Planners' Alchemy Transforming NIMBY to YIMBY: Rethinking NIMBY

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RETHINKING NIMBY

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Local opposition and protest have halted the siting of LULUs -- locally unwanted land uses -- not only throughout the United States but throughout the industrialized world (Popper 1987). The examples are virtually endless. In January 1988, authorities in the then-Soviet Union abandoned construction of a new nuclear power generator near the city of Krasnodar following an outpouring of what was described as "bitter opposition" by local residents in the aftermath of the Chernobyl accident (Keller 1988). Continuing what is said to be the world's longest-running anti-nuclear protest, residents of the Swedish village of Kynnefjäll are maintaining a twenty-four-hour-a-day vigil begun in April 1980 to block access to test drilling sites for storage of high-level radioactive waste proposed by SKB, the Swedish Nuclear Fuel and Waste Management Company (Åhäll et al 1988; Lidskog and Elander 1991). Protestors in northern Minnesota reportedly dropped explosives into test wells to disrupt the Minnesota Waste Management Board's search for a hazardous waste disposal site (Gendler 1984). In response to growing public opposition, Texas, the largest producer of hazardous wastes in the United States, declared a moratorium last year on permitting new or expanded waste treatment facilities (Schneider 1991). New York State's Office of Mental Retardation and Office of Mental Health have encountered intense local opposition to their attempts to site group homes for nearly 30,000 disabled individuals (May 1986). New York City recently bowed to intense public protest and shelved plans to site 24 homeless shelters under its newly-adopted -- and award-winning -- "fair share" formula for distributing facilities across city neighborhoods (Roberts 1991; Purdum 1991; Gallagher 1992).

Public opposition to unwanted facilities is conventionally ascribed to the NIMBY -- not-in-my-backyard -- syndrome. In the NIMBY framework, selfish parochialism generates locational conflict that prevents attainment of societal goals. NIMBYism is blamed for virtually all of our failures to solve pressing social problems. Our inability to eliminate environmental degradation, transportation congestion, homelessness, crime, and poverty is ascribed to NIMBY. We could make giant strides in all of these areas, it is claimed, if local communities would only abandon their selfish opposition to the waste incinerators, transit systems, housing projects, prisons, shelters, and clinics society needs to solve these pressing problems. Faced with seemingly intractable problems, we indict NIMBYism as the villain.

My purpose in this paper is to reconsider NIMBYism. The NIMBY characterization is built on two inherent premises: first, that facilities are needed to provide an important social benefit; and, second, that selfish local parochialism prevents realization of that societal good. I wish to examine both of these premises and, in so doing, to call them seriously into question. In place of this conventional view, I argue that such facilities are needed not by society but rather by capital, and by a state striving to reproduce the capital-labor relationship. I argue further that the local protectionism characterized as NIMBY represents a barrier not to societal goals but to the goals of capital.

I then wish to trace several implications of this reformulation. If NIMBYism represents opposition not to societal goals but to the interests of capital, then as an expression of place-specific interests, NIMBYism reflects the role of place in the mobilization and empowerment of community resistance against the interests of capital. Such resistance encounters a formidable barrier in the state's caricature of NIMBY as irrational and reactionary, a characterization that places the onus for policy failure entirely on selfish local communities, obfuscates the interests of capital, and deflects attention away from the fundamental causes of societal problems. In various policy arenas, however, the obduracy and proliferation of community opposition causes a crisis of legitimation that is forcing the state to redirect the costs of policy intervention away from communities and back onto capital -- that is, away from the siting of unwanted facilities and towards more fundamental solutions requiring concessions from capital. A final implication of this reconceptualization addresses the role of the analyst in these political debates. Analysis that uncritically accepts the denigration of NIMBY as selfish parochial obstructionism rests at the level of appearances, contributes to obfuscation, and may undermine community empowerment.

The Conventional View

The conventional view of NIMBY assumes that LULUs are locally unwanted facilities that are nonetheless essential to achieve a societal benefit and realize the public good. Waste incinerators are necessary to protect health and safety and avoid the environmental damage caused by illegal dumping. Shelters are essential to move homeless people off the streets. New prisons are needed to provide prompt disposition of criminally deviant behavior.

The assumption that LULUs provide societal benefit by fulfilling a societal need is uncritically accepted by most observers. Brion (1991: xii) prefaces his analysis of the NIMBY phenomenon with the claim that "agreement is general that we -- as society generally or as a more local community -- derive a strong overall benefit from these facilities." O'Hare, Bacow and Sanderson (1983: 1) described the "siting problem" over facilities that "are generally thought essential to society." Not only are such facilities

indispensable, but our failure to site them "will result in large and certain damage to public economic and physical health" (O'Hare, Bacow and Sanderson 1983: 1). In the view of Mazmanian and Morell (1990: 126), "society pays a high price for such local vetos."

Following from the assumption that unwanted facilities fulfill a societal need is the closely related assumption that, by opposing such facilities, local interests stand in conflict with societal interests. Debate over LULUs invariably contrasts local concerns over health risks, economic loss, and protection of neighborhood ambiance and community status against the benefits to society said to emanate from the facility (Morell 1987). This conceptualization, positing the terms of conflict as between local interests and societal interests -- or between community and society -- has its parallels in numerous related formulations. It underlies analyses that posit the LULU problem in terms of the inequity inherent in the geographic discrepancy between locally-concentrated costs and dispersed societal benefits (Morell and Magorian 1982; Kasperson 1983). The same assumption is made in Brion's (1991: xv) contrast between "society's drive to achieve material progress" versus protecting the integrity of local communities; in Sidney Plotkin's (1987) contrasting of "expansion" and "exclusion;" and in the apparent and often-noted conflict between economic growth and environmental protection.

NIMBY Reconsidered

These twin assumptions -- of societal need and community-society conflict -- obfuscate the essential character of LULUs. Rather than necessarily and inherently fulfilling a societal need, LULUs represent a particular solution to a problem. Siting hazardous waste incinerators, for example, constitutes a locational solution to an industrial production problem (hazardous waste generation). But the incinerator siting solution is only one of a number of possible strategies for hazardous waste management. The facility siting strategy concentrates costs on host communities, as compared to the alternative strategy of restructuring production so as to produce less waste, which concentrates costs on capital. Locating homeless shelters similarly concentrates costs on host communities, relative to an alternative strategy that seeks to alleviate joblessness and reduce the incidence of poverty through capital restructuring.

In each case, the facility siting solution constitutes a form of state intervention to alleviate economic crisis, where the mode of state intervention is constrained by the relationship of the state to capital. Elsewhere (Lake and Disch 1992), following the state derivationist theory of Offe (1984) and Hirsh (1981; see also Carnoy 1984), I have argued that facility siting constitutes a state political-administrative response to economic crisis that minimizes the costs to capital and concentrates costs on communities.

In short, rather than representing inherent *societal* need, LULUs constitute structurally constrained political solutions to economic problems that privilege the needs of *capital.* It follows, then, that rather than reflecting conflict between community and society, local opposition to LULUs expresses conflict between community and capital, and between community and the state constrained in its intervention by the capital-state relationship.

NIMBYism is hardly a new phenomenon. In an account of locational conflict in nineteenth century Worcester, Massachusetts, Meyer and Brown (1989) calculated the frequency of locational conflict as the number of such conflicts reported in the newspaper per capita per year. They found that the incidence of locational conflict on a per capita basis was essentially the same for Worcester in the 1870s as was found for the 1970s by Ley and Mercer (1980) in Vancouver, British Columbia, by Cox and McCarthy (1982) in Columbus, Ohio, and by Janelle (1977) in London, Ontario. In the nineteenth century, the opposition was to rendering plants, slaughter houses, and saloons rather than to waste incinerators, homeless shelters, and affordable housing, but the opposition was certainly no less virulent. A frequent target of local protest, according to Meyer and Brown, was the millponds which, despite their obvious economic importance, were thought to generate "miasma," a disease-bearing atmospheric poison emitted by decaying organic matter.

While locational conflict has been in evidence for a long time, some observers argue that an important difference in the current period is the rate at which opponents have succeeded in blocking construction of locally unwanted facilities (Popper 1992; Van Horn 1988). This success rate (if it is such) bespeaks a new level of community empowerment, a point that I will return to later. First, however, it is necessary to understand the proliferation and obduracy of NIMBYism.

Community and Capital

The reason that NIMBY has been and continues to be such a potent political force is that it is an inherent and inevitable component of the land development process. The land development process in the United States is based on investment decisions initiated by private capital -- land developers, real estate investors -- within a set of regulations designed and implemented by planners and governments. The process is guided, fundamentally, by the anticipated rate of return to property capital. The basic requirement for development to be profitable -- or at least for there to be an anticipation of profitability -- has, if anything, been accentuated by the proliferation of private-public partnerships and the rise of urban entrepreneurialism, so that even land development nominally within the public sector proceeds largely on the basis of profitability (Leitner 1990; Leitner and Garner 1992; Clarke 1992; Sagalyn 1990).

The land development process distributes population and activities in space, but this distribution is not only an outcome but is also a cause of the process. A fundamental requirement to maintain the rate of profit in land development is land consumption. Just as mass culture and mass consumption are requirements for the support of fordist mass production within the primary, or goods-producing, circuit of capital (Harvey 1988; Schoenberger 1988; Storper and Scott 1986), mass consumption of land, houses, office space, and shopping malls is analogously required to support the rate of profit in the secondary, or property, circuit of capital.

Out of the land development process is established a land use pattern, a distribution of people and businesses, and a landscape in which consumers have invested and from which producers have profited. The resulting landscape is soon overcome with problems: low-density development, suburban sprawl, inadequate services, socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic segregation, traffic congestion, and environmental pollution. Proliferation of these problems threatens the profitability of subsequent rounds of land investment, inviting intervention by the state through the planning process. When planners, and the state generally, attempt to address these problems, they encounter opposition from consumers who invested in the landscape as it was, in the first round of the land-development process. State intervention to maintain the rate of profit in subsequent rounds of capital investment encounters opposition from the consumers who accounted for the profitability of the first round. In correcting the mistakes of the land development process, the state rarely requires the property capitals who invested in the first round to return their profit, but it frequently expects the consumption communities that were created -- and that made the investment profitable -- to accept substantial change in the nature of the community. When communities object to such changes, we call it NIMBY.

State intervention in support of capital accumulation thus gives rise to the NIMBY phenomenon. This formulation reverses the conventional view that interprets NIMBY as arising from local perceptions of the negative externalities of needed facilities. Conflict arises not simply over the spatial implications of a given facility per se, but rather over the state's introduction of that facility into a prior context of production and consumption.

The emphasis on state intervention clarifies the nature of locational conflict as displaced class conflict. Kevin Cox and others have explored this concept in terms of conflict between development capital and residents protecting their commodified living place (Cox 1981, 1984; Cox and McCarthy 1982). I would expand that argument and view locational conflict not as direct conflict between capital and labor but rather as conflict induced and mediated by state intervention seeking to alleviate a crisis of capital in ways that privilege capital over community. Such state intervention may be motivated by crisis in the primary, or goods-producing, circuit of capital, as in the siting of waste incinerators or homeless shelters, or by crisis in the secondary, land-development, circuit of capital, as in the case of attempts to rectify suburban sprawl.

We now arrive at a paradox. The NIMBYism that arises in opposition to the interests of capital is at the same time essential to maintaining capital's rate of profit. The need for property capital continually to pursue successive rounds of investment, and the demand for constancy and stability expressed as NIMBY, constitute a dialectical relationship within the land development process. Far from being an irrational and idiosyncratic aberration, NIMBY is an antagonistic but necessary element ensuring the profitability of property capital. To eliminate the acquisitiveness, the protectionism, the selfishness, and the self-interest that give rise to NIMBYism would be to undercut consumption and eliminate the market demand that ensures the return to capital that fuels the land development process. This dialectical relationship between consumption and capital underscores and explains the pervasiveness of NIMBY. It also suggests that resolving NIMBY conflicts entails continually renegotiating a political rapprochement between the poles of the dialectic.

The Politics of NIMBY

Political conflict over LULUs is a struggle between capital and community via the intermediary of the state. From the side of capital is pressure for laissez-faire, free-market, unconstrained development based on private property rights and profit maximization. The state is called upon to support capital accumulation.

Simultaneously, from the other direction comes a demand for constancy and stability of the community. This is in part economic, involving property values and protection of one's major investment, but is also non-economic, involving protection of aesthetic values, social status, the sanctity of the home, and the coherence of community. Such economic and non-economic stability and coherence contribute to what we might call residents' expectation of minimized uncertainty. This expectation is essential to consumers' willingness to participate in the land development process, and fulfilling this expectation is an important source of state legitimation. (Zoning, for instance, was adopted by the state as a means of reducing uncertainty for consumers and producers in the land development process.)

The state is entangled in this dialectic, caught between supporting the conditions of production and supporting the conditions of consumption, between capital and community. The result -- the form of state intervention -- at any one time is a politically-negotiated outcome that reflects the relative political empowerment of capital and community in a given place at a given historical moment. The political debate determines whether the particular form of state intervention adopted and implemented at a particular moment directs costs onto capital or onto community.

There are a number of reasons to expect that, for the most part, state intervention privileges capital at a cost to community. The decision to castigate NIMBY as irrational, misguided, selfish, and obstructionist is a *political* decision. It is a political

decision based on a calculation -- usually not difficult to make -- that it is far easier to attack the NIMBY side of the dialectic than to challenge capital. The development industry is politically organized; communities are not. The state is immediately and on a daily basis dependent on revenues from "growth." The state is also dependent on popular support that might be undercut by proliferating NIMBYism, but this is a more amorphous challenge and everything might improve by the next election.

The political outcome is even more striking at a more fundamental level. It is far easier, politically, for the state to criticize NIMBY as irrational than to try to ameliorate problems at their source. Take the case of affordable housing. It is politically easier to castigate community opposition to affordable housing than to re-examine a political economy that perpetuates poverty so that we have to create places for poor people to live. In a single year, between 1989 and 1990, the United States added 2.1 million people below the poverty level (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991). In that same year, the nation may have added a few thousand units of affordable housing. Criticizing community opposition to that housing is akin to opening a pin-hole in a clogged-up sink drain while leaving both faucets wide open filling the sink with water. We attempt daring social engineering to integrate the poor and unemployed into residential communities, but we are politically unable, as a nation, to devise an industrial policy to stem the capital flight that accelerates the unemployment rate (Law and Wolch 1991; Mair 1986).

In another example, suburban sprawl and laissez faire development have caused major problems of transportation congestion and serious air pollution. Numerous localities and regions are undertaking heroic efforts to guide development and change travel behavior in order to attain federally-mandated air quality standards (Burns 1991; Deakin 1991; Porter 1991). The Southern California Association of Governments, for example, in conjunction with the South Coast Air Quality Management District, is attempting to redistribute housing growth and job development in the region in order to rationalize travel patterns and thereby reduce air pollution (Hayward 1989). Such efforts, however, are encountering a great deal of local opposition expressed as NIMBYism. If the state's objective is to reduce air pollution and improve air quality, then why not confront the problem at its source? What is the relative contribution to the goal of improved air quality of, on the one hand, trying to change land use patterns on the margin, as opposed to inducing Detroit to re-engineer its cars so as to reduce auto emissions by, say, fifty percent. The state is choreographing an incredibly complex ballet to induce 20 million people in Southern California to change their behavior, because it can't get the automobile industry to change its behavior. That reflects a political decision. Even more insidiously, our current approach may well be counterproductive. To the very extent that we are successful in overcoming NIMBYism in Southern California (and elsewhere), we allow the automobile industry to postpone retooling a little bit longer.

Now, despite the highly organized power of capital to affect political decisions about the form of state intervention, and despite the state's persistence in castigating NIMBY as selfish and parochial, there are instances where the pervasiveness of NIMBY is beginning to force the state to redirect its intervention to win some concessions from capital.

The evolution of hazardous waste management policy is a case in point. After more than fifteen years of trying, not one state has succeeded in siting a hazardous waste incinerator in the United States (Lake and Disch 1992). In New Jersey, eleven municipalities that were selected as possible waste treatment or disposal sites were all eliminated because of public opposition and environmental factors. Faced with this record, New Jersey moved a step away from incinerator siting with the Pollution Prevention Act of 1991 (N.J.S.A. 13:1D-35 et seq.). The Act requires firms within the state to reduce their use of hazardous materials and reduce their production of hazardous waste by fifty percent over five years. The effect of the Act is to redirect some of the costs of hazardous waste management away from communities and back onto capital. The political support necessary to pass the Pollution Prevention Act would not have developed if communities across the state had not uniformly opposed the incinerator siting strategy. It is equally likely that the cheap disposal option provided by a waste incinerator would have eliminated the incentive for waste reduction. New Jersey's Pollution Prevention Act, and similar initiatives elsewhere, provide some evidence of a swing in the political pendulum in the direction of community empowerment, redirecting the costs of state intervention away from communities and back onto capital (Heiman 1990).

Implications for Planning

Rethinking the NIMBY phenomenon suggests several implications for planning. In the conventional view of NIMBY, where parochially-minded people obstruct rational planning, the solution lies in overcoming irrationality through attitude adjustment: education to change selfish attitudes; persuading balky residents of the greater social benefit of a more rational approach; or constructing a legislative and judicial mechanism strong enough to steamroll the parochial impulse. Recognizing the dialectical relation of NIMBY to capital throws this solution into serious doubt: it is closing the barn door after the horse has escaped. Further, accepting that the community perspective represents a barrier not to society but to capital requires reconsideration of our notion of rationality, and of the relative legitimacy of the community position. Rather than automatically disparaging NIMBYism as irrational obstructionism, we should recognize it for what it is: an expression of people's needs and fears. As such, it is an expression that is no more or less rational and legitimate than the market mechanism and the profitability of capital. We can no more eliminate NIMBY than we can eliminate private development capital and the market mechanism: we are saddled with both sides of the dialectic.

To castigate NIMBY as irrational is to avoid the exponentially more difficult task of resolving problems at their source. In colloquial terms, if we did it right the first time, we wouldn't need to try to fix things after the fact -- at the expense of the communities that we put in place before we recognized that something was wrong. The various recent attempts at state development planning, such as that established by New Jersey's State Planning Act (N.J.S.A. 52:18A-202.1g et seq.), may begin to establish the guidelines and regulations to steer capital investment towards *ex ante* solutions rather than *ex post* corrections. Mounting support for hazardous and solid waste source reduction may lessen the pressure to impose waste incinerators on resistant communities. Recognition of the pervasiveness of poverty may help mobilize a political constituency in support of a national jobs and income policy, easing the homelessness crisis and the associated housing market pressures that complicate siting of group homes and social service facilities.

Such initiatives radically recast the state's role from crisis reaction to proactive anticipation. Providing the vision and implementation proactively may be politically difficult, but looking beyond the short-term view, it may be easier, more efficient, more effective, and more equitable than trying to repair problems later. Such a shift reflects a recognition that locational conflict over unwanted facilities is simply postponed conflict over fundamental causes (Lake and Disch 1992). It means directing more of the costs of the solution onto capital now rather than imposing them on communities later. The search for such fundamental solutions will be difficult, long-fought, and politically contentious, requiring a realignment and redefinition of the state's role that is virtually unprecedented since the New Deal.

In the more pragmatic short run, the task is to find a middle ground between capital and community, to find a balance between the poles of the dialectic. This more realistic approach suggests that solutions can, at best, be only temporary solutions. This is true for two reasons. Since we are not solving problems at their source, we are continually playing catch-up, needing to adjust our solutions to the latest manifestation of the problem. Whether because of limited authority, localized jurisdiction, or inadequate political clout, we can only respond to problems rather than working proactively to eliminate them. Secondly, we can never hope for more than temporary solutions because the political middle ground -- the balance between capital and community -- is constantly shifting. Workable solutions will depend not only on good planning principles and correct technical answers but also on the politics of the moment -- on what is defined as a politically acceptable balance between the countervailing pressures of capital and community. Solutions can only be temporary because even as a political balance is struck, the pendulum is already swinging back in the other direction: more planning/less planning; more regulation/less regulation; pressure from capital or pressure from community. The timing of the policy shift may depend primarily on how long it takes the planning system to recognize the political realignment and adjust policy and programs accordingly.

It follows that we need to resist the temptation to look for *the* perfect planning solution. We should resist the belief in the perfect solution that, once devised, would define a system of planning practice that should be installed everywhere and for all time. Rather than seeking to define the perfect solution, what is needed is the flexibility to respond to the countervailing pressures of capital and community. This requires a receptivity to both points of view. Characterizing NIMBY as irrational, while perhaps instrumental in the short run, forecloses reasoned dialogue and thrusts the debate into a confrontational mode. For planners and analysts uncritically to perpetuate the conventional assumptions about NIMBY contributes to obfuscation, may undercut community empowerment, and exacerbates political conflict.

In the final analysis, to recognize the community perspective is not to romanticize it. Contrary to the conventional assumption, I have argued that the local community perspective is not necessarily opposed to the societal good -- but nor is it necessarily synonymous with it. The community interest is dialectically related to the interests of capital and while, therefore, it is no more nor less legitimate, its effects may be equally indefensible from a normative standpoint. The NIMBY perspective provides an essential countervailing force to the interests of capital, and if we wish to criticize it on normative grounds, at least we should criticize it for the right reasons.

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