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45 Social criteria in planning marginal regions

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In this paper I do not intend to list the social criteria that may be relevant for planning marginal regions, though I shall obviously be referring to some of them by way of illustration. My intention is rather to consider some of the problems that are involved in their use. For it is generally accepted that social criteria should be taken into account in planning policy. The extension of planning from its traditional and restricted concern with land use so as to include social questions has resulted in part from the recognition over the last decade or two that planning has not always brought the social benefits to which it has so long laid claim. This movement has been encouraged by the *crise de conscience* which unsettled the planning profession during the sixties and by the growing interest which younger planners especially have shown in sociology. The importance of social criteria is particularly clear in relation to marginal regions. A Treasury working-party only last year reaffirmed the point that it was "mainly on social (rather than on economic) grounds" that efforts to prevent rural depopulation had to be justified (HM Treasury, 1976).

Yet in spite of all this, what exactly social criteria are and how they can be incorporated into planning policy remains, I suspect, rather ambiguous and obscure. Sociologists might have been expected to have thrown some light on this question. But regrettably, with only a few exceptions, sociologists have tended increasingly to indulge themselves in the uncritical fulminations required by a 'critical sociology' which has led them to scorn contributing to the formulation (as distinct from the criticism) of policy for deadly fear of appearing to be endorsing the *status quo*. Yet it is from sociology that an analysis of social criteria needs to draw if the ambiguity about them and their use is to be dispelled.

The first problem which we face is that the concept 'social' is notoriously, but unnecessarily vacuous. It has usually been used either in a far too general or in a residual sense, neither of which makes for precision or clarity of definition. It is, for example, sometimes suggested that all planning is social since 'in the end' (whatever that means) it aims to promote social well-being. As Eversley has noted, the concept 'social planning' for example, has been "stretched so widely as to comprehend by now all the field of governmental activity" (Eversley & Moody, 1976). In that case, if social includes everything, then it means nothing specific. As a residual concept, social means anything that is not something else, such as land use or economics. It was in that sense that social studies departments in universities or social development departments in new town corporations often made use of the term when the criteria that defined a distinctive sphere of social analysis and policy were unclear.

We shall be helped in clarifying the concept of social criteria by considering briefly how two major Continental scholars grappled with the question when, at the turn of the century, they were trying to define the subject-matter of sociology. Two lines of argument can be discerned. From French positivism, and especially the seminal work of Durkheim (1950) on methodology, we can draw the idea that the concept 'social' refers to institutions, that is to say to those relatively stable patterns of relationships, such as occupations, social classes, generations, households, which constrain individuals, whether they wish to be constrained or not, to conduct themselves as members of those institutions in a regular and determinate fashion. From German idealism, notably expressed by Weber (1947), we can derive the additional idea that relationships are 'social' when they invoke and rest upon shared meanings among those who participate in those relationships. That is what is usually implied in the term 'a way of life', which I shall shortly consider. But the concept 'social' has also come to be ascribed to those policies of a nation-state which are justified not primarily on grounds of economic cost-effectiveness, but out of a concern for what it is regarded as appropriate to contribute for the welfare of its citizens who are considered as having a right to such support in virtue of their citizenship. To invoke social criteria in policy-making, accordingly, means considering how social institutions and patterns of meaning affect policy and how policy affects them, taking account of what provisions can be justified, over and above direct economic considerations, by a concern for the welfare of the citizen.

Given his interest in such matters, it is understandable that the social planner should sometimes be expected simply to represent the interests of those whom planning is likely to harm. In particular, in relation to rural development he is often expected to be an advocate, defending what is described as a 'way of life' against change or encroachment. But while the social planner cannot avoid at least

implicitly advocating something, his advocacy in my opinion ought to be based, as sometimes it is not, upon a careful analysis of specific circumstances which may, for example, lead him to the view that the way of life of a given community may not be damaged as easily as its more apprehensive members may think. For one of the major problems in using social criteria in planning, as it is in the practice of sociology itself, is that the same concepts may be employed, though in somewhat different ways, both by the people themselves and by the social analyst who studies them.

A distinction can therefore be made between the analytical and the ideological use of social criteria. To use such criteria ideologically is to use them simply as political tools, regardless of their validity. This usage is often justified by those who rightly regard planning as having to do with value-judgements and as therefore being in some degree a question of political choice, but who then go on to the *non sequitur* of a conclusion that planning is nothing but political judgement. This inevitably leads sociologists of this persuasion to ignore the necessity of testing what they are advocating with precise conceptual analysis and with detailed reference to the facts of the case.

The concept of a way of life is sometimes used as a defence of existing interests against the innovation that may be required by rural development policy. In recent years, for example, a great deal of anxiety has been expressed that oil-related developments, and particularly the construction of an oil-terminal at Sullom Voe, would irrevocably damage the Shetland way of life. That feeling has underlain some of the local resistance to development and no doubt helped the County Council in promoting the Shetland Act of 1974 which gave Shetland a share in the oil companies' revenues. There can be no doubt that Shetland does have a strong sense of its distinctive identity and that anxiety about the effect of the oil industry on the community is justified. But there is obviously a strong political motive for exaggerating the danger to this way of life; and it is therefore particularly important that the social analyst who makes use of the term in evaluating policies should be especially concerned with the question of its validity.

In reviewing the sociological analysis which had been incorporated into a draft of the Shetland development plan a few years ago, it seemed to me that the sociologists had, so to speak, scooped up the idea of a Shetland way of life off the streets of Lerwick and included it without further analysis or appraisal in the plan itself. It was being used, though I do not think they realised it, in a distinctly Hegelian manner. For the Shetland way of life was presented as being a totally unique *Volksgeist* which alone gave meaning and coherence to the particular, detailed features of that community. This spirit seemed to be regarded as hovering over Shetland like a balloon, so fragile that it was likely to burst at the first gush of oil into Sullom Voe. The Shetland way of life, it was suggested, had been static

and unchanging for centuries until now, and it was something in which every Shetlander totally and unequivocally participated.

All these beliefs seem to me to be exaggerated. They derive not so much from empirical evidence as from the way in which the concept of 'a way of life' is defined. For if it is conceived primarily as being embodied in a distinctive set of values and beliefs, sharply differentiated from the materialistic spirit which is alleged to characterise the British mainland, then it is almost inevitable that it will seem to be fragile and evanescent. But beliefs, values and a sense of identity are not held in isolation. They are related to economic and social structures like agrarian organisation, patterns of land-tenure and technology which are also part of a community's way of life and which are much more substantial, tangible and durable than a focus on the cultural aspects alone would lead one to expect. In much the same way, the supposition that a way of life has been virtually unchanging and is shared by all the members of the society exaggerates the degree of consensus and ignores structural factors, such as differences in generational attitudes and economic interests which tend to divide rather than unify a society. Thus while the way in which the idea of a way of life was used may well have accurately reflected the local people's ideas and anxieties, it was nevertheless poor sociology. As such, it functioned as an ideology of conservatism, justified by the opposition which it engendered to the oil developments that were taking place.

The social planner, accordingly, in introducing social criteria into thinking about policy ought to ensure that his analysis is conceptually sound and empirically valid. This is not by any means to deny that a community's way of life may be severely damaged by planning policies; still less is it to endorse the view expressed by the former chairman of the Highlands and Islands Development Board that adaptation to 'the realities of modern life' is a self-evidently desirable criterion for evaluating rural development policy. It is simply to note that empirical evidence is needed to test the implications of development policies and to counter the naiveties of self-interested ideological reactions. Sometimes, of course, analysis may fully justify opposition to a given development. At the Drumbuie inquiry, for example, I argued that a community might well have to accept some social disturbance if long-term social and economic benefits were to be secured. But in that particular case it seemed to me that the proposed development would cause substantial social and economic dislocation to communities in the Kyle peninsula, without any compensating long-term advantages and the project could therefore be described as exploitative (Broady, 1975). In Mid-Wales, on the other hand, I consider that the construction of an enlarged Craig Goch reservoir, while it will cause some disturbance of which the local people are fully aware, will nevertheless bring more benefits than losses in the short-run and will have long-term advantages which make it socially acceptable despite the disturbance (Broady et al, 1975).

While the appeal to facts, then, is essential in applying social criteria to policy formulation, it is also necessary to note that sound theory, which suggests how the facts may be linked together, is no less important. Indeed, the technical business of collecting evidence, which so often appears to the empirical British mind as the most important stage of an inquiry, is derivative from and subservient to the more analytical judgements that begin and end social investigations: at the start, the assessment of the policy options available which the inquiry will seek to evaluate, and at the end, the appraisal of the factual evidence in the light of other material, often documentary or theoretical, so as to produce a set of considered conclusions. In the Craig Goch inquiry, for example, into the social implications of constructing a huge new reservoir, perhaps the single most important step was to conceive the modest theoretical proposition which guided and gave coherence to the analysis. This suggested that the crucial variable was the provenance of the labour-force and that there might be a definite relationship between that factor and the probable consequences for the local economy on the one hand and the social structure and social services on the other. If labour were locally recruited, this would probably have a more damaging effect upon the local economy than on the social system, since workers would be drained off existing employment but would still be living in their own communities. Conversely, incoming workers would probably damage the economy less but would be more likely to disrupt local communities and place new demands upon the public services.

Nor should we fall into the trap of supposing that, where social criteria are concerned, only quantitative data are useful or objective. Certainly such data are needed and the development of quantitative social analysis should be encouraged, though not to the point, as seems to be becoming the case with social indicators, where this becomes a self-justifying industry of its own, less and less relevant to policy formulation. There is also a further danger, an example of which can be seen when complex statistical techniques, like component and cluster analyses, are applied to the study of urban areas. For the quantitative refinement of these methods is, in my judgement, frequently invalidated by the uncritical use of enumeration districts which, defined for the convenience of the census administration, often cut across real and obvious social divisions.

Quantification, as Self (1975) has pointed out in regard to cost-benefit analysis, can produce 'nonsense on stilts' by trying to get inappropriate and far too simplified answers to what are really complex qualitative value-judgements. The point is also emphasised in the recent report on environmental impact analysis, that even physical effects often cannot be quantified and that for many environmental changes "the state of knowledge and the techniques will often permit only a qualitative assessment although such an assessment may sometimes be accompanied by numerical explanations" (Catlow & Thirlwall, 1976). Nor is this as damaging as

those suppose who regard quantification as the mark of science and science as the only valid form of knowledge. For it is far too easy to forget that science is only one form of rationality among many and that sociologists, like lawyers, and historians, who deal with verbal or documentary material whose content cannot be quantified without distorting or misunderstanding it, still make use of rational criteria for assessing the relative validity of evidence, propositions, theories and policy conclusions even though the conclusive proof of quantifiable experiment may not be possible.

Following from that distinction between quantitative and qualitative appraisal, we must differentiate finally between techniques and procedures in the armoury of planning methods. A technique is an objective method of establishing evidence or reaching a conclusion. By 'objective' we often think we mean foolproof, or finally valid, but the term also means that, in using a method thus described, nobody answers back. But in planning and in implementing policies dialogue is also required. And the essence of a procedure—as in a parliamentary procedure, for example—is precisely that there is a dialogue, a political process that seeks to fashion collaboration out of potential conflict. In devising and implementing policies, the procedures, the ways of bringing together divergent interests are of considerable social importance.

Upland areas are mainly in economically marginal regions in which the continuing and selective outflow of people leaves behind an increasingly aged population. This increases the propensity to rural conservatism in such areas which can seriously inhibit the development of new policy initiatives. In Mid-Wales, to take one example, Garbett-Edwards (1972) has noted that the small rural local authority often "has difficulty in bringing to future planning the objectivity and resolve which is necessary. Future planning tends to succumb to present interests." In similar vein and the same context, Jones (1972) has commented upon "the reluctance of the farm population to change its way of life, however clear the economic case for so doing." The Hunt Committee (1969) also recognised "the difficulties, attitudinal as well as organisational, which can impede the process of adaptation" from one economic activity to another and stated that too little was known about those factors that were important in "creating an environment sympathetic to innovation." One of the major social problems in the development of rural areas, therefore, is how to secure change, and this is not so much a technical as a procedural or organisational question.

There are now many instances of effective innovation in marginal areas which need to be analysed in order to clarify those factors. We in Swansea, for example, are preparing a study of the Mid-Wales Industrial Development Association, which successfully promoted the growth of small industries in the region and, on a financial shoe-string, instigated the thinking that has recently culminated in the

establishment of the Development Board for Rural Wales. The Rural Housing Organisation which Bohan (1973) has set up in Shannon is another extremely interesting example of an important and successful rural initiative of which the first research report has recently appeared (Callanan, 1976).

The ambiguity which sometimes appears to enshroud the concept of social criteria can, therefore, be dispelled. To do so, however, requires clarity about what kind of criteria are to be considered under the term 'social'. We need clear theoretical arguments and sound empirical data and the ability to stitch theory and fact, theory and practice together. This is probably best engendered by direct participation in planning projects. But finally, while we need to quantify our answers as far as we can, we should not allow our concern for techniques to deflect attention from the procedures, the modes of organisation that have to be devised if policies are to be effectively introduced in areas which, precisely because they are marginal, are likely to be particularly resistant to change.

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