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From Apophenia to Epiphany: Making Planning Theory-Research-Practice Co-constitutive

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This paper addresses the question of how planning research could be reasserted to balance the relationship between theory and practice. To that end, a twofold approach is taken: on the one hand, different interrelations among planning theory, research and practice are set out building on Jacques Lacan's 'four discourses'—the master's, the university's, the hysteric's and the analyst's. On the other hand, a process to formulate the plan regulador (local normative master plan) of a canton in southern Costa Rica is drawn upon, through storytelling, to shed light on the aforementioned relations. The article's in-conclusion is that among planning theory, research and practice, rather than a synergic co-constitution, linkages that challenge, occlude, bypass or control one another are generated. Moreover, due to the apophenic ability of universal(izing)-technocratic(ized) theories to obviate the 'right measure' between action and reaction, discourses of research and practice are manipulated and the role of theory as 'master signifier' upheld. However, the 'counter-discourses' of both the hysteric and the analyst could be articulated by a planning 'critical-hysterical' research, which, in turn, would allow epiphanies to come to the fore, separate action from reaction and, pragmatically and dynamically, co-constitute planning theory, research and practice.

Keywords: Lacanian discourse; planning decision-making; storytelling; master plan; planning 'critical-hysterical' research.

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Introduction: Disentangling a Gordian knot

At one time, practice was considered an application of theory, a consequence; at other times, it had an opposite sense and it was thought to inspire theory, to be indispensable for the creation of future theoretical forms. In any event, their relationship was understood in terms of a process of totalization [...]. [H]owever [...] [t]he relationships between theory and practice are far more partial and fragmentary. On one side, a theory is always local and related to a limited field, and it is applied in another sphere, more or less distant from it. The relationship, which holds in the application of a theory is never one of resemblance. Moreover, from the moment a theory moves into its proper domain, it begins to encounter obstacles, walls, and blockages which require its relay by another type of discourse (it is through this other discourse that it eventually passes to a different domain). Practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another. No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall (Deleuze, 1977 [1972], p.205-206).

In this paper I engage with the question of how planning research could be reasserted to balance the (intrinsically imperfect) theory-practice dialectical nexus. In so doing, the interest is on knowledge production and application—the epistemological and normative dimension of planning—and a co-constitution of planning theory, research and practice is advocated by dint of a ‘critical-hysterical’ research. To that end, I draw, firstly, on Lacanian theory to delve into the complexities of planning decision-making processes, wherein, as Jean Hillier (2002) argues through the Lacanian Real¹, there is no absolute knowledge, information or consensus. More specifically, Lacan’s theory of four discourses enables to comprehend the relationship between power and discourse, via a set of analytical tools that decompose rhetorical predications aimed at reaching absolute agreement (Bracher, 1993; Chaitin, 1996; Gunder, 2003b, p.294). In sum, the theoretical section discusses the (still) pervasive tendency of producing solipsistic knowledge to underpin universal planning theories that end up suffering from apophenia², given their capacity to assert a (socio-spatial) order based on random configurations and their ‘tendency to be *overwhelmed* by meaningful coincidences’ (Brugger cited in Waldman, 2014; italics in the original).

On the other hand, making use of storytelling, I recourse to my practical, very much empirical, experience in planning, which was supported by a ‘universal(izing)-technocratic(ized)’ theory. Within the theory-practice interplay the role of research became, during my time as a practitioner, rather diffuse, in the sense that practice, as Gilles Deleuze points out in his above quotation, was usually regarded as the ‘natural’ offspring of theory, and yet there was a quite noticeable disassociation between what was supposed to happen and what, in effect, took place. Research, I came to conclude, was being misled by the chutzpah of a professional planning practice that, time and again, fell short in its ultimate desire to ‘control the future by current acts’ without ever realizing that ‘the present may be reluctant to give birth to the future’ (Wildavsky, 1973, p.128) in the terms planners so stubbornly try to spell it out. My relentless bind became understanding the insistence on pursuing the (exact) same way to go about, though envisioned objectives were not being

¹ ‘The Real is a gap, or rift, where all un-definable qualitative ideals and concepts of the Kantian sublime, the fair, the just, even “what is quality”, and above all the “good” can also be considered to reside within a logic of constitutive lack’ (Gunder, 2003b, p.243-4).

² Apophenia, first coined by German scientist Klaus Conrad as *apophanie* in 1958, refers to a subtle stage of schizophrenia characterized by the capacity to link and render meaningful unrelated details and identifying patterns where there are none (what in statistics is called a Type I error or false positive) (Poulsen, 2012). As opposed to an epiphany (the intuitive capacity to accurately perceive the world’s interconnections), an apophany constitutes a deceitful way of comprehension (Waldman, 2014).

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obtained. For years I awaited the man on an ox-cart to hand me in the answer. It was not until I altered radically, via anti-essentialist Lacanian theory, my take on and attitude towards planning praxis that I was able to, so to speak, ‘theorize outside the box’ and, consequently, comprehend that I had been riding the ox-cart all along.

The paper has two main sections. First, an overview of Jacques Lacan’s (2007 [1991], p.11ff.) ‘Production of four discourses’—the master’s, the university’s, the hysteric’s and the analyst’s. Based on the premise that planning theory, research or practice enacts the agency of one, or several, discourses, different interrelations among them are, thereupon, set out. Second, a story about a planning process to formulate the *plan regulador* (local normative master plan) of a canton in southern Costa Rica is utilized to develop further the outlined interrelations among planning theory, research and practice, by focusing on a tension- and conflict-ridden deliberative process held around the (latent) threat of a natural disaster³.

The paper’s in-conclusion—the here proposed discussion should be boundless—is that among planning theory, research and practice there is no synergic co-constitution, but rather linkages aimed at challenging, occluding, bypassing, directing one another. More particularly, due to the apophenic knack of universal(izing)-technocratic(ized) theories to obviate the ‘right measure’ between action and reaction, a ‘pseudo-Hegelian immediate coincidence of the opposites’ is crafted, in which ‘action and reaction should coincide, the very thing that causes damage should already be the medicine’ (Žižek, 2003). Discourses of research and practice are thus manipulated securing the dominant role of theory as ‘master signifier’. Nevertheless, counter-discourses, namely those of the hysteric and of the analyst, could be articulated by a planning ‘critical-hysterical’ research, which, in turn, would allow ‘striking realizations’—i.e. epiphanies—to come to the fore and separate action from reaction, by coupling, for instance, with phronetic research and agonistic views on planning decision-making processes. This rift, accordingly, facilitates zooming in on how local contextual characterizations and micro-practices could influence an epiphanic co-constitution of planning theory-research-practice—an unremitting task that resembles the chimera of disentangling a Gordian knot to fathom out, a second later, that it is made of an infinitude of other knots. On the whole, it would be as if, in regard to the overarching theme of this issue, each knot represents concurrently a (new) theoretical difference and practical connection. Both Lacanian theory and storytelling, therefore, are ‘untying’ research mediums that, critically and hysterically deployed, may bring practical relays and theoretical points closer together.

Lacan’s *Production of four discourses*: By what we say it is meant more than what we actually believe

There’s no such thing as a metalanguage (Lacan, 1999 [1975], p.118).

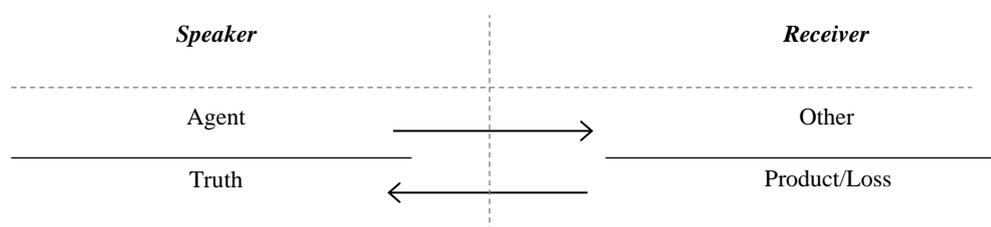
Lacan’s theory of four discourses, departing from the impossibility of perfect communication, centers on the ‘formal relationships that each discourse draws through the act of speaking’ (Verhaeghe, 2001, p.21). Thus, his theory is to be understood as a formal system that goes well beyond any spoken word. With the aim of identifying and comprehending ‘the crucial factors through which language exercises both formative and transformative power in human affairs’, Lacan came up with his ‘schemata of the four fundamental structures of discourse’

³ The planning story (the empirical section of the paper) is intended, first and foremost, as a means whereby shedding light on (i.e., de-abstracting, as it were) some of the theoretical concepts introduced. In addition to that, the story allows elaborating further, through Lacan’s theory of four discourses, some of the complications inherent to the planning process (as well as some of the analytical snags, which doing so cannot help but to bring about).

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(Bracher, 1994, p.107). Lacan purposely uses the term ‘discourse’, rather than ‘speech’, to denote the ‘transindividual nature of language, the fact that speech always implies another subject, an interlocutor’ (Evans, 2006 [1996], p.45). Discourse, therefore, ‘as a necessary structure that goes well beyond speech’, ‘can clearly subsist without words. It subsists in certain fundamental relations which would literally not be able to be maintained without language’ (Lacan, 2007 [1991], p.12-13). Discourses, hence, can be seen as a sort of encasement that determines the limits of thought, communication and action. Lacan, in time, revisited his definition of discourse and, still emphasizing intersubjectivity, designated it as ‘a social link, founded in language’ (Lacan, 1999 [1975], p.17). By highlighting the capacity to socially interrelate through language, Lacan’s basic assumption comes to the fore, ‘namely that each discourse delineates fundamental relationships, resulting in a particular *social bond*’ (Verhaeghe, 2001, p.21; italics in the original).

There are four possibilities to ‘socially bond’: the discourse of the master, the discourse of the university, the discourse of the hysteric and the discourse of the analyst (Lacan, 2007 [1991], p.11ff.), representing, ‘respectively, four fundamentals social effects: (1) governing/commanding, (2) educating/indoctrinating, (3) desiring/protesting, (4) analyzing/transforming/revolutionizing’ (Bracher, 1993, p.53). Each of the four discourses is represented by an algorithm, which, in turn, is composed of four algebraic symbols: S_1 (master signifier), S_2 (knowledge), $\$$ (the spilt subject) and a (surplus enjoyment). What tell each of the four discourses apart is the position that these symbols have within the algorithm, and one anticlockwise quarter of a turn gives rise to each discourse. Lacan also named specifically every seat as follows (Evans, 2006 [1996], p.45; Fink, 1997 [1995], p.131; Bracher, 1993, p.54):



The discourse of the master

Due to historical reasons, it is both phylogenetically and ontogenetically ‘a sort of primary discourse’ that constitutes the outset of the other three discourses and embodies ‘the alienating functioning of the signifier to which we are all subject’ (Fink, 1997 [1995], p.130). Its inception happens in the symbolic order and provides thereby the constitution of the subject with a formal expression (Verhaeghe, 2001, p.26). The dominant position is occupied by the master signifier (S_1) that is ‘to be seen as intervening [...] in a signifying battery that we have no right, ever, to take as dispersed, as not already forming a network of what is called knowledge’ (Lacan, 2007 [1991], p.13). Moreover, the illusion of equating the subject with its own signifying is aimed at excluding ‘the unconscious—the knowledge that is *not known*—as this would jeopardize the ego’s sense of certainty and autonomy’ (Newman, 2011, p.349; italics in the original). The matter of concern of the master, in this regard, rather than knowledge, is certainty—as long as everything functions as desired and power is retained, is not worth bothering with discovering why and/or how things work.

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The discourse of the university

The agency here is taken up by knowledge (S_2) and, as a result, 'systematic knowledge is the ultimate authority, reigning instead of [the master's] blind will, and everything has its reason [...] providing a sort of legitimation or rationalization of the master's will' (Fink, 1997 [1995], p.132). Therefore, any one attempt to produce 'absolutely' neutral knowledge is, after all, a pursuit of domination over the other to whom knowledge is being conveyed (Evans, 2006 [1996], p.46). The university's discourse, on such account, stands for the hegemony of knowledge—a characteristic that becomes visible, for instance, in the modernist supremacy of science and its standardized knowledge centered around an alienating master signifier that enables it to come into play (Gunder, 2004, p.307; Verhaeghe, 2001, p.30). That being so, 'working in the service of the master signifier, more or less any kind of argument will do, as long as it takes on the guise of reason and rationality' (Fink, 1997 [1995], p.133).

The discourse of the hysteric

It 'is associated with the practice of protesting, and in this sense it is always pitted against the authority of the Master' (Newman, 2011, p.349) and any of its (ir)rational articulations embodied by the university's discourse. The split subject (\$) performs the agency, addresses the master signifier (S_1) and demands to 'prove his or her mettle by producing something serious by way of knowledge' (Fink, 1997 [1995], p.133). To that end, the hysteric has to turn the other into a master signifier; however, any answer found (or given) is doomed to fail, because the network of signifiers (S_2) are unable to couple a particular answer with the driving force underscoring the *objet petit a* occupying the seat of truth (Verhaeghe, 2001, p.29). Consequently, the hysteric's and the university's discourse are nemeses and whereas knowledge, in the former, is what the hysteric gets off on; in the latter is what justifies the 'academic's very existence and activity' (Fink, 1997 [1995], p.133).

The discourse of the analyst

Once the final quarter of a turn has taken place, the surplus enjoyment (*a*) occupies the commanding position and triggers the analyst's discourse. As it is the actual inverse of the master's discourse, psychoanalysis, in Lacan's view, 'is an essentially subversive practice which undermines all attempts at domination and mastery' (Evans, 2006 [1996], p.47). The discourse of the analyst is therefore the sole 'effective means for countering the psychological and social tyranny exercised through language' (Bracher, 1994, p.123), because it gives way to a subversive subjectivity that bridges the gap between university and hysteria (Žižek, 2006b). For this purpose, the analyst looks into the precise points in which the conscious and the unconscious split and has the analyst and "coughs up" a master signifier that has not yet been brought into relation with any other signifier' (Fink, 1997 [1995], p.135). The analyst then attempts to relate this 'new' master signifier with other (already existing, or, knowable) signifiers, by means of a link 'established between each master signifier and a binary signifier such that subjectification takes place' (Fink, 1997 [1995], p.135).

All in all, Lacan's psychoanalysis and, particularly, his schemata of four discourses offer analytical depth avoiding to become a definitive 'master's discourse on truth', because psychoanalysis, 'without itself constituting a "metalanguage"', 'allows [...] to understand the functioning of different discourses in a unique way' (Fink, 1997 [1995], p.198/133; italics in the original). I will next discuss how these four discourses operate within certain interactions among planning theory, research and practice.

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Lacan's four discourses within the planning theory-research-practice triad: Looking for the creative side of apophenic knowledge

Lacanian thought has been prolifically utilized in the field of planning to provide new insights to theoretical and practical research (see, inter alia, Gunder, 2003a, 2003b, 2004, 2005, 2011; Gunder & Hillier, 2004; Hillier, 2002, 2003; Hillier & Gunder, 2005). Lacan's work, moreover, is pertinent to other disciplines and areas of human thought and action, given its engagement with both the practical and the abstract (Fuery, 1995; Gunder, 2003b, p.293). Lacan's spatial metaphors and his tactical use of them, more specifically, lead the way to a psychoanalytical (broader) understanding of the tangled process of social space production (Pile, 1996, p.122); which, in turn, 'includes an appreciation of planning practices' deployment of power, or governmentality, via the prescription and prohibition of activities in urban and regional space' (Gunder, 2003b, p.293).

In what follows, relationships are established among planning theory, research and practice, when each of them is the agent of one or various discourses. Lacan's discourse theory is therefore deployed to widen the 'understanding of planning practice' as well as 'of agonistic discourse or debate, authority/expertise, and the *realrationalität* of planning process' (Gunder, 2003b, p.299; italics in the original). It is important to note that just because one of the discourses is called 'the hysteric's discourse' that hysterics are inescapably circumscribed in it. Contrariwise, 'as an analyst, the hysteric may function with the analyst's discourse; as an academic, the hysteric may function within the discourse of the university' (Fink, 1997 [1995], p.130-131). That being so, planning theorists, researchers and practitioners can move among discourses and, though their efficacy remains unaltered, their physical structure 'suffer from the obstacles and shortcomings endemic' to whatever discourse they choose to use, because, irremediably, 'a particular discourse facilitates certain things and hinders others, allows one to see certain things while blinding one to others' (Fink, 1997 [1995], p.130).

The twofold character of the communication agent

Additionally, Lacan's distinction between 'full' and 'empty' speech is to be considered when analyzing linkages among planning theory, research and practice: 'as a rule, empty speech is conceived as empty; nonauthentic prattle in which the speaker's subjective position of enunciation is not disclosed, whereas in full speech, the subject is supposed to express his or her authentic existential position of enunciation' (Žižek, 1998 [1993], p.94). Hence, between empty and full speech there is also the duality between the 'subject of the enunciated' (i.e., 'I', the first person; the psychoanalytical ego) and the 'subject of the enunciation' (i.e., the subject of the unconscious whose signifiers differ from and even contradict what is enunciated).

Full speech is not then simply filling out empty speech, '[q]uite the contrary, [...] it is only empty speech by way of its emptiness (of its distance toward the enunciated content which is posited in it as totally indifferent) which creates the space for "full speech"' (Žižek, 1998 [1993], p.94). This ostensible contradictory capacity of the subject renders the agency of the Lacanian discourse inconsistent and inauthentic (when the master signifier (S_1) is exerting the discourse); consistent but inauthentic (in the case of the academic, i.e., knowledge (S_2)); inconsistent and yet authentic (this dualism is that of the hysterical split subject ($\$$)); and consistent and authentic (condition that the analyst (a) possesses) (Žižek, 1998 [1993], p.274).

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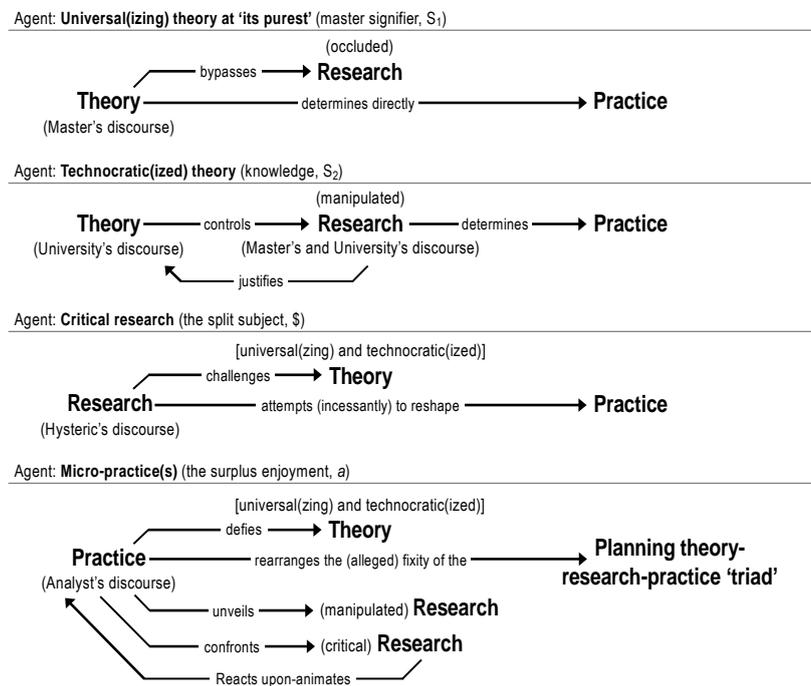


Figure 1. Relationships among elements of the planning theory-research-practice triad according to type of agent and discourse deployed / Source: own elaboration.

Universally equating theory with practice

As shown in Figure 1, the first case is that of 'universal(izing)' planning theory as master signifier (S_1) making use of the master's discourse. Given that the master (theory) is not at all concerned with the production of knowledge, research is bypassed and practice thereby encapsulated in a standardizing manner. Such straightforward passage from theory to practice states that no epistemological base is (allegedly) needed, in order to assert what, how and/or why has to be done. Discourses of universal(izing) planning theories smack inevitably of contradiction: socio-spatial reality could never be tamed! Yet they may well seem honest in advancing a well-ordered space for people to live pleasantly, cherish nature, practice truly participatory democracy, and so on. The catch, though, is that 'ideas of complete information, a harmonious society and of consensus are the Lacanian impossible Real of utopian dreams rather than actual lived reality' (Hillier, 2003, p.45). Universal(izing) planning theories therefore acquire a tinge of inauthenticity in their tragic fruitless efforts to symbolize and materialize the Real, for all they end up doing is misleading it.

Universal(izing) theory's 'alibi'

In the second case, technocratic(ized) theory, in the form of knowledge (S_2), utters the discourse of the university. Research is controlled to justify universal(izing) theory and, ultimately, determine practice. To that end, research employs either the discourse of the master or of the university. In the former scenario, power, bestowed, wielded and articulated by 'servant' planning researches, 'defines, and creates, concrete physical, economic, ecological and social realities' (Flyvbjerg, 2003, p.320); whereas in the latter scenario,

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research aids to turn rationality into rationalization to then get away with it. Planning research within this interaction, despite being consistent ('planning recipes' are, in themselves, coherent discourses), is helplessly inauthentic, for it is at the service of the obfuscating interests of technocratic(ized) planning theory.

Howling universal(izing)-technocratic(ized) theory down

The third case displays critical research as the split subject (\$) articulating the discourse of the hysteric to defy both universal(izing) and technocratic(ized) theory. In so doing, critical planning research attempts incessantly to reshape practice, by recognizing that it is a matter of neither systematization nor dogmatism, rather of uncertain disarray and unorthodoxy. There is a large body of planning literature that may well be seen as 'critical-hysterical' research, in which the hysteric's discourse is the 'discourse of both the questioning academic and the questioning planning student seeking the production and assurance of new knowledge (S₂)' (Gunder, 2004, p.307). However, answers, if any are found, never coincide with the ones originally sought, because hysterical knowledge cannot 'produce a particular answer about the particular driving force of the object *a* at the place of truth' that is the actual drive of the hysterical agent (Verhaeghe, 2001, p.29). Thus, critical-hysterical research, while being authentic (their demands to the master/technocratic academic are legitimate), is doomed to be inconsistent due to its incapacity to pair questions/problems and answers/solutions together. Yet, the planning critical-hysterical researcher, by way of this deception, unconsciously eludes the universal(izing)-technocratic(ized) planning theorists' megalomaniac desire of either bypassing or wiping out problematic/conflictive practical situations.

Getting rid of universal(izing)-technocratic(ized) canons

The final interaction is triggered when practice, as surplus enjoyment (*a*), performs the agency of the analyst's discourse. The planning analytical practitioner, akin the critical-hysterical researcher, challenges universal(izing) and technocratic(ized) theory. In consequence, the manipulated technocratic academic is unveiled and the critical-hysterical researcher confronted; who exerts a counteracting influence on the analytical practitioner. It is hard to put one's finger on what tells one from the other, given that, at times, they could perfectly be the same; however, not simultaneously. Therefore, the relationship between the planning analytical practitioner and critical-hysterical researcher resembles, in some way, that between the analyst and the analysand, in which, 'while the analyst adopts the analyst discourse, the analysand is inevitably, in the course of analysis, hysterical' (Fink, 1997 [1995], p.136). Analytical practice and critical-hysterical research, in this way, follow a principle of discovery that, instead of seeking to state universal delusional canons, grounds theory in reality. Because of this, practice, through the discourse of the analyst, is able to rearrange the alleged 'fixity' of the planning theory-research-practice triad—a fixity that, not surprisingly, is safeguarded by either universal(izing) or technocratic(ized) theory.

These four cases show that among planning theory, research and practice there is not a synergic co-constitution. Conversely, diverse linkages spawn following the directive influence of the discursive agent. Particularly, when universal(izing) and technocratic(ized) theory perform the agency of, respectively, the master's and the university's discourse, research and practice are subdued. Knowledge and the way it is created, distributed and used suffer, as a result, from apophenia—experiencing delusion as revelation and providing from no substantial to limited insight into the true nature of reality. However, 'apophenic' knowledge can be counteracted, for apophenia is also the spontaneous perception of connections and

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meaningfulness of (apparently) disconnected phenomena. Given that such propensity ‘most closely links psychosis to creativity’, ‘apophenia and creativity may even be seen as two sides of the same coin’ (Brugger, 2001, p.205). In the subsequent section, storytelling is used to examine how apophenic planning knowledge, embodied by universal(izing) and/or technocratic(ized) theoretical discourses, is critically and hysterically called into question; that is to say, *looking for the creative side of apophenic knowledge through a critical-hysterical analytic lens*.

Stories *in* and *for* planning: From mere anecdotes to critical-hysterical (self-) assessment

A reflective storytelling session is just what seems needed when planning efforts result in nothing tangible over time (van Hulst, 2012, p.300).

Stories are pertinent to planning because, being structured around things that matter to people, they ‘construct and carry the identities of groups’ (van Hulst, 2012, p.302). Moreover, ‘good planning might include collecting and telling stories about both the past and the future’ that could be at odds with each other, which raises the issue of ‘how one can compare differing stories and choose among them’ (Throgmorton, 2003, p.126). In so doing, it must not be overlooked that power largely influences how stories ‘get told, get heard and get weight’ (Sandercock, 2003, p.26)—let alone remembered and reflected upon. Storytelling, additionally, helps planners ‘ground’ the technical data collected via scientific methods, which, remarkably at the local level of communities⁴, brings in the so-often-sought-to-be-avoided political side of planning, for ‘empirical (micro)studies of storytelling in practice allows us to zoom in on the political process that is inherent in storytelling and between storytelling and other planning activities’ (van Hulst, 2012, p.301). All things considered, storytelling can constitute ‘a model of planning’ (when practical stories are reconstructed) and/or a ‘model for planning’ (when storytelling enables people to articulate their stories) (van Hulst, 2012, p.303).

Furthermore, the fact that within the story I play an active double role (telling and being a part of it), proves that it is not as far-fetched for planning practitioners to face the internal (and innate) contradictions of their profession. Becoming a sort of dissident, resisting to practice planning ubiquitously and opening up to other forms of ‘getting things done’ is a critical-hysterical analytical path that animates a more fruitful co-constitution of theory, research and practice. Such attempt, too, is most necessary, because when planners neither question themselves, nor can imagine any other (theoretical, analytical and/or practical) alternative, they are inevitably feeding ‘the growing ineptitude, if not irrelevance, of (in)organic and traditional intellectuals, whose cynicism often translates into complicity with the forms of power they condemn’ (Giroux, 2009, p.177).

⁴ Here ‘community’ refers to a group of people living in close proximity and sharing certain common values and interests, rather than administrative planning units.

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The story: Digging into the ulterior dimension of the past

The writing of histories is not simply a matter of holding a mirror up to the past and reporting on what is reflected back. It is always a representation, a textual reconstruction of the past rather than a direct reflection of it (Sandercock, 1998, p.36-37).

In some remote corner of a tropical country that is poured out in countless flickering planning schemes, there once was a planning office in which clever planners retrodicted knowledge to predict nature's behavior. That was the most arrogant and the most untruthful moment in the 'country's planning history'—yet indeed only a moment. After nature had taken a few breaths, the planners' cocksureness froze over and the clever planners remained astounded and speechless⁵. This caustic passage summarizes the storyline of a tale about how planners do their work abstracting themselves from real-life situations; namely that, by means of technical expertise, the present and future of territorial units of political administration can be, respectively, fixed and guided. In carrying out such an overarching task, planners are (thought to be) 'neutral, objective, rational adjudicators of the public interest' and their plans 'have a single literal meaning [...] that any intelligent person can grasp' (Throgmorton, 2003, p.128). However, planners are anything but unbiased and their 'future narratives' cannot help to be subject to manifold interpretations.

Bringing disarray into order: Planning as post hoc fallacy

The task of relating processes of decision to the social conditions in which they must operate is hampered because rational planning is supposed to stand as universal truth not subject to alteration through experience (Wildavsky, 1973, p.152).

To practice, officially and formally, planning in Costa Rica can basically mean two things: working either for or on behalf of the state, to put together master plans that promote what is known as *ordenamiento del territorio* ('territorial ordering'⁶). Thus, a group of professionals with diverse backgrounds stick to an already established methodology to produce master plans. That is how I first understood, by and large, the practical dimension of planning as I ventured into the field roughly ten years ago. In time, I also realized that planning, as previously mentioned, was markedly state-led and, due to a strong influence of the American planning tradition, highly statutory. The working method, in theoretical terms, though (still) remains somewhat rudimentary, has been deeply shaped by the rational-comprehensive planning paradigm, which places at the heart of planning thought and action the figure of the 'planner-analyst' who goes about following the dictum of 'the more comprehensive the analysis of the planning problem[s], the better the plan' (Mäntysalo, 2005, p.24). Without ever deploying the discourse of the analyst—as it may be wrongly inferred—we, a group of 'planner-analysts', drawing on the university's and, if it were the case, the master's discourse, created master plans, in which the 'public interest' was confined to our 'planning expertise'.

Such mode of planning, as Saul Newman (2011, p.347; italics added) observes, 'is an elite practice and *discourse*: it is the idea of a certain order of space imposed from above upon pre-existing social relations' through the supremacy of technical-knowledge jargon. In order to make the master plans more appealing and (at least allegedly) more understandable, planners normally make use of an eye-catching 'label' (e.g., democracy, freedom, social well-

⁵ The acute reader may well have recognized that these lines are a paraphrase of Friedrich Nietzsche's (1989 [1873], p.246) *On Truth and Lying in an Extra-moral Sense* introductory paragraph.

⁶ In planning literature the notion of *ordenamento territorial* is usually translated as 'spatial planning'. Yet, for the purpose of this discussion, it is better to bear in mind the (more) literal translation of 'territorial ordering'.

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being, sustainability⁷, and others of that ilk), which operates as the Lacanian ‘master signifier’ of the discourses that comprise the plans and whose ‘value lies in what they symbolize, crucial identity-shaping ideas [...] that are greater than the individual and hence give the subject a sense of meaning and belonging’ (Gunder, 2004, p.301). On such account, the utmost normative goal of the master plans I helped producing—the very abstract notion of ‘quality of life’—was articulated via ‘common-benefit’ planning solutions that needed be defined through scientific inquiry instruments. This, nonetheless, was—and most likely still is—nothing but a faulty attempt, given that planners, while crafting master plans, have to fall back on a ‘set of knowledge, beliefs, and symbolic practices’ that ‘are the components of discourse, the subcodes that support the [hollow] master signifiers’ (Gunder, 2004, p.302). What we were therefore doing was designing planning strategies that reduced what in reality must have been a myriad of codes and subcodes to what we so firmly and unilaterally believed ‘quality of life’ was and, what is more, how it, once achieved, was going to look like.

However, master plans, as I quickly experienced (and, at the moment, not without a tinge of frustration), rarely see the light. They end up truncated due to: legal appeals (opposing partially, or even totally, the plan); the excessively long bureaucratic process required to enact the plans; lack (and, oddly enough, sometimes excess) of political support; shortage of both human and technical resources to implement the plans; and, mostly, the positivist logic that buttresses the master plans, which ‘magically’ extricates the planning process from any difficulties. Master plans, to put it another way, are based on an aphoristic idea of ‘bringing, for once and for all, disarray into order’ by means of a post hoc fallacy that, as Aaron Wildavsky asserts in the aforementioned quote, rejects ‘alteration through experience’ because planning is deceptively to be regarded as bulletproof.

Planes Reguladores: The more (precise the) rationalization, the greater the irrationality

For the most part, I was involved in the production of *Planes Reguladores*, local master plans operative at the political-administrative level of cantons. Municipalities, in collaboration with the *Instituto Nacional de Vivienda y Urbanismo* (INVU, national institute of housing and urbanism), are to formulate, enact and supervise these plans, relying on a handbook⁸ (every now and then updated) that contains a specific methodology. Such ubiquitous procedure consists of six consecutive phases: (1) data collection; (2) analysis and diagnosis; (3) forecast; (4) proposals; (5) approval and adoption; and, finally, (6) management for implementation (INVU, 2006, p.9).

This mode of planning is (or, at least, is supposed to be) very exhaustive. While making the plan, a lot of prominence is given to accurateness: information gathered has to be all-encompassing, findings thorough and intricate, and forecasts as well as proposals definite. Acceptance and implementation of the plan, as a ‘natural’ result, are thought to be smooth and easy. Nevertheless, I started to notice, after having tested the method a couple of times,

⁷ See Gunder (2006) for a thorough discussion on how sustainability, as master signifier, has pervaded planning theory, practice and education.

⁸ The manual, as specified in the version here quoted, was elaborated by the *Dirección de Planificación Urbana* (Department of Urban Planning) of the INVU together with the *Ministerio de Vivienda y Asentamientos Humanos* (Ministry of Housing and Human Settlements) and the Project Management Unity of the PRU-GAM Project (aimed at generating a new regional plan for the *Gran Área Metropolitana*, the country’s largest urban agglomeration, with the financial aid of the European Union) as a ‘technical instrument’ whose objective ‘is to create a structural model, balanced, efficient, hierarchical and in complete harmony with the environment and the national idiosyncrasy [...] to generate more human cities, in keeping with urban work, beautiful and with an improved quality of life’ (INVU, 2006, p.1).

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that a basic principle was being constantly and inexplicably overlooked, namely that ‘planned decisions often have unplanned consequences’ (Wildavsky, 1973, p.129). This ‘self-inflicted’ blindness was foremost evident whenever a zoning scheme was put together ranging from a ‘macro-scale’ (sometimes covering several thousand square kilometers) to a ‘micro-scale’ (using the cadastre to determine land uses). There was, in other words, an explicit incongruity between the theoretical planning framework (rational-comprehensive) we drew upon and ‘the real world of practical planning intervention’, given that ‘[t]he one is the quintessence of order and reason in relation to the other which is full disorder and unreason’; it was as if ‘[p]lanning theory [had] set itself the task of rationalising irrationalities [...] bringing [...] a set of abstract, independent and transcendent norms’ (Scott & Roweis, 1977, p.1116).

The insistence, with such a narrow-minded attitude, on making use of the same means to achieve the same (unachievable) goals was rooted—I eventually settled—in a ‘[m]isplaced faith in the norms of rationality’ that can be any minute easily ‘transmuted into normless use of power’ (Wildavsky, 1973, p.152). This is why we, as rational ‘planner-analysts’, were unable to learn from experience, because ‘to learn one must make mistakes and planning cannot be one of them’ (Wildavsky, 1973, p.151). Moreover, in order to avoid criticism, which would uncover such internal contradiction in our work and, more specifically, our judgment, master plans were presented, deploying both the discourse of the master and the university, as the only possible way to reverse the undesirable situations previous master plans—produced almost exactly like the new ones—have paradoxically prompted. That is to say, the solution of the problems planning could not thus far resolve (or preempt) was more of the same ‘old’ planning. In consequence, a sort of ‘planning without planning’ emerges capable, via universal(izing) and technocratic(ized) theory, of producing ‘reality itself deprived of its substance, of the resisting hard kernel of the Real’ (Žižek, 2003). Here is when discourse, either the master’s or the university’s, become one endless soliloquy and knowledge helplessly aphoristic.

In such effort to equate action and reaction; i.e., averting opposition to the plan, there is yet a significant oddity: the input of people, which undoubtedly could mean contestation, is granted and encouraged (in particular for the approval and adoption of the plan, the fifth phase) throughout the whole process of creation of the *planes reguladores*—the thing is, *how* citizen participation is understood and thus fostered/dampened!

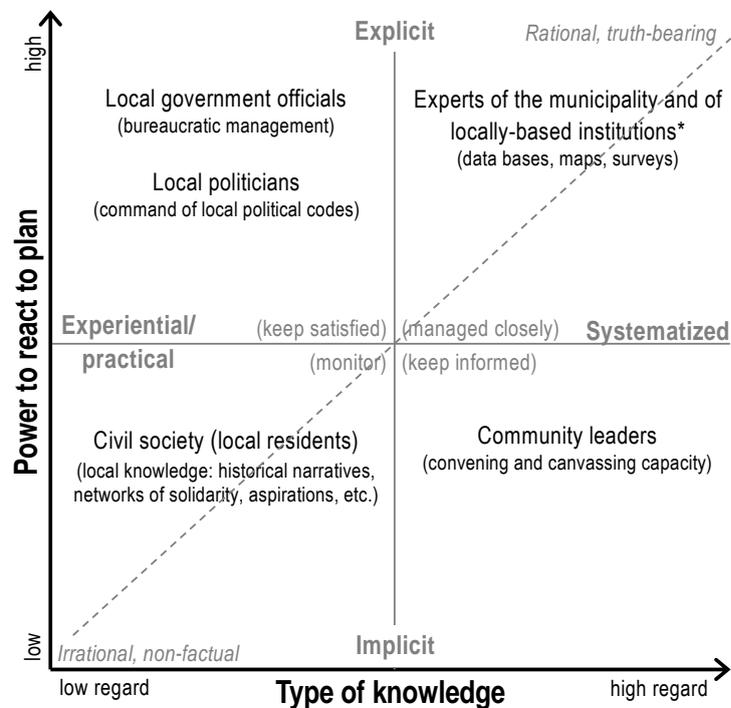
Citizen participation and Planes Reguladores: Do as I say and everything will be just fine

The method to formulate the *planes reguladores* (and master plans in general), thus far described, does seem to be incompatible with a substantive, not tokenistic, democratic planning decision-making. Citizen participation, notwithstanding, is a requisite without which the plans are, in principle, unviable. To make things a bit knottier, citizen participation, as it reads in the ‘planning handbook’, is a means whereby assuring that planning decisions, in determining the ‘quality of life’ (the plan’s master signifier), reflect the needs, desires and preferences of people; rather than constituting a group of purely technical superimposed solutions (INVU, 2006, p.32). Moreover, in the section where the six phases to create the plan are described, citizen participation, it is stressed, must take place during certain phases pointing out the expected input of local residents. While citizen participation, seen like that, appears to be a catalyst for the master plans not to fall on stony ground, it is, in the very end, aimed at facilitating that ‘people *accept* systematically the analysis and proposals of the *plan regulador*, ensuring thereby its implementation and development’ (INVU, 2006, p.10; italics)

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added). In point of fact, citizen participation does not go further than, as Sherry Arnstein put it, ‘the first rung’.

Now, that being so, why feigning that citizen participation has a role to play in the creation of *planes reguladores*? A hypothetical⁹ answer might be that master plans operate as a ‘converging point’ coalescing (sometimes forcibly) a range of stakeholders. The plan is, in itself, a medium to channel support, given that ‘the existence of a formal plan suggests a greater commitment to the objectives and the subordinate goals in the plan than one would expect in the absence of such a visible public document’ (Wildavsky, 1973, p.129). The *planes reguladores*, therefore, are frequently instrumentalized to convene electoral support and cope with bureaucratic requisites to have funds devolved from higher governmental tiers. Thus the interest amid local officials—and not necessarily among experts—in (the creation of) *Planes Reguladores* and ‘tolerance’ of limited and distorted citizen participation.



* It refers to either regional or local offices of central government institutions in charge of themes like electricity, water supply, public transportation, road systems, etc.

Figure 2. Mapping of stakeholders, according to the professional team’s perspective that creates a *plan regulador*, correlating power to react to the plan with type of knowledge / Source: own elaboration, based on Mitchell et. al (1997) and Healey’s (2007, p.245) typology of knowledge.

Here, the ‘gap between the fantastic universal Real of the public supposed to (or having the right to) know and the reality of the public supposed to believe’ (Hillier, 2003, p.47; Dean, 2001) is observable, given that access to information and the way it is made known to the public is controlled, in great detail, by experts carrying out the plan (sometimes under the spell of ‘hidden’ powerful actors). In the long run, the input of civil society, within the

⁹ I do not believe there can be a definitive version about what drives us to behave illogically or irrationally.

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constellation of the stakeholders (see Figure 2), is rendered irrational and non-factual for the sake of decision-making and taming of reaction to the plan. Yet it has to be allegedly taken into account. Local residents, all in all, are stakeholders to be monitored and, consequently, become the ‘public supposed to obey’—just nod, be quiet, cooperate and everything shall be fine. However, those thought to obey can dare, all of a sudden, to bite the hand that ‘plans’ them.

A noumenal versus a phenomenological tale of the future

The elements of the strange orb were immediately calculated, and it was at once conceded by all observers, that its path, at perihelion, would bring it into very close proximity with the earth. There were two or three astronomers of secondary note who resolutely maintained that a contact was inevitable. I cannot very well express to you the effect of this intelligence upon the people. For a few short days they would not believe an assertion which their intellect, so long employed among worldly considerations, could not in any manner grasp. But the truth of a vitally important fact soon makes its way into the understanding of even the most stolid (Edgar Allan Poe, *The Conversation of EIROs and CHARMION*).

Citizen participation, according to the handbook, could take place via public assemblies, focus groups, thematic workshops, roundtables, open house, storytelling, interviews, inter alia. Focus groups, interviews and public assemblies were the participatory tools most frequently deployed while I worked generating *planes reguladores*. Interviews were typically conducted during the first phase (data collection) and a public assembly was organized to present the final draft of the plan (approval and adoption) and allow discussion (yet, none of the opinions, desires, worries, etc. are binding). Focus groups, on the other hand, were organized throughout the whole planning process. All the information gathered in focus groups sessions, which conflates stories (both past and future) local residents shared, was later on sorted out—a process in which local knowledge almost inevitably withers, given that “community storytellers” construct and tell contending stories, but these people typically disappear in plans [...]; the planner supplants them as storyteller, usually in ways that cannot be discerned’ (Throgmorton, 2003, p.134). However, people can reclaim their ‘authorship’ whenever they feel their take on the past or the future is being misled and their livelihood hence threatened. Such was the case in the frame of the participatory planning process of a canton in southern Costa Rica.

People, in none of the planning processes I partook, evidenced great interest in the *plan regulador*. Reasons for that are multifarious: eroded image of municipalities (with which the plan is directly associated), lack of information, faulty canvassing and communication strategies, excessive complexity of certain aspects (or leastways the way they are presented), etc. Nonetheless, once a matter had been identified as either already or potentially altering their livelihood, local residents would swiftly change their attitude towards the plan—even to the point of opposing it altogether. Amid the topics that were usually addressed during focus groups, zoning schemes, due to their ‘irrational’ level of specificity and, prominently, their inherent prescriptive character, were the foremost polemic and debated. More specifically, the problem arose when the zoning map of a rural community was presented to the focus group discussing the risk of natural disasters. Participants were markedly surprised when they comprehended, not without certain difficulty (the ability to read maps should never be taken for granted!), that almost the whole town was within a zone labelled as ‘high flood threat’. This classification, as they were explained, derived from accurate mathematical models used to determine the probabilities of flood. Needless to say, this explanation did not suffice to calm them down and, from that moment on, the supposed river flood became the major concern playing any other issue down that the *plan regulador*

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could bring about. The topic, furthermore, spread among residents by word of mouth: ‘Have you heard? Just the other day there was a bunch of “experts” saying that we all have to go elsewhere because the river will inevitably flood!’

This reaction was, by far, unexpected, for technocratic(ized) planning practitioners transmitted the vast scientific reasoning, underlying the *plan regulador*, through the university’s discourse to preempt animadversion. Hydrologists that ran the prediction models, in the light of such startling response by local residents, conducted more analyses and, eventually, revealed an even more complicated fact: the river was about to finish a cycle—that is, the flood, besides imminent, could happen a lot sooner. Hydrologists, furthermore, hardly ever set foot in communities to present their findings and, given that professionals not as skilled in the subject had to tell the ‘awful truth’, communication and understanding were hampered. That being so, as soon as the latest results were disseminated, the notion of risk as ‘something that can be measured, observed, mapped and generally controlled’ (put forward by the planning team) ranged from fairly general acceptance (by ‘the public supposed to know’) to increasing defiance (by ‘the public supposed to believe’), given that ‘once risk is socially recognized, it becomes politically explosive’ (Gunder, 2008, p.187/191).

Due to this reduction of scope, people hardly had a chance to assimilate that they needed be relocated and correspondingly leave their homes—both a material and an emotional loss. Actions, too, were to be taken urgently—event prior to the completion of the *plan regulador*—because waiting could have been ostensibly fatal. Such haste was, moreover, the very thing that triggered scepticism amid a sector of the community that started to question, drawing on the discourse of the hysteric, the veracity of the facts. Their incredulity, as I was later on able to grasp, was based on a criticism leveled at ‘the attempt to assert control over the environment or society’ (Gunder, 2008, p.197) that transforms ‘danger’ into ‘risk’, because ‘we can talk of risk only when the occurrence of an event is linked to a decision; otherwise we talk of danger’ (Pellizzoni, 2004, p.545). Residents unwilling to accept the scientific arguments were, perhaps without being fully aware of it, revealing a conceptual and discursive contradiction we, as planning experts, were exposing. Chiefly, when the flood was asserted, based on careful retrodiction (which is nothing but illusory and certainly perilous), our mistakenness became most evident, for ‘the experience of the past, encourages anticipation of the wrong kind of risk, the one we believe we can calculate and control, whereas the disaster arises from what we do not know and cannot calculate’ (Beck, 2006, p.330). Should we have said: ‘Look, we have a hunch the river may flood and it would be best to move permanently families that may potentially be affected’, local residents perhaps would have accepted the idea a lot better (or, at least, with less mistrust)—who knows? However, we resorted, instead, to the recalcitrant discourse of the master, when deliberation was predictably reaching a deadlock, and sought to lessen controversy by subjecting it to the master’s formula par excellence: ‘I AM = I AM KNOWLEDGE = I AM THE ONE WHO KNOWS’ (Ragland, 1996, p.134; capitals in the original).

Opting for such an extreme position kept us from recognizing that people refusing the flood as a given were authentic in their hysterical claims, because a ‘party’s unwillingness to present rational argument or documentation may quite simply indicate its freedom to act and its freedom to define reality’ (Flyvbjerg, 2003, p.321); not to mention that their ‘commitment values [...] [were] a matter of identity and historical contingency rather than rationality’ (Hillier, 2003, p.39). This was clearly seen during the last meeting prior to the whole planning decision-making process getting bogged down: a few moments before the meeting ended, residents leading ‘the opposition’ brought in a ninety-something-years-old man and asked if he could say a few words. Once he was holding a microphone, the old guy stood up and

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said: 'As you all know I was born here a long time ago. All my life I have lived here. Here I got married and had my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. All my life, I repeat, all my life I have been here and not once has the river flooded!'

A statement like this, one is tempted to, could be equated with another one declaring to have seen a 'Beast of Bodmin'. But the same pretty much goes for the scientific claim advancing the flood's imminence. In either case, the split between the subject of the enunciated and the subject of the enunciation can be recognized, which brings to the fore the ulterior character of the Lacanian agent. Every time planners exposed truth-bearing reasons (myself included) wherefore the river was thought to flood, though they were the ones speaking, they were in fact reproducing (or actually trying to fill) the empty speech of an undisclosed subject, i.e., the hydrologists that remained distant from the conflict. Additionally, advocating that people actually had to be displaced, while responding to a honest care for safeguarding, above all, human life, the burden of being held responsible, had a flood actually happened, may well be the subjacent drive of the planning team's masterly and inflexible position. By the same token, the way local residents defended their position not to be relocated—and, thus, disobeyed the technical-scientific expertise—had a similar discursive structure. Whereas some of the arguments given, such as 'sense of belonging', 'inheritance', 'social bonds', amid others uttered by the subject of the enunciated ('I have lived all my life here...') are legitimate, an unconscious push can nevertheless be read between the lines: the highly valued pride of land ownership. Even in the Costa Rican Constitution the inviolability of the dwelling (with few exceptions, being the threat of natural disasters *not* one of them) is granted. In consequence, the sovereignty over private property is what the subject of the enunciation seems to have meant every time a reason not to evacuate was proffered.

To put it differently, the planning practitioners, with their inauthenticity and (in)consistency (master's and university's discourse) could not quite get their ideas through, and local residents, impaired by their inconsistency, were not able to make better use of their authentic hysterical discourse. Amid this clash of discourses, at any rate, a point is to be stressed: although no concrete measures were taken and only contending intentions were shared, the cranny between thought and action is not as apparent as one may believe, because

Thought is no longer theoretical. As soon as it functions it offends or reconciles, attracts or repels, breaks, dissociates, unites or reunites; it cannot help but liberate and enslave. Even before prescribing, suggesting a future, saying what must be done, even before exhorting or merely sounding an alarm thought, at the level of its existence, in its very dawning, is in itself an action—a perilous act (Foucault, 1977, p.5).

God works in mysterious ways

Nothing is so alien to the human mind as the idea of randomness (John Cohen, 1960, p.42).

A few days after deliberation had become no longer viable and consensus hence untenable, a (back then) working peer of mine approached me and said: —'Do you know what could settle, once and for all, the river flood dispute?' —'I have no clue', replied I. —'An actual river flood!' Within a week or so, the unthinkable almost happened: a tropical storm caused flash floods producing severe material damages and several casualties throughout the canton. Many people had to be evacuated, but none from the rural community with which we had the disagreement, for it was left completely intact. Any given day, in an unrelated situation, I ran into a resident who was very active enthralling antagonism towards the planning team 'allegations'. After having recognized me, we engaged in a short conversation and, at some point, he condescendingly told me: —'Do you know why we were, as it is now clear, all along

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right?’ I remained silent. —‘Because God was always on our side’. Having heard that I could not help asking: —‘What about all those other people who were seriously affected? Some of them even died’ —‘Well, you see’, retorted he, ‘God sometimes works in mysterious ways’.

Planning, as I understood it then, was ‘pure’ reason embodied by the plan. However, by worshipping (the method to create) the *plan regulador* we had failed to see that ‘secular idolatry is no easier to maintain than a religious one’ (Wildavsky, 1973, p.152). The very dictum, underpinning rational-comprehensive planning and uttered by the ‘master-planner’, of ‘[p]lanning is good if it succeeds and society is bad if it fails’ (Wildavsky, 1973, p.151) had been, at once, knocked down.

In-conclusion: what’s the difference, what’s the connection?

There are always loose ends within any one reflection on any given subject. It is therefore not my intention to come up, at this point, with a planning axiom, because, as John Friedmann (1998, p.253) sharply writes, ‘[t]here can be no conclusions. We are, after all, engaged in continuing search to improve the practice of planning through the power of theory. And that is an ongoing effort that must remain open to the future’. Such unflagging quest, moreover, ought to incorporate a two-way lens that operate inward as well as outward from the planning phenomenon being scrutinized. By combining external explanation (based, for example, on observation) with internal critical reflection (e.g., insightful practice stories), one could not only grasp the causes of behavior, but also (try to) deconstruct the meaning of action of the miscellaneous actors (planners, politicians, citizens, etc.) involved. That is, to a greater or lesser extent, what I have propounded in this paper—perhaps with a stronger accent on the latter and with a bit of self-criticism (for I was, first, ‘on stage’ and I am now seated in the grandstand).

Finding out why planners go about in *this* or *that* manner and what that means, though it may seem ostensibly easy (say, all they do is what they are trained/instructed to do: apply rational common sense!), is a quite tricky task, given that ‘actions derive their meaning from [...] shared ideas and rules of social life’ and meaning, in turn, ‘range from what is consciously and individually intended to what is communally and often unintendedly’ (Hollis, 2003 [1994], p.17). In other words, there is no certainty—and we must not unproductively pursue it. We, instead, need embrace uncertainty and fully integrate it into our symbolic resources to move beyond ‘modern’s planning epistemic goals of truth, or agreed consensus, predicated *on a priori* reasoned knowledge—universal theory of what is, or has been—that unsuccessfully seeks to project into the future an ideal of factual-certainty derived from the past’ (Gunder, 2003b, p.236).

Thus, this paper is a contribution to debates on how the supremacy of epistemological (scientific knowledge) and technical (know-how) stances may be ‘phronetically’ superseded to apply ‘the art of judgement’ (Vickers, 1995), inasmuch as ‘attempts to reduce planning research to *episteme* or *techne* or to comprehend planning practices in those terms are misguided’ (Flyvbjerg, 2004, p.285; italics in the original). Furthermore, when delving *critically* and *hysterically*, through storytelling, into local-specific political planning processes, a phronetic take allows insightful reflection, because ‘*phronesis* is [an] intellectual activity most relevant to praxis [...] [that] requires an interaction between the general and the concrete; it requires deliberation, judgement, and choice [...] [but] [m]ore than anything else, *phronesis* requires *experience*’ (Flyvbjerg, 2004, p.288; italics in the original). *Phronesis* also exposes the need to make room, within the ‘rationality’ of planning decision-making processes, for a wider array of rationalities as well as ‘the reasonable’ and ‘the plausible’ (Mouffe, 1993, p.14).

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In short, *phronesis*, ‘while not without identified flaws¹⁰, might form part of an alternative framework of agonistic debate for planning and decision-making’ (Gunder, 2003b, p.253), in which ‘the art of judgment’ is to be radically reconceived avoiding ‘false dilemmas between [...] the existence of some universal criterion and [...] the rule of arbitrariness’ (Mouffe, 1993, p.14).

In essence: it is in planners’ self-criticism—which is the mode of planning critical-hysterical research here developed—that storytelling, Lacanian theory and phronetic planning research could come across, encouraging thereby a more pragmatic and dynamic co-constitution of planning theory, research and practice. Moreover, if theory, research and practice are to relate to one another more effectively, without ever becoming one unrecognizable unity, the balance between action and reaction has to be as well permanently sought—without the conviction of ever reaching a perfect equilibrium. To that end, Slavoj Žižek’s (2006a) proposition of reframing problems may well lead the way: for instance, rather than questioning why planners fail to persuade people to accept their technical-scientific solutions, the question should be why people have to be persuaded in the first place (and not, as it is so outspokenly said, because ‘common’ people just don’t get it!). Likewise, as Jean Hillier (2003, p.54), following Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2002), suggests, the consecution of rational agreement in the frame of democratic planning decision-making is to be brought out, since, though it might be a bit of a pipe dream, it will always be pertinent and desirable.

Finally, and returning to the general topic of this issue, the *difference*, in the light of the still-in-vogue Western-centric, modernist planning mainstreams, critical-hysterical debates have to underscore is that planning is not a linear, smooth, systematic process, in which all previously stated objectives are easily attained. It is, on the contrary, messy, full of uncertainties and pitfalls, frustrating and exhausting, time-consuming and conflict-ridden—and as such must be recognized and embraced. The *connection*, furthermore, between planning critical-hysterical research and analytical practice (which are actually two sides of the same coin) is the acknowledgment that theorizing, analyzing or practicing planning, as if it were a truism, is not only futile but also boring. It is, then, the challenge of seeing planning as a Derridean ‘aporia of undecidability’¹¹ (Gunder, 2008, p.196)—i.e., as something that, though it may look implausible, may be attainable—what animates incessant efforts to re-think, re-analyze and re-practice, co-constitutively, planning. Chances are that, in time, this *difference* and this *connection* make delusion as revelation to fade away and enable to realize that decision-making consensus is the very fundamental impossibility that underpins an epiphanic co-constitution of planning theory-research-practice as well as a more pragmatic (responding better to regional and local contextual characteristics) and dynamic (avoiding to ‘fix’ socio-spatial reality) imaginations of the future and remembrances of the past.

¹⁰ *Phronesis* ‘can be misapplied when the definition of “good and effective” are themselves ideologically misconstrued via the asymmetrical application of power; or through simply historical contingency that produces our present values towards what is contestably “good”’ (Gunder, 2003b, p.255).

¹¹ Though Derrida’s formulation is ‘undecidability’, it is not entirely clear if this is either a typo or a custom-made variation of the concept.

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