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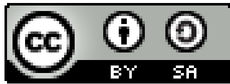
Planning theory



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Planning theories are a prerequisite for intentional actions in planning practice and serve to help the profession understand itself. The planning discipline has developed into a science with relevance for research, doctrine and practice. The teaching of planning theories has become firmly established in the curricula of all planning degrees. Perceptions in planning theory – from the technical drafting of plans to communication strategies in political planning processes – have clearly changed.

1 What is planning theory?

Depending on the epistemological perspective, the concept of planning theory encompasses various requirements. A theory generally develops a system of premises to describe, explain or also forecast a specific aspect of reality with reference to an exemplary representation. To the extent that recommended actions are derived from them, theories form the basis for practice. In the planning discipline, proximity to planning practice combined with a traditionally rather limited interest in theory, as well as the disciplinary diversity of theoretical approaches and the failure to develop its own paradigms have in the past led to it being criticised for eclecticism and for lacking a shared theoretical core. No disciplinary consensus has hitherto been established regarding what planning actually encompasses or the relevant schools of thought. The notion of what falls within the discipline of ▷ *Planning* has not been entirely clarified, as the understanding of the concept significantly depends on the planning theoretical perspective of the observer. Planning theories can work either in an empirical-analytical manner and aim for a better understanding of planning practice (descriptive or explanatory planning theories) or also provide specific guidelines for action as to how planning should take place (normative planning theories). 'Planning theory is […] divided into those who understand planning through analyzing existing practices and those who theorize in an effort to transform planning practices' (Fainstein/DeFilippis 2016: 2). Ultimately, planning practice is often based more on intuition than on explicit theories. 'Yet this intuition may in fact be assimilated theory. In this light, theory represents cumulative professional knowledge' (Fainstein/Campbell 2012: 3). Theories, whether expressed as condensed practice or explicitly formulated as theories, are ultimately the prerequisite for any intentional act of planning in practice. 'There is no planning practice without a theory about how it ought to be practiced. That theory may or may not be named or present in consciousness, but it is there all the same' (Friedmann 2003: 8).

Planning theory is both interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. It draws on theoretical groundwork from entirely different disciplinary contexts. Planning science is thus confronted with an intractable plurality and concurrence of divergent paradigms. Under these circumstances, any attempt to draw up a comprehensive and uniform theory of planning is doomed to fail.

2 Why planning theory?

The theoretical planning approaches that have evolved in recent decades, which have always reflected the zeitgeist of the time and theoretical influences from outside the discipline, have an important function: to allow professionals within the discipline to communicate with each other to arrive at a shared understanding of it. As with any other science, planning science also requires a critical reflection of itself based on theories. However, in German-speaking countries, there has as yet been no comprehensive stocktake of the status quo in planning theoretical discussions, which could serve as the groundwork for further technical discourse. The close relationship between the comparatively young planning science and the political-administrative system of urban and ▷ *Spatial planning (Raumplanung)* makes the need for such self-reflection all the more urgent, as both the science and practice of planning have been under considerable pressure as regards their legitimacy since their inception. 'Planning theory is one of the few means we have at

our disposal to hold us together as a family of practitioners' (Friedmann 2011: 130). At the same time, a practice-oriented theory should make a stronger contribution to resolving problems that occur in practice (Selle 2006).

3 Dimensions of planning theory

Planning theoretical approaches examine three fundamental questions, which closely correlate with the various dimensions of the concept of politics in the political sciences – polity, policy and politics – as well as with the concept of strategy in organisational studies: context, content and process (see Table 1, cf. Wiechmann 2008: 91): Why plan? What is being planned? How is it being planned?

Table 1: Fundamental planning theoretical questions

Question	WHY plan?	WHAT is being planned?	HOW is it being planned?
	Legitimacy of planning	Substance of planning	Rationale for planning
Dimension	Context	Content	Process
	Polity	Policy	Politics
Focus	Planning as a public task	Planning guiding principles and content	Planning as an action system
Themes	Structures, organisations, standards, institutions	Problems, tasks, goals, values, issues	Conflict, consensus, power, instruments, stakeholders

Source: The author

The context addresses the institutional dimension of planning, which is defined by structures, organisations, rules and standards and allows for actions, but also limits the stakeholders' room to manoeuvre. The content dimension reflects the normative substance of planning, where the material content of plans becomes the subject of analysis. It concerns problem-oriented treatment of issues and performance of tasks as well as planning guiding principles and objectives. Finally, the process dimension relates to the procedural course of planning and focuses on the formal and informal processes of developing policies, decision-making and implementation as well as the pursuit of interests through power, conflict and consensus. Similar as the policy cycle of political sciences, planning science frequently describes processes using phase models.

In the same way as content and process are inextricably linked with each other, all planning processes are embedded in specific contexts and can only be interpreted according to the context. Variations in the context or process or shifts over the course of time lead to changed results. The three dimensions should not be understood to mean independent components. It is now accepted that different approaches in urban and spatial planning can only be comprehensively analysed

and explained with consideration of all three dimensions – context, content and process – and their reciprocal effects.

For analytical reasons, to focus the argument and reduce complexities, a concentration in the theoretical discussion of planning on one of these dimensions is useful, as long as the others are taken into account. From the perspective of planning theory, the process dimension plays a very prominent role, as planning includes the conceptual anticipation of a sequence of action steps. At least since the influential publications by Faludi (1969), suggesting a subdivision into procedural 'theories of planning' and substantive 'theories in planning', there has been a widespread search for 'general planning theories' (Selle 2005), which focus on the process of planning detached from specific societal fields of action.

4 Historical roots of planning theory

'The first question of theory is one of identity, which in turn leads to history' (Fainstein/Campbell 2012: 6). The development of planning theory cannot be understood independently from developments in practical planning, as the theory has always defined itself also through a detailed analysis of the practice and the value of the insights gained from that for practical purposes.

The history of modern urban and spatial planning as a public task starts in the second half of the 19th century with the attempts by far-sighted urban planners to overcome the consequences of industrialisation, i.e. unhygienic housing and the social deficits during the Wilhelminian period in Germany. However, in this phase of 'adjustment planning' (Albers 1992), spatial development was deemed to be neither predictable nor controllable. Planning was limited to 'regulatory efforts' (Düwel/Gutschow 2001: 37), to preventing hazards, resolving specific deficiencies and taking measures to improve hygiene in the urban environment (▷ *History of spatial planning (Raumordnung)*; ▷ *History of urban planning*). Planning expectations remained modest: 'The 19th century revolution town is an example of piecemeal (and bad) planning' (Keeble 1969: 1).

In the subsequent phase of 'containment planning' in the first half of the 20th century, there was already a forward-looking steering approach. 'Planning emerged as the 20th-century response to the 19th century industrial city' (Fainstein/Campbell 2012: 6; cf. Hall 2002). A rational, scientific approach to state planning was viewed as a means to select the best available option to achieve a set objective. In the divergent political systems of that epoch, planning was held to be a technical tool, although this view was not explicitly formulated as planning theory. Patrick Geddes's (1915) planning strategy, based on the dictum 'survey before plan', represented a milestone and had a significant impact on planning in the 20th century. Based on a systematic and holistic understanding of urban regions, Geddes advocated the idea of influencing social processes by shaping the spatial environment At the same time, he was the first to introduce a sociological approach to ▷ *Urban planning*. Yet the myth of the rationalist approach to planning, the 'God the Father' model of planning, remained the actual core of how planners perceived their function for quite some time. In this connection, Siebel (2006) pointed to the continuity of authoritarian planning: planning was understood to be a sovereign act to reduce complexity across all systems. Order in society was to be created through an orderly regulation of space. Criticism of these totalitarian attempts at creating order, which were expressed early on by e.g. Karl Popper (1945) or Friedrich von Hayek (1945), was only absorbed into urban and spatial planning much later.

The arrival of the (explicit) planning theory can be dated to the middle of the 20th century in the immediate post-war period. In autumn 1947, the first social-sciences based planning faculty independent from architecture was established at the University of Chicago. One year later, while a Masters student, John Friedmann took part in a seminar convened by the young political scientist Edward Banfield, which he described retrospectively as the 'the first ever seminar in planning theory' (Friedmann 1998: 245). The planning model developed here envisaged that planning bodies acting rationally would translate political goals into an effective plan, which would subsequently be implemented by the public administration: 'Planning is designing a course of action to achieve ends' (Meyerson/Banfield 1955: 314). However, the famous case study on public housing in Chicago conducted from 1949 to 1952 by Meyerson and Banfield impressively demonstrated that the rationalist planning model, described comprehensively for the first time at the Chicago School, was naive and grossly simplifying, while planning practice was consistently political. 'Our standard of good planning – rational decision-making – is an ideal one; the standard is, we think, useful for analysis, but real organizations (like real people), if the truth is told, do not make decisions in a substantially rational manner' (Meyerson/Banfield 1955: 15).

Even though the Chicago School closed again in 1955 for cost reasons, its orientation was groundbreaking for the establishment of an explicit planning theory. It made it possible to critically reflect on planning practice and was at the same time in line with decision theory concepts in the social sciences from Manheim to Simon, from von Hayek and Lindblom to Dewey. Faludi (1987: 27) believed that the impact of the Chicago School on planning theory could not be overstated. He called it the 'mainspring of modern planning thought'.

In Europe, independent planning faculties were established only in the heyday of planning euphoria in the mid-1960s. At the same time, a planning theoretical discussion evolved (cf. Luhmann 1966; Albers 1969; Faludi 1969). Prior to that time, planning theory was often understood to be merely a component of engineering planning, focusing on practical problems and dealing with methodological and procedural issues. 'The planning tradition itself has generally been "trapped" inside a modernist instrumental rationalism for many years' (Healey 1997: 7). Controversial debates on the relationship between planning and policy, on the understanding of planning values and on the legitimacy of planning concepts arose only in the pioneering spirit of the late 1960s (Fürst 2004: 240).

The early works of Faludi (1969) proved to be particularly influential for the European debate. His procedural theory of planning, decisively influenced by Popper, followed the ideal of rational planning. He established the need for a theory of planning both with the necessary underpinnings of the profession and distinct from other disciplines, which became necessary after the launch of degree courses in planning. When the planning euphoria quickly died down in the mid-1970s, the first phase of planning theoretical discussions also ended abruptly.

5 Trajectories in the development of planning theory

In the half-century since its inception, such a diversity of theoretical approaches to planning has developed that maintaining a handle on them all is a challenge in itself. The individual trajectories of planning theory which have developed have few overlaps and follow conflicting rationalities, even though it is specifically this presumption of a particular rationality, which distinguishes

planning from other forms of social action. According to Siebel (2006), planning must be able to accommodate contradictions between the various rationalities and to manoeuvre among these conflicting debates. The ‘actual rationality of planning lies in its ability to navigate between conflicting functions and to remain suspended within the charged field of different rationalities’ (Siebel 2006: 209).

In seeking to identify the genuine territory of planning theory, all attempts to codify and establish limits to the field of planning theory are essentially doomed from the outset (Fürst 2004: 239). ‘No two of us could agree on the nature of the beast we wanted to theorize […] We were riding off on different horses, each galloping into the sunset in a different direction’ (Friedmann 1998: 246). Nevertheless, with some fairly extensive simplification, broad trajectories of development and varying currents over time can be discerned in planning theoretical perceptions.

5.1 1950s to 1970s

In line with the rationalist planning model, into the 1960s the widespread notion was that modern planning was a powerful tool to prepare decision-making, which helped to steer complex social processes in the most rational manner possible. From a theoretical perspective, rationalist planning theory still retains its value today, as it focuses attention on the divergences from a postulated ideal of rationality on the part of an informed planner seeking to optimise utility, and thus allows for an analysis of these differences. However, this proclaimed rationality must not be misconstrued as a description of behaviour. It rather represents an ideal, which is not achieved in reality by either individuals or organisations. According to Faludi (1986), it is rather a ‘methodological principle’ that offers a benchmark for evaluating decisions.

Nevertheless, since its inception rationalist planning theory has been contentious as an ‘unrealistic concept’ (Selle 2005: 65), which could not be realised either theoretically or in practice. Already in the 1950s, Lindblom (1959) formulated an alternative planning model, for which he relied on Popper’s critique of holistic system planning. Instead of futile attempts to achieve major improvements through big plans and central steering, fragmented incrementalism strives for gradual but steady improvements through a decentralised social process (▷ *Incrementalism/ perspective incrementalism*). Planning bodies concentrate on a limited number of alternatives for action and the supposedly important consequences of those actions, and accept that they may also exclude other significant consequences. Compared to the rationalist planning model, this is associated with a drastic reduction in the requirements for planning bodies. Consequently, expectations regarding the results of planning decisions and acts must be reduced and the pretence of providing a final solution to a problem must be relinquished. A single, big bite is replaced by steady nibbling (Lindblom 1968: 25).

Fragmented incrementalism has frequently been the subject of sweeping criticism in the academic literature in planning science. In so doing, many critics reduced the approach to a directionless ‘muddling through’ without any strategic component. To characterise it in this way, as suggested by the title of Lindblom’s best known article, ‘The Science of “Muddling Through”’, is however, incorrect. Lindblom describes many aspects of political decision-making more realistically than the approaches of the rationalist planning model allow for. Nevertheless, he provides almost no indication of how abandoning the formulation of long-term goals and incremental improvement could lead to collectively desirable results.

The dispute between rationalists and incrementalists in the early phase of planning theory led to repeated attempts to find a middle ground between the closed model of synoptic development planning and the open model of the piecemeal technique. One of the most prominent examples is the concept of ‘mixed scanning’ by Etzioni (1967) and the ‘strategic choice approach’ (Friend/Jessop 1969; Friend/Hickling 1987).

5.2 1980s to 2000s

Since the 1970s, a fundamental change in planning theory has occurred. Planning theoretical studies in the 1980s and 1990s, in particular, emphasised the reflective and communicative character of planning. Representatives of planning theory, such as Schön (1983), Forester (1989), Innes (1995) and Healey (1997), saw the focus of planning as no longer being on technical rationality but on the function of planning as a communicative action and learning tool. The key focus was no longer on control, but on generating actions and innovations (Friedmann 2003: 8).

The ‘communicative turn in planning theory’ (Healey 1992) is based to a considerable extent on the concepts of communicative rationality of Habermas. It raises the question of normative principles of how strategic consensus building can succeed in fragmented communities. In this view, planning is meant to become more democratic through the power of the better argument in non-hierarchical negotiations; planning bodies themselves should facilitate communication processes. Communicative planning approaches were criticised for their lacking basic legitimacy and limited conflict resolution capacity as well as for their dominant prescriptive nature. The reality of planning, on the other hand, was said to be far removed from the normative ideals of non-hierarchical communication (cf. Selle 2004; Allmendinger 2009).

Later approaches to communicative planning are therefore rather based on the work of the French philosopher Foucault, who assumed that power is inherent in all discourses and is manifested and reproduced through it. Accordingly, the knowledge and solutions that arise through discourse are determined by power relations. In a much discussed case study on the Aalborg project, Flyvbjerg (1998) also offered empirical proof that in reality, planning processes are influenced much more by the ‘rationality of power’ than by the ‘power of rationality’.

The debate on planning in the US has critically grappled with the tension between ideal and reality in planning practice in the course of the ‘argumentative turn’ (Fischer/Forester 1993). In the tradition of pragmatic planning theory, the reality created by action is afforded a factual claim of validity. It is built on the philosophical current of pragmatism, which is widespread in Northern America, and emphasises the equal status of knowledge and practice (Dewey 1925). After the failure of most approaches to planning theory, pragmatic planning was understood as an anti-theoretical ‘getting things done’ approach, where theory and practice do not exist in separate spheres but instead develop together (Healy 2008). Forester (1989) focuses his interest on thematising power in planning processes. In ‘Critical Pragmatism’ (Forester 1993), he critically examines the political role of planning bodies and obstacles to planning in the real world. The core idea of this approach is to perceive planning as the restructuring of the communication between stakeholders with diverging and conflicting interests and significant inequalities in power and influence. In this model, planners are not perceived as superior decision-makers by virtue of their technical expertise or as neutral moderators, but instead as pragmatic specialists, who support inclusive and participatory forms of collective action.

Planning theory benefitted from important impulses in the 1990s through various theories of neo-institutionalism and research on governance. From a social sciences perspective, neo-institutionalism amounts to a countermovement to the approaches of conventional behaviourist theory and the notion of rational choice. In addition to formal institutions, it examines informal rules and further principles of organisation to better reflect reality. The 'institutional analysis and development framework' of Ostrom (1990) and the 'stakeholder-centric institutionalism' approach based on Mayntz and Scharpf (1995) found particularly wide support in planning science.

The governance perspective highlights the significance of collective action. However, the notion of governance is not linked to a specific theory; instead, a number of theoretical references – such as system theory, game theory, economic and sociological institution theories, urban regime theory or network theories – offer fruitful points of connection (▷ *Governance*; ▷ *Networks, social and organisational*; ▷ *Cooperative planning*). Unlike the classic approaches of control theory in the political sciences, which pursue a primarily stakeholder-oriented approach, the approaches of governance theory follow a more institutionalist perspective (Mayntz 2004). It examines intermediary regulatory structures, i.e. the institutional framework, which steers the actions of stakeholders in the state, in economy and in civil society. The stakeholders simultaneously constitute the regulatory structures and are steered by them. Benz and Fürst (2003: 12) use the general term *regional governance* to 'describe a complex steering structure in regions'. At its core is the coordination of collective action on a regional level.

5.3 New approaches

Since the 1990s, the need for a methodical, integrated approach in planning practice has been revisited. The evident disadvantages of project-oriented planning led in both Anglo-Saxon-inspired international planning research and in German-language planning studies to a debate about the renaissance of strategic planning (Healey/Khakee/Motte et al. 1997; Salet/Faludi 2000; Wiechmann 2008). The 'turn to strategy' (Healey 2007: 183) should be seen as a response to the deficits in incremental planning through projects (▷ *Strategic planning*). Theoretically and conceptually oriented studies on strategic planning as well as empirical studies focus on how capable strategies lead to a more effective planning practice. The studies differ in their understanding of strategic planning depending on the planning context, theoretical points of reference and intended insights. With reference to the approaches of management theory, strategy is understood to include emerging strategies (Wiechmann 2008). It is no longer a matter of merely using the necessary means to achieve a goal. Instead, strategies can emerge even without a plan from everyday action routines and spontaneous decisions. In addition to formal planning, there are several other options for developing a strategy.

The European debate about 'strategic spatial planning' (Albrechts/Balducci 2013) differs from the American debate about 'strategic planning' (Bryson 2004) in particular in that in Europe, strategic planning is discussed as an integrative, development-oriented form of planning, while in the US it is understood as a planning-based development of strategy to bring about fundamental decisions based on the notion of corporate planning.

Another strand of approaches to planning theory has been established through research into planning culture, which looks at the cultural embedding and dependencies of planning practices (Othengrafen/Reimer 2013). ▷ *Planning culture* in this regard refers to the spatiotemporally

dependent, site-specific understanding of planning and the related formal and informal planning routines (▷ *Informal planning*). It addresses how exactly the various stakeholders see their roles and functions, how they perceive problems and deal with them and in so doing apply certain rules, processes and instruments. These approaches build on the ‘cultural turn’ in the social sciences and attempt to explain the broad variation in planning practices across the globe. Criticism of research on planning culture is largely focused on the vagueness of the notion of culture. Fürst (2007) speaks of a ‘slippery concept’, unsuitable for empirical work because it takes too many variables and mutual interdependencies into account in order to validly determine causal links and correlations.

With their focus on cultural phenomena, elements of the research on planning culture adhere to the tradition of structuralism. Others follow more distinctly praxeological approaches. This is in contrast with more recent approaches to planning theory, which see themselves in the tradition of French post-structuralism. Gunder (2011), for example, draws on Foucault, Derrida and Lacan, while Hillier (2008) makes express reference to Deleuze and Guattari. Post-structuralist planning theory rather follows theories that are critical of planning, such as incrementalism and pragmatism. ‘So while post-structuralist approaches are part of the contemporary face of planning theory, they actually echo more traditional concerns with “non-planning”’ (Allmendinger 2009: 189).

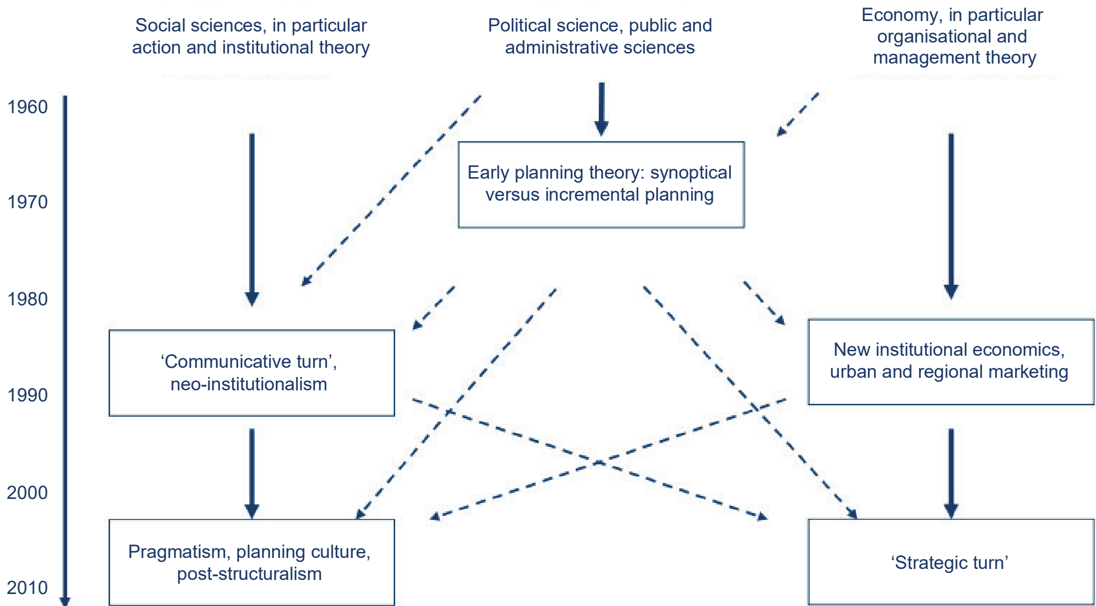
Poststructuralist planning theory assumes, like pragmatism, that power is pervasive in communication. Language creates identification and views about society in general and planning in particular. ‘We act as planners in and through language’ (Gunder 2011: 201). Planning communicated through language seeks to order reality: ‘Ideas in planning, such as the role of green belts, can and do have a powerful permanence outside of formal planning policy or plans’ (Allmendinger 2009: 189). In post-structuralism, ‘master signifiers’, such as green belts, are understood as the simplified ordering of knowledge into a single term. Yet language is deemed to be incomplete. Symbolic anchor points for group identities with a vague core meaning at best are termed ‘empty signifiers’ according to Laclau and Mouffe (2001). Gunder and Hillier (2009) consider planning itself to be such an empty signifier. The same is held to apply to key planning terms such as ▷ *Sustainability*, rationality and responsibility. The subconscious and the impossibility of ascribing unambiguous meanings, as well as the blurring of categories such as human/non-human, are important elements of post-structuralist thought. The capacity to act is perceived as a relational effect of those acting within networks, and power itself as a relational process. Ultimately, the goal of these approaches to planning theory is to understand the deeper, underlying reasons and forces for the emergence of planning practices (Balducci/Boelens/Hillier et al. 2011: 487).

5.4 Limits of systematisation

As indicated above, this outline of the various schools of thought in planning theory is perforce a rough simplification and is thus by no means exhaustive. For example, it omits any discussion of Marxist planning, ‘advocacy planning’, system-theoretical approaches or ‘evidence-based planning’. However, in the final instance, even comprehensive treatments of the topic, such as those by Friedman (1987) from an American perspective or Allmendinger (2009) from a UK perspective, do not provide an exhaustive overview. All attempts to systematically classify planning theories necessarily emphasise certain elements as structurally defining aspects. The goal of the

explanations in this article was to outline the most influential trajectories in the development of planning theoretical perceptions from the perspective of German planning science with the necessary brevity. Figure 1 presents a schematic overview of these trajectories.

Figure 1: Trajectories in the development of planning theory



Source: The author

6 Changing perceptions in planning theory

Giving a brief overview of the various perceptions within planning theory is like an attempt to precisely describe a diffusely sprawling mosaic, composed of countless individual elements without any evident pattern in a few words over the telephone. One look at the readers on planning theory reveals that even half a century after the establishment of independent planning faculties, there is as yet no established canon of academic literature on the subject. Of the texts in Faludi's *Reader in Planning Theory*, published in 1973, only two (Davidoff 1965; Lindblom 1959) were included in the standard work *Readings in Planning Theory*, first published by Campbell und Fainstein in 1996. The most recent three editions of this reader (Fainstein/Campbell 2003, 2012; Fainstein/DeFilippis 2016) include a total of 62 original texts, of which only six were consistently included in all three editions.

Nevertheless, there has unmistakably been a general shift in planning theoretical perceptions. Following Friedmann (2011), Fainstein and Campbell (2012) as well as Fürst (2005), four 'big shifts in planning theory' can be identified, irrespective of the individual theoretical approaches:

- from the administrative-technical task of drawing up plans to a task for society as a whole,
- from an overly scientific search for optimal solutions to collective learning processes,

- from an interventionist presumption of control to communicative action and
- from planning bodies as vicarious agents to politically engaged stakeholders in the planning process.

This changing approach should not belie the fact that the field of planning theory is still very heterogeneous and fragmented. ‘Planning theory, like planning practice, is an eclectic or, to put it more elegantly, an interdisciplinary, even transdisciplinary field’ (Friedmann 2011: 222). It remains the task of future generations of planning scholars to advance an independent paradigmatisation of planning science as a university discipline and to juxtapose the diversity of theoretical reference points with a common base of conceptual approaches and theoretical schools of thought, and all of this in the face of the proximity to planning practice.

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