and coordination of our collective action (Habermas 1996; see also Hillier 2003). In addition to the search of consensus over matters of 'the right' and 'the just', Habermas makes room also for 'reasonable disagreements' concerning the ideas of 'good life', as well as for balancing of interests through compromises (ibid.). Furthermore, while it is true that Habermas gives emphasis of abstract systems of rights, like liberalist theorists in general, his complex idea of co-originality of public and private autonomy of people implies, for example, that in the actualization of rights it is essential to recognize particular identities and needs (Habermas 1996; 1998).

In comparing the ideals of agonism and Habermasian theory, this paper also looks at Habermas's writings on aesthetics, especially those writings that deal with the theme of 'deviant' uses of language and aesthetic modes of communication (see e.g. Habermas 1998b; Boucher 2011). It also follows the advice of Hillier (2003) and goes to the psychoanalytical roots of Habermas's thinking, roots that appear especially in Habermas's assessments and re-constructions of the first generation critical theorists' works on aesthetics. Drawing on these works, the paper discusses themes such as need interpretation and formation of personal and collective identities. It focuses especially on the roles that aesthetic-expressive activities play for need-interpretation and identity formation in Habermas's works, and it also explores the reasons that have

made Habermas eventually to deny the position of these activities in communicative action-coordination (cf. Boucher 2011).

The main argument of the paper is that if we do not look so much at *The Theory of Communicative Action*, but Habermas's later works, Habermas's views do not seem to deviate radically from the ideals of agonist planning, ideals concerning the respect of pluralism and difference. Habermas appears to make more room to 'the political' – as well as to difference – than the critics of communicative planning have argued. For this reason, Habermas would still deserve a position among the relevant sources of inspiration for planning theory. However, differences remain between Habermas and agonists when it comes to the respective parties conceptions of the nature of language. The paper maintains that both Habermas's and agonists' ideas concerning expressive and creative uses of language, as well as the position of these kinds of language-uses for action coordination, would need further clarification.

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