Bringing Power to Planning Research : One Researcher's Praxis Story

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▶ The Inevitable Question of Power

Friedmann (1998), in a recent stocktaking article on planning research, identifies what he calls "perhaps the biggest problem" in theorizing and understanding planning (p. 249). This problem, according to Friedmann, is "our ambivalence about power." He rightly argues that this ambivalence exists in all major schools of planning thought from the rational planning paradigm to the knowledge/action theory of planning to the communicative paradigm. Furthermore, Friedmann says, one "of the things I would do differently today" in thinking about planning is introducing "the inevitable question of power" (p. 250). Friedmann closes his article by encouraging planning researchers to ponder the question of power with a point of departure in what is *actually* happening in city politics and planning, as opposed to what we *normatively* would like to see happen, the latter being the classic and problematic approach of planning research:

> I would like to urge those of us who are committed to the further development of planning theory to build relations of power—and especially enabling power—into our conceptual framework. This will be done more readily once we ground our theorizing in the actual politics of city-building. (Pp. 252-53)

Unlike political science and sociology, the field of planning research still lacks a regular body of central monographs and articles that place power relations at their core. Valuable contributions are emerging, however, from scholars like Crush (1994), Fischler (1998), Hajer (1995), Richardson and Jensen (2000), and Yiftachel and Huxley (2000). The works of Forester (1989, 1999), Healey (1997), and other communicative theorists also talk about power. But because of their focus on Habermasian communicative rationality, they tend to remain strongly normative and procedural without the substantive understanding of *Realpolitik* and real rationality that characterizes studies of power (Flyvbjerg 1998a). My own work is an attempt at contributing to the kind of development Friedmann now encourages by introducing to planning research an intellectual

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Abstract

This article provides an answer to what has been called the biggest problem in theorizing and understanding planning: the ambivalence about power found among planning researchers, theorists, and students. The author narrates how he came to work with issues of power and gives an example of how the methodology he developed for power studies—phronetic planning research—may be employed in practice. Phronetic planning research follows the tradition of power studies running from Machiavelli and Nietzsche to Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. It focuses on four value-rational questions: (1) Where are we going with planning? (2) Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? (3) Is this development desirable? (4) What should be done? These questions are exemplified for a specific instance of Scandinavian urban planning. The author finds that the questions, and their answers, make a difference to planning in practice. They make planning research matter.

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tradition that is particularly strong on issues of power. This tradition runs from Aristotle to Machiavelli to Nietzsche to Foucault (Flyvbjerg 1992, 1996, 1998b, 2001; Flyvbjerg and Richardson 1998). In what follows, I will explain how I came to work with issues of power, and I will give an illustration of how the praxis-oriented methodology I have developed to study power in planning may be employed in practice. I call this methodology "phronetic planning research" after the Aristotelian concept *phronesis*.

▶ Something Happened

One summer, something happened that would prove consequential to my professional trajectory in life. I was employed as a student intern with the newly established Regional Planning Authority with Ribe County Council in Denmark. Parliament had just passed the first law on nationwide regional planning, and the counties were in the process of preparing the first generation of regional plans. The atmosphere was one of novelty and aspiration. As a planner-to-be, I felt I was in the right place at the right time.

The central question of the regional planning exercise was the classic one of whether future development should be encouraged chiefly in the main urban centers or whether development should be decentralized and take place in smaller towns. My job was to carry out a survey of social, educational, and health services with the purpose of finding arguments for and against centralization and decentralization in these three sectors. One of the arguments I found was in a British study showing how young children's performance in school decreases with increasing distance between home and school. The study was presented in a well-known textbook with an instructive figure documenting the negative correlation between distance and learning (Abler, Adams, and Gould 1971). "Thus it would appear," the authors concluded, "that there are good psychological as well as economic reasons for minimizing the school journeys of young children" (Abler, Adams, and Gould 1971, 478). This might be seen as an argument for decentralized schools, that is, many schools close to where the children live, as opposed to fewer schools with longer distances to travel between home and school. I included this information and the figure in my draft report together with many other results that might count as pros and cons in the County Council's decision regarding whether to centralize or decentralize urban development.

After approval from my boss, my report was sent for comment to the administrative heads of the county's social, educational, and health services, respectively. When they returned the report, there was plenty of red ink on its pages. The text and figure about young children's performance in school was crossed out, among other things. A note in the margin, in finicky handwriting, read, "Cancel, may not apply in Denmark," followed by the initials of the county director of schools. The director may well have been right about this, of course, but going through his corrections, it became clear they had a peculiar pattern: knowledge that could be taken as arguments for a geographically decentralized school structure had to go, while knowledge that supported a decision to centralize the schools could stay in the report. The school administration had already unofficially decided on centralization, and the Regional Planning Authority was not allowed to interfere with knowledge that might question the wisdom of the decision. Our report had to show that centralization was desirable.

From the way the matter was handled—with a certain tension in the air; things that could not be said had to be done—it was clear to me that something important was going on. Later, I experienced a similar episode as an intern with the Ministry of Environment in Copenhagen. We had not learned about this in planning school. Our education was based on the Baconian dictum that "knowledge is power," knowledge is important. The university itself was built on that assumption. As students, we were not exposed to knowledge that addressed the question of whether it is true that knowledge is always important or what decides whether knowledge gets to count as knowledge or not. Such questions were not asked.

Today, we would say that our education lacked reflexivity on this point. However, in my practical work I had seen, on one hand, that knowledge can be so important that people in powerful positions find it worth their while to repress it. On the other hand, I had also seen examples of knowledge being so weak that this repression actually succeeded. I had seen knowledge being marginalized by power and power producing the knowledge that served its purposes best. I concluded that knowledge about the phenomena that decide whether economic, social, geographic, or other knowledge gets to count as important is at least as important as that knowledge itself. If you are not knowledgeable about the former, you cannot be effective with the latter. Even if it would take me more than a decade before I could express my experiences in scholarly formulas, I had, in fact, already found my professional interest in planning: the relationship between rationality and power, truth and politics.

Later, as a university lecturer, I found that planning, democracy, and modernity have a "blind spot" in their reflexivity regarding the relationship between rationality and power. Ideals seem to block the view to reality. Modern democratic constitutions typically prescribe a separation of rationality and power, much like the untenable separation of fact and value in conventional social and political thinking. The ideal, which

often remains unrealized, prescribes that first we must know about a problem, then we can decide about it. For example, first the planners investigate a policy problem, then they inform the city council, who decides on the problem. Power is brought to bear on the problem only after we have made ourselves knowledgeable about it. In reality, however, power often ignores or designs knowledge at its convenience. A consequence of the blind spot is that the relationship between rationality and power gets little attention in the research literature. There is a large gray area between rationality and power, which is underinvestigated. This is the area where the sort of thing takes place that happened with the schools in Ribe County. The literature contains many studies of rationality and some of power, but much fewer of the relationship between the two.

I decided that as a scholar, I would study this gray area. Accepting the ideal that planning and democratic decisions should be rational and informed—an ideal to which I subscribe—should clearly not keep us from trying to understand how rationality and power relate in real planning in real democracies. First, I wanted to study the phenomenon that modern ideals of how rationality and power ought to relate—and such ideals are centrally placed in planning in any democracy—are often a far cry from the realities of how rationality and power actually relate, with only weak guiding power and impact from ideals to reality. Second, I wanted to focus on what can be done about this problem. I decided to study these issues not only in theory but also in practice. I figured that a focus on concrete cases in particular contexts would help to better understand planning practice. And I reckoned that such an understanding is necessary for changing planning practice in a direction that would leave less scope for the kind of undemocratic power-knowledge relations I had witnessed in Ribe and elsewhere. Eventually, I decided to study how rationality and power shape planning in the town where I live and work, Aalborg, Denmark.

▶ Aalborg and Florence

Aalborg is the main urban commercial, administrative, and cultural center for northern Jutland, a region of a half-million people, idyllically adjoined by the North Sea to the west and the Baltic Sea to the east. A typical medium-sized European city, Aalborg has a high-density historical center that is several centuries old. When I moved to Aalborg to start teaching in the university there, a major urban preservation project was being implemented in the city center. Aalborg, like many other European cities, was overrun by cars, and the city government had decided to do something about it. The project they were implementing was aimed at preserving the character of the historical downtown area; radically improving public transportation; enhancing environmental protection; developing an integrated network of bike paths, pedestrian malls, and green spaces; and developing housing stock. Specifically, automobile traffic was to be reduced by one-third in the downtown area. With these measures, city government was a good decade ahead of its time in trying to cut a path to what would later be known as "sustainable development." The planning exercise they had just started would become known as the award-winning Aalborg Project; it would become one of the town's most sensitive and enduring political and planning issues for a decade and a half; and it would be recommended by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as a model for international adoption on how to integrate environmental and social concerns into city politics and planning, including how to deal with the car in the city.

I had heard about the plans for the Aalborg Project previously, but I only began to consider the project as a potential candidate for my own research when, as a newcomer, I mused about the many changes happening to the urban landscape. Some of these were hard to explain rationally; for instance, how certain regulations aimed at reducing car traffic were repeatedly being reorganized. If there was logic to the reorganizations, it escaped me, and I got curious. I did a pilot study of the Aalborg Project and then an actual study, covering almost fifteen years in the life of the project. The results of the research are described in Flyvbjerg (1998b). In what follows, I will focus not on the results of the study as such. Instead, I will illustrate the method I employed, which, after Aristotle's concept *phronesis*, I call phronetic planning research. *Phronesis* goes beyond both analytic, scientific knowledge (*episteme*) and technical knowledge or know-how (*techne*) and involves judgments and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social and political actor. The method is more fully described, with theoretical argument, in Flyvbjerg (2001). The examples that follow are necessarily brief and selective. For a deeper understanding, I refer the reader to the two books.

I wanted Aalborg to be to my study what Florence was to Machiavelli's—no other comparison intended. I wanted to write what Machiavelli calls the *verita effettuale*, effective truth, of planning and democracy in Aalborg, that is, a truth that holds the potential to affect the reality it uncovers. In so doing, I hoped to contribute to the discussion of planning and democracy, in Aalborg and elsewhere. Aalborg would be a laboratory for understanding the real workings of power and what they mean for our more general concerns of social and political organization. In carrying out the study, I employed what Peattie (2001) calls "dense data case studies." The case story, accordingly, can neither be briefly recounted nor summarized in a few main results. The story is itself the result. It is a "virtual

reality," so to speak, of planning at work. Not the only reality, to be sure, and a reality to be interpreted differently by different readers. But for the reader willing to enter this reality and explore the life and death of the Aalborg Project from beginning to end, the payback is meant to be a sensitivity to issues of planning, democracy, rationality, and power that cannot be obtained from theory. Students can safely be let loose in this kind of reality, which provides a useful training ground with insights into practice that academic teaching often does not provide.

▶ Where Are We Going?

In studying Aalborg, I took my point of departure in four value-rational questions that stand at the core of phronetic planning research:

1. Where are we going with planning and democracy in Aalborg?
2. Who gains and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?
3. Is this development desirable?
4. What should be done?

The questions are asked and answered by planning researchers on the basis of their attitude to what they study. This attitude is not based on idiosyncratic moral or personal preferences but on a context-dependent common worldview and interests among a reference group, well aware that different groups typically have different worldviews and interests and that there exists no general principle by which all differences can be resolved.

In the Aalborg study, the main sources for answering the questions were archival data, interviews, participant observation, and informants. For a while, I had my own desk and coffee mug with the city department for planning and environment, just as I was a frequent visitor with the other actors in the Aalborg Project. Empirically, I wanted the study to be particularly deep and detailed because I wanted to test the thesis that the most interesting phenomena, and those of most general import, would be found in the most minute and most concrete of details. Or to put the matter differently, I wanted to see whether the dualisms general/specific and abstract/concrete would vanish if I went into sufficiently deep detail. Nietzsche (1968a), who with Machiavelli is one of the pioneers in the study of power, advocates "patience and seriousness in the smallest things" (p. 182, sec. 59) and stresses the importance of detail when he says that "all the problems of politics, of social organization, and of education have been falsified through and through . . . because one learned to despise 'little' things, which means the basic concerns of life itself" (Nietzsche 1969, 256, sec. 10). Rorty (1985) is similarly emphatic that "the way to re-enchant the world . . . is to stick to the concrete" (p. 173). Both Nietzsche and Rorty seem right to me. And, for reasons I will touch upon below, I definitely wanted to reenchant my work. I saw the Aalborg case as being made up of the type of little things that Nietzsche talks about. Indeed, I saw the case itself as such a thing, as what Nietzsche calls a "discreet and apparently insignificant truth," which, when closely examined, would reveal itself to be pregnant with paradigms, metaphors, and general significance, what Nietzsche calls "cyclopean monuments" (Foucault 1984, 77). Let us now see what these terms might mean in practical planning research.

One day in the city archives, I was searching for material on the genealogy of the Aalborg Project. I was "meticulously and patiently" poring over some of the tens of thousands of pages of "entangled and confused" documents, which made up the archival side of the case and which often were "scratched over and recopied many times," as Nietzsche (1969) and Foucault (1984, 76-77) said I should be doing when doing genealogy. At one point, a particular document attracted my attention. It was the minutes from a meeting about the planning of a major new thoroughfare in Aalborg's city center. I was trying to understand the context of the Aalborg Project and was studying urban policy and planning in Aalborg in the years immediately prior to the launching of the project. At first, I did not know exactly why this particular set of minutes drew my attention more than the many other pages I was perusing that day in the archives. In particular, five lines of text, buried within the minutes under the fifth of six items on the meeting agenda, kept alerting me. Here is how the five lines read in full:

> Before November 13, the City Center Group must organize a meeting plan for orientation of the following groups:
> a. The [City Council] Technical Committee.
> b. The Chamber of Industry and Commerce.
> c. The Police. (Technical Department City Center Group 1974, 2)

The City Center Group is a group of officials responsible for planning and policy in downtown Aalborg, and the three groups listed for orientation—no more and no less—are the external parties that the City Center Group decides to inform about what the group has in mind for the new thoroughfare in the center. I could not come to grips with what it was about this text that kept exciting my attention, and I moved on to other documents. Later in the day, I returned to the five lines and asked myself, "a, b, and c, yes, but the ABC of what?" I did not get any further, however. This went on for several days. I kept returning to the text, but to no avail. I felt like you sometimes do when you look at a certain gestalt-type figure with a hidden image. You know the image is there, but you cannot see it; it will

not become a gestalt. And the harder you try, the more difficult the task seems to be.

Then one day, when I returned to the document one more time, in a flash, I finally saw the image: here is a private interest group, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, sandwiched between two constitutionally determined powers. On one side, there is the *political power* of the democratically elected City Council Technical Committee, representing the political parties of the council in matters of planning and environment. On the other side, there is the *executive power* of the police. What is a private interest group doing in the middle of such company? Does its inclusion here not constitute a deeply problematic deviation from democratic standards? And, finally, the question with monumental potential of Nietzsche's "cyclopean" kind: could the abc-list be indicative of the ABC of power in Aalborg? Did I have here, in fact, an image of the tripartition and separation of powers à la Aalborg?

The minutiae of the five lines of text and the questions they sparked would prove invaluable for understanding the Aalborg Project and for answering the four basic value-rational questions above. Following this approach, and documenting case after case of special treatment of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce by elected and administrative city officials, I eventually established that only by factoring in the hidden power relations between the chamber and the city government could I begin to understand the curious changes to the urban landscape that had first made me interested in the Aalborg Project. In relation to the central traffic and environment component of the project, the rationality of the chamber could be summarized in the following three propositions: (1) What is good for business is good for Aalborg; (2) people driving automobiles are good for business, ergo; (3) what is good for people driving automobiles is good for Aalborg, whereas, conversely, what is bad for auto drivers is bad for Aalborg. In short, "the car is king" was the rationality of the chamber.

In contrast, the rationality of the Aalborg Project—or, to be more precise still, the rationality of its planners—was built on the basic premise that the viability of downtown Aalborg as the historic, commercial, and cultural center of the city and of northern Denmark could be secured if, and only if, automobile traffic was significantly reduced in the city center. The fate of the Aalborg Project would be decided by these two rationalities fighting it out, and the group who could place the most power behind their interpretation of what was rational and what was not would win. Below we will see how. Here, I will note only that in this fight over rationality and power, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce—through century-old and well-maintained relations of power—was able to position itself as a clandestine advisory board to top officials in the municipal administration. "You know, we had the possibility to change the proposals [the planners] came up with," a former chairperson of the chamber explained to me in a startlingly frank interview (unless otherwise stated, all interviews were carried out by me). The chamber secretly reviewed and negotiated changes to the Aalborg Project before proposals for the project were presented to the politicians on the City Council Technical Committee and to the council itself. This happened despite the fact that by law and constitution it was the politicians who were supposed to make the decisions that the chamber was now making with administrative officials. The chamber preferred things this way, needless to say, "for it has turned out that if [the proposals] first reach the Technical Committee, and are presented there and are to be discussed in the City Council, then it is almost impossible to get them changed," as the chamber ex-chairperson clarified for me.

The power relations I uncovered through interviews, in the archives, and with the help of my informants are too complex to be accounted for here. Enough is to say that they were of a premodern kind that could not be defended publicly vis-à-vis standards of modern democracy, similar to what Putnam (1993) found for planning in Italy in regions with weak civic traditions. In a sense, there was both too much and too little democracy in Aalborg. When I evaluated the city government against conventional standards of representative democracy, I found there was too much democracy, because the Chamber of Industry and Commerce was participating where it should not be in the role of what it itself was eager to stress was not a "supreme city council," which is exactly what it was. Its participation was distorting the outcomes of representative democracy and transforming the rationality of the Aalborg Project. When, on the other hand, I evaluated the city government against more recent ideas of stakeholder and citizen participation approaches to democracy, I found too little democracy, because involving only one stakeholder is clearly not enough when others are affected and wish to be involved.

For these and for other reasons given in *Rationality and Power* (Flyvbjerg 1998b), my answer to the first of the four value-rational questions ("Where are we going with planning and democracy in Aalborg?") was a clear, "Astray."

▶ Who Gains and Who Loses, by Which Mechanisms of Power?

In answering the second question, "Who gains and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?" I was particularly interested in the interplay between rationality and power in defining winners and losers. Let me give just one example, though at some length, of how I addressed this question.

Above, I mentioned the "car is king" rationality of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce. The city planners were aware of the barriers this rationality might create for the Aalborg Project. Therefore, at one stage in the project, they decided to try and shoot down the chamber's rationality by agreeing to do a shopping survey of where customers in downtown Aalborg came from and which means of transportation they used. The Chamber of Industry and Commerce had been claiming over and over, like a mantra, that 50 to 60 percent of gross revenues, if not more, in the city center's shops came from customers driving cars and that policies and plans that were hostile to drivers would thereby lead to a reduction in retail earnings. When the survey was done, it showed, in stark contrast to the chamber's claim, that each of the three groups—(1) motorists; (2) pedestrians, bicyclists, and moped drivers; and (3) users of public transportation—accounts for equal shares of gross revenues.

Aalborg Stiftstidende, the local newspaper interviewing the chairperson of the Chamber's City Center Committee, tells its readers that the chairperson "acknowledges being astonished as to how many customers use public transportation." At the same time, however, the chairperson points out that one should not look at total gross revenues alone but should examine the share of specialty goods as compared with the share of sales of staples and so on. According to the chairman, who owns a specialty shop himself, this is because (1) it is the specialty shops that distinguish a center more than the sales of groceries, and (2) specialty goods generate the largest share of earnings. Specialty goods are thus more important for the retailers and for the downtown economy than are other types of goods.

The chairperson also cites these factors in an interview I did with him, in which he comments on my interpretation of the survey results as rendered above:

> Chairperson: Well, it shows that you, too, have not understood [the results of the survey]. Because what counts for the city's retailers is not the giant sales which lie in the supermarkets' food sections. If you subtract them, you will obtain other percentages. And the purchases made by those driving their cars have a *much, much* higher average. It is the specialty goods which create the gross earnings, the profits. It is the specialty goods which create a center at all. If the specialty goods are not found in a center, then you get an American-style situation. Slums. Food products make up a very large part of sales. Try and subtract them and then analyze where the earnings come from.
>
> Interviewer: Has the chamber tried to do that?
>
> Chairperson: Oh yes, yes. We also presented it to the municipality. I think that we reach a figure where those driving cars make up far more than 50 percent of the specialty goods trade. Now specialty goods also include clothes, and so on. It is hardly so marked for clothes. But as soon as you go over to genuine specialty goods [i.e., excluding clothes and other textiles], then the proportion of drivers gets very, very large.
>
> Interviewer: Are everyday goods not so important for a center?
>
> Chairperson: No, because it is only a question of supplying the local residents, right? It certainly has nothing to do with creating an atmosphere in a town. This is not what makes a town fun and nice to be in and interesting to walk around in. (Flyvbjerg 1998b, 110-11)

But even if we allow for the revamped categories, which the chairperson of the Chamber's City Center Committee proposes, he still overestimates the significance of automobile drivers. Their share of purchases in downtown Aalborg is not "much, much higher" or "far more than 50 percent." Subtracting both conventional goods and clothes and textiles from gross revenues and then examining the remaining sector of pure specialty goods, as the chairperson proposes, it appears that motorists account for 45 percent of the revenues in this group of goods. Since pure specialty goods constitute 33 percent of total earnings, the share of specialty goods purchased by drivers thus comprises but 15 percent of gross revenues (i.e., 45 percent of 33 percent). Were we to accept the chairperson's argument, it would mean that city policy makers ought to accord highest priority to the specific activities (specialty shopping) of a specific customer group (drivers) who contribute only 15 percent of the total sales in downtown Aalborg. Even when seen from a narrow sales point of view, such a policy would seem problematic. However, through a complicated web of influences and rationalizations that cannot be accounted for here, this is precisely what the actual policy becomes in Aalborg (Flyvbjerg 1998b, 109-12).

In contrast to the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the city planners view the results of the shoppers' survey as hard evidence against the chamber's views and in favor of their own strategy: the bicyclists, those on mopeds, pedestrians, and those using public transportation must be accorded higher priorities in downtown Aalborg, say the planners; the interests of those driving private cars must be downgraded. It therefore seems strongly misleading and unusually provocative to the planners when the *Aalborg Stiftstidende* chooses to report on the shopping survey with the following four-column headline: "Aalborg's Best Customers Come Driving in Cars." The

headline is misleading, inasmuch as drivers are shown much less significant as a customer group than originally thought. After all, the text of the article makes clear that two-thirds of total sales are made to people who do *not* come to the shops by car. Headline and text thus convey two opposing messages, as if two different people wrote them—which is probably the case, the text by a reporter and the headline by an editor.

For the planners, this misleading headline is the straw that breaks the camel's back. It is captions like these, together with a number of very critical editorials about the Aalborg Project, that force the head of the Aalborg Project, a conservative alderman who heads the city's administration for planning and environment, to uncharacteristically complain about lack of fairness in the paper's coverage of the project.[1] The alderman explains in an interview:

> I think that I, not I but everyone here in the house [the city's headquarters for planning and environment], hardly received a totally fair treatment [in the press]. I think that a line was already in place, coming from *Aalborg Stiftstidende* among others, that this [project] was garbage. (Flyvbjerg 1998b, 114)

The chief of city planning now wants to strike back at both the *Aalborg Stiftstidende* and the Chamber of Industry and Commerce. He is fed up with both of them. Normally, it is the official policy of the city not to reply to press criticism unless asked. But the planning chief asks permission from the alderman to submit a long comment to the paper. He has, in fact, written it. First, the alderman says no, according to an in-house source. Then the chief tries again, and the alderman gives in. He now says that if the chief absolutely wants to, he can submit the comment, as long as it is as his personal opinion. Here is an excerpt from the proposed commentary by the chief of city planning written for the *Aalborg Stiftstidende*:

> One cannot . . . talk about, for example, the purchases of drivers being dominant in relation to those of other road users, bus passengers, or pedestrians. . . . It is just as important to plan for bus passengers, bicyclists, and pedestrians, who taken together make up 65% of the purchases. Parenthetically, it can be mentioned that [the chamber] has stated to the *Stiftstidende* that public transportation is more important than what the Chamber of Industry and Commerce had expected, (which must logically imply that they have overestimated the importance of one or more of the other traffic forms (perhaps the driving of private cars)) [parentheses in original]. . . . The City Council has resolved that major new roads and extensions of existing roads in the dense part of the city must be avoided, which accords well with many other tendencies in society, including the interest in maintaining the urban environment, improving traffic safety, and converting from private to public transportation.
>
> The instruments of planning, as previously mentioned, therefore consist of regulating traffic within the possibilities accorded by the existing street area; that is, removing the unwanted through-traffic and other measures which can lead extraneous vehicles out to the main traffic arteries as directly as possible.
>
> When the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, in its alternative to the city center project, calls attention to the fact that private cars should be able to drive unhindered through the downtown area, that parking conditions be improved, that public transportation be expanded, that bicycles and motorbikes have unhindered access everywhere (outside the pedestrian streets), that the conditions for "non-vehicular" road users be improved, that retail deliveries can operate without problems, that better conditions be created for pedestrians—all this together with the establishment of more green areas, expansion of housing, maintenance of downtown functions, more jobs, and better public services, then it is a list of wishes which everyone could put their name to. The problem lies in fulfilling, within the existing framework, the often contradictory goals. Priorities must be set, and it must be accepted that it will entail restrictions on freedom within one domain to achieve important advantages in others. . . . In my opinion, the report on shopping in the city center does not produce any need to propose changes in the planning objectives. On the contrary, I think that [these objectives] have been confirmed on many points. (Flyvbjerg 1998b, 114-15)

The chief of city planning never publishes his article, however. He explains why:

> Chief of city planning: It was a kind of self-criticism, you know. It didn't promote the case, and now we had just received a certain amount of goodwill from the Chamber of Industry and Commerce. So there was no reason to dig [trenches].
>
> Interviewer: But was it you yourself who decided that the article would not appear?
>
> Chief of city planning: Yes! (Flyvbjerg 1998b, 115)

The goodwill of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce that the chief talks about is explained by the fact that the shopping survey has opened the chamber's eyes to the fact that there are other groups of customers than those driving private cars. And these other groups put significant amounts of cash into the shopkeepers' cash registers. However, the chief of city planning and his staff are mistaken in their evaluation of the chamber's goodwill. In fact, the chamber draws a fundamentally different conclusion from the shoppers' survey than the planners, a conclusion that they do not understand until it is too late. The chamber's leadership realizes that there are indeed other important customers than those who drive cars. And this causes the chamber to reduce or withdraw its previous criticism of those subprojects aimed at improving conditions for pedestrians, bicyclists, public transportation, and so on, such as pedestrians malls, a network of bicycle paths, and a large bus terminal. After the publication of the shopping sur-

vey, the previous harsh criticism of these subprojects simply ceases.

Nevertheless, the chamber's view of reality is not structured by the same analytic rationality as that of the chief of city planning and his staff. The chamber therefore does not draw the same conclusions about trade-offs and priorities as the planning chief. The chamber wants "to have their cake and eat it too," as the alderman for planning and environment would later put it.

In other words, there exists a single survey and two interpretations. The planners interpret the survey as solid, analytic documentation for the Aalborg Project's downgrading of automobile traffic and its upgrading of public transportation and nonautomotive forms of transport to achieve environmental improvements and improved traffic safety. For the chamber, however, the survey documents the possibility to increase earnings for the city's shops by improving conditions for nonautomotive and public transportation *without* reducing car access. It is a classically clear example of an evaluation that is dependent on the eyes of the beholder.

Empirically speaking, the survey results are not interesting in themselves. They may or may not reveal a single reality, but that is not important. Rather, the interpretations of the survey results are important. And the decisive aspect in relation to the fate of the Aalborg Project is not whether the one or the other interpretation is correct, rational, or true but which party can put the greatest power behind its interpretation. The interpretation, which has the stronger power base, becomes Aalborg's truth, understood as the actually realized physical, economic, ecological, and social reality.

The stronger power base turns out to be that of the chamber, which, by means of a multiplicity of clever strategies and tactics, successfully blocks most of the city's measures for reducing auto traffic while, as said, allowing measures that facilitate walking, biking, and the use of public transportation. The chamber thus confirms a basic Nietzschean insight regarding power and interpretation, namely, that interpretation is not only commentary, "Interpretation is itself a means of becoming master of something" and "all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation" (Nietzsche 1968b, 342, sec. 643; 1969b, 77, sec. 2.12). With the help of the very survey that the planners carried out to disprove the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the chamber came up with a fresh interpretation of the Aalborg Project—and became master of the project.

In this manner, power defined a reality in which the winner was the business community in downtown Aalborg, who, via their strategy of opposing measures to restrict cars combined with acceptance of improvements for public transportation, pedestrians, and bicyclists, have seen an increase in retail sales in downtown Aalborg following the implementation of the Aalborg Project, while sales figures declined at the national level during the same period.

With roughly a 50 percent increase in bicycle and public transportation in downtown Aalborg during the first decade of the project, and without a projected 35 percent decline in automobile traffic, but an increase instead, the actual situation stood in sharp contrast to what was envisioned. Without the downgrading of automobiles, the pressure on downtown road space has produced harmful effects on environment, traffic safety, and traffic flow. It was this very situation that the Aalborg Project was supposed to prevent but that it has instead exacerbated. Thus, the losers in the struggle over the Aalborg Project were those citizens who live, work, walk, ride their bikes, drive their cars, and use public transportation in downtown Aalborg, that is, virtually all of the city's and the region's half-million inhabitants plus many visitors. Every single day, residents, commuters, and visitors in downtown Aalborg were exposed to increased risks of traffic accidents substantially higher than the national average and the planners' projections. They were also exposed to higher levels of noise and air pollution, and a deteriorating physical and social environment. The taxpayers were also losers, because the considerable funds and human resources used in the Aalborg Project have largely been wasted.

The rationality and interests of one group, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce, was allowed to penetrate and transform the project. The main viewpoints of the chamber have overlapped with the views of the Aalborg Police Department and the *Aalborg Stiftstidende*. As the *Stiftstidende* has a near monopoly on the printed press in Aalborg, and as the police hold a powerful position in questions of traffic policy, this threefold overlapping of interests has endowed the chamber's viewpoints with a special impact.

The *Realpolitik* for the Aalborg Project was shaped by these interests in classic Machiavellian style, while the *formal* politics in democratically elected bodies like the City Council have had only minor impact on the project. Rational, deliberative democracy gave way to premodern, tribalistic rule by the strongest. Distorted relations of power produced a distorted project. Power thus defined a reality in which the *real* Aalborg Project, that which has become reality, deviates from, and on principal objectives directly counteracts, the *formal* Aalborg Project, which was ratified by the City Council with a 25-1 vote, but which exists only on paper.

Briefly summarized, my untangling of the web of rationality-power relations in the Aalborg Project showed that while power produces rationality and rationality produces power, their relationship is asymmetrical. Power has a clear tendency to dominate rationality in the dynamic and overlapping

relationship between the two. Paraphrasing Pascal, one could say that power has a rationality that rationality does not know. Rationality, on the other hand, does not have a power that power does not know. The result is an unequal relationship between the two. Illegitimate rationalization and not rationality came to dominate the fate of the Aalborg Project (Flyvbjerg 1998b, 225-36).

► Is It Desirable?

The third value-rational question is whether the situation depicted in answering the first two questions is desirable. My answer to this was, No.

I did not need ideals of strong democracy or strong ecology to support this conclusion. Most, if not all, informed persons who subscribe to the ground rules of democracy and who agree with the 25-1 majority on the City Council, which ratified the environmental objectives of the Aalborg Project, would also have to agree with my analysis that the development that I had uncovered was neither desirable nor justifiable. Thus, my analysis could not be easily rejected on grounds of being idiosyncratic. This was deliberate and strategically important, because as I moved on to answering the fourth question—What should be done?—I wanted as broad popular support as possible for my conclusions and suggestions for action.

I already mentioned above Francis Bacon's dictum that knowledge is power. This dictum expresses the essence of Enlightenment thinking. "Enlightenment is power," and the more enlightenment—the more rationality—the better. The Aalborg study shows that Bacon is right; knowledge *is* power. But the study also shows that the inverse relation between power and knowledge holds and that empirically, as opposed to normatively, it is more important: "Power is knowledge." In this sense, the study stands Bacon on his head. It shows how power defines what gets to count as knowledge. It shows, furthermore, how power defines not only a certain conception of reality. It is not just the social construction of rationality that is at issue here; it is also the fact that power defines physical, economic, social, and environmental reality itself.

Modernity relies on rationality as the main means for making democracy and planning work. But if the interrelations between rationality and power are even remotely close to the asymmetrical relationship depicted in the Aalborg case—which the tradition from Thucydides, Machiavelli, and Nietzsche tells us they are—then rationality is such a weak form of power that democracy and planning built on rationality will be weak, too. The asymmetry between rationality and power makes for a fundamental weakness of modernity and of modern democracy and planning. The normative emphasis on rationality leaves the modern project as ignorant of how power works as the guardians of the Aalborg Project and therefore as open to being dominated by power. Relying solely on rationality therefore risks exacerbating the very problems modernity attempts to solve.

This weakness of modernity and of democracy and planning needs to be reassessed in light of the context-dependent nature of rationality, taking a point of departure in thinkers like Machiavelli, Nietzsche, and Foucault. The Aalborg study shows constitution writing and institutional reform based on communicative rationality à la Jürgen Habermas to be inadequate. To enable democratic thinking and the public sphere to make a real contribution to democratic planning and action, we have to tie them back to what they cannot accept in much of communicative planning theory: power, conflict, and partisanship. This, then, was the next step in my work with the Aalborg Project: to become a partisan, to face conflict, and to exercise power.

► What Should Be Done?

In deciding on my praxis in relation to the Aalborg Project, I reasoned that if the arrangements and outcomes of city politics and planning in Aalborg were not publicly justifiable, as my studies showed they were not, then, perhaps, I could help change things for the better, if only modestly, by calling public attention to my results. *Better* is defined here simply as being more democratic and more effective in fulfilling the objectives of the Aalborg Project as ratified by the City Council. In this way, my studies would become part of the power relations they had uncovered.

I already mentioned that I chose to study the relationship between rationality and power because this particular area of research was relatively unexplored and because I hoped to help improve the reflexivity of planning on this point. By the time I began the Aalborg study, however, another, more personal, motive had come along. Campbell (1986, 128-29), Lindblom (1990), Lindblom and Cohen (1979, 84), and others have noted that the development of social research is inhibited by the fact that researchers tend to work with problems in which the answer to the question, "If you are wrong about this, who will notice?" is "Nobody." Bailey (1992) calls the outcome of this type of research "'so what' results" (p. 50). I had now been a planning researcher long enough to be only too familiar with the problem of "so what results." At one point, I considered leaving the university altogether because of this problem. Planning research, like other social science, does not have natural science's link to technological development and has only sporadic political relevance or support. Planning research,

therefore, seemed to me too isolated from what is important in life to be worth the effort of a lifetime's work. Nonetheless, I chose to stay and tried to solve my problem, in part by gradually developing and practicing the methodology described in Flyvbjerg (2001). Phronetic planning research would be my antidote to the "so what" problem.

Instead of natural science's relevance to technological development, I would conduct phronetic research in ways that would make it relevant to practical politics, planning, and administration. I tried to secure such relevance by adopting two basic criteria. First, I would choose to work with problems that are considered problems not only in the academy but also in the rest of society. Second, I would deliberately and actively feed the results of my research back into the political, administrative, and social processes that I studied. For reasons I will return to below, at one stage I called this way of working "research on the body."

Employing this approach in the Aalborg study has been a challenge and has worked much better than I had reason to expect when I first began to develop it. One day, for example, I found myself in a studio of the Danish Radio (DR), participating in a direct, national broadcast about preliminary results from my study. To get my feet wet and to gain step-by-step experience with the phronetic methodology, I had published partial results of my research as I went along. "Trial balloons," I called them. This was the second time I sent up a balloon, and one of the results that drew public attention, locally and nationally, was the fact that whereas the Aalborg City Council had decided with the Aalborg Project that higher-than-average traffic accidents for the many bicyclists in the city center were cause for special concern and must be reduced by 30 to 40 percent, now—several years into the implementation of the project—I documented that instead of the planned reduction, there was a steep increase in accidents. Moreover, the increase had happened without politicians and planners noticing. They, quite simply, were not monitoring the project on which they had spent millions for planning and implementation. I also showed how the increase in accidents was caused by city officials allowing the rationality of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce to slowly, surely, and one-sidedly influence and undermine the rationality of the Aalborg Project as explained above. Participating in the radio broadcast were also the alderman for planning and environment, the chairman for the local chapter of the Danish Cyclist's Federation—a force to be reckoned with in a bicycle nation like Denmark—and two interviewing journalists. When the journalists asked the alderman what he thought about the results of my study, he pulled from his briefcase a sheet of statistics, waved it, and said to the nation that here he held proof that my data were wrong.

This, of course, is as bad as it gets for a scholar. We are paid to be that group in society that is best equipped to produce data, knowledge, and interpretations of the highest validity and reliability. This is a main basis of our credibility and existence. Consequently, if someone questions that credibility, our existence is at issue.

The journalists immediately turned to me and asked for my reaction to the alderman's attack. The green light on my microphone went on, I crossed my fingers for luck under the table and answered that if there were any errors in my numbers, they must originate with the police, who does the registration of traffic accidents on location, or with the Danish Highway Administration, who maintains the national database for traffic accidents. When the broadcast was over, I went to my office and prepared a large package for the alderman containing the raw computer printouts of my data and other details of my analyses plus a cover letter asking the alderman to please identify the errors he said I had made. Three weeks later, the material was returned to me with a message stating that the alderman's staff had been able to identify no errors. The same day, I wrote a short press release stating the facts of the matter to clear myself of the accusations of poor scholarship. That evening on television, I watched the alderman retract his accusations. The next day, the printed media carried the story, and I was in the clear again.

There were other incidents like this, and I mention them here to emphasize four things. First, and most important, this way of working helps effectively to begin the dialogue with groups outside of academia, which is at the heart of phronetic research. Some groups and individuals, like the alderman above, may not be interested in beginning a dialogue; they would rather do without the extra attention, transparency, and accountability it entails. In the Aalborg case, they would have preferred to turn a blind eye on the traffic accidents and environmental problems; in other cases, the issues will be something else. But the very raison d'être of phronetic research is to help society see and reflect, and transparency and accountability are key prerequisites for this and for democracy. Where there is resistance to seeing and hearing, the dialogue may need to be jump-started, as was the case in Aalborg. Nevertheless, after some initial difficulties, a real dialogue was established that went on for several years and covered many aspects of planning, politics, and administration in Aalborg.

Second, the dialogic approach to research is also effective in ensuring that research results reach the relevant target groups. This is a question of effective communication. The highly specialized media of scholarly journals and monographs are well suited for reaching academic audiences. But they are lacking when it comes to the target groups that are

relevant in the practical world of planning, politics, and administration. Here public dialogue, including communication via everyday media, is necessary.

Third, the dialogic approach generates the type of outside stakeholders in the research that we need to get beyond the stigma of "so what results." I here understand a stakeholder to be an organization, a group, or a person with an interest in the outcomes of the research. The stakeholders care about the research, for good and for bad, some as supporters and some as antagonists.

Fourth and finally, your senses are definitely sharpened when you carry out your research with the knowledge that upon publication, people with an interest in the results might do what they can to find errors in your work, like the alderman and his staff did with my analyses of the Aalborg Project. For me, the consequence is a state of heightened awareness in data collection and processing that helps take the drudgery and dullness out of these activities. External scrutiny is also an excellent motivation for achieving the highest levels of validity and reliability: facts and data have to be handled with excruciating accuracy, and interpretations have to be clear and balanced. Otherwise, the work will be self-defeating and not allowed to count as a voice in the phronetic dialogue that it is aimed at.

Because of the stakes involved and because of the engagement with other actors, you experience an almost bodily responsibility for, and involvement in, the research. This engagement seems to me to enhance the learning process, which is in the best of the traditions of experiential learning and very different from didactics and theory. Learning becomes embodied. I understand from colleagues in the field of education that recent research corroborates the experience that human learning is generally more effective with this type of engagement and with an excited sensory system; that learning is more effective when the proprioceptors are firing, so to speak. This is why, as said, I called my methodology "research on the body," here understood not as research with the body as an object of study but as research that is embodied and where researchers experience, on their own bodies, society's reactions to their research.

As a consequence of my trial balloons and the debates they generated, when later I published the Aalborg study in earnest—in the two-volume, 640-page Danish edition of *Rationalitet og Magt*—the alderman and other actors with stakes in the Aalborg Project knew that they would not get away with postulating another reality for my research than what could be documented. That type of tactics may work in politics, but it rarely does in research. Therefore, the debate about the Aalborg Project, although still spirited, now became much less polemical and more dialogic. For instance, the alderman and I would give back-to-back talks about the project, each presenting our views, followed by discussion, in and out of Aalborg. Our "road show," we would eventually call it. The alderman and his staff began to listen to the research instead of fighting it; they realized the research was influencing public opinion about their work, and soon they were ready to make changes in the Aalborg Project.

Reaching the dialogic mode of communication is crucial for practicing phronetic research in a democratic society. Polemics typically does not facilitate democracy but is more closely related to the tactics of rhetoric and antagonistic power play. Dialogue, on the other hand—not necessarily detached and without combat, but with respect for other parties and a willingness to listen—is a prerequisite for informed democratic decision making. And dialogue is the vehicle by means of which research can best hope to inform the democratic process, whereas polemics has only limited use for research in achieving its goals. Thus, to be effective, phronetic researchers avoid polemics and look for dialogue. They also look for how they themselves may contribute to establishing the conditions for dialogue where such conditions are not already present.

The debate about the Aalborg Project, which again was both local and national and this time also spilled over into Sweden and Norway, now placed so much attention on the Aalborg Project that it became hard for the city government to continue to defend the project and refuse to be held accountable for what was going wrong with it. At the practical level, this was the situation I had hoped to bring about by publishing the Aalborg study. The aim of exposing dubious social and political practices through phronetic research is, in Foucault's (1981) words, as quoted in Miller (1993), precisely to bring it about that practitioners no longer know what to do "so that the acts, gestures, discourses that up until then had seemed to go without saying become problematic, difficult, dangerous" (p. 235). For the Aalborg Project, my study led to transparency, transparency led to public attention, and public attention led to accountability. And after accountability, no more Aalborg Project. Or, to put it more accurately, after accountability, another Aalborg Project, since the problems in downtown Aalborg had not disappeared by any means. Quite the opposite; they had been exacerbated and needed to be taken care of more than ever.

The alderman put it like this in an interview:

> I simply took the consequence of Flyvbjerg's study, and I could see that the process we had been through [with the Aalborg Project] could in any case not be allowed to happen again. I let myself be much inspired by [the idea that] now we must have a broad popular element [in city planning] so that it did not proceed on those power positions [which had dominated the Aalborg Project]. (Petersen 1993, 44)

Foucault said about his work that practitioners are not likely to find constructive advice or instructions in it; they would find only the kind of problematizations mentioned above. Such problematizations are useful and may lead to action and change in themselves. But unlike Foucault, based on my problematizations of the Aalborg Project, I reconstructed a set of planning and policy measures for how city governments may significantly reduce their risk of ending up with the type of counterproductive, wasteful, and undemocratic plans and policies seen in Aalborg (Flyvbjerg 1991, 1993).

One of seven key measures I proposed was the use of planning councils in the decision-making process, not as detached Habermasian or Cartesian fora devoid of power but as devices that acknowledge and account for the working of power and for the passionate engagement of stakeholders who care deeply about the issues at hand (for the other six measures, see Flyvbjerg 1993, 194-97). I developed the idea from a set of semi-institutionalized, semisecret, and often intense meetings that were already being held on a regular basis between city officials and the Aalborg Chamber of Industry and Commerce. The problem with these meetings was that only a single stakeholder was invited to participate; this was one reason why decisions became unbalanced. But from the meeting minutes and from my interviews with participants, I could see that such meetings were not necessarily a bad idea in themselves. The interactions they involved resulted in additional information and in ideas that proved useful in the decision-making process. And the collaboration between project owner and stakeholder led to external support for aspects of the project that might not have gained support without stakeholder participation. Finally, real negotiations and real decisions with real commitments took place in the meetings.

In my version of a planning council, however, it would be open to not only one stakeholder but to all stakeholders in addition to all other interested and affected parties. Moreover, as the composition of such councils and decisions about who should count as stakeholders are clearly political acts, I suggested that city government take an active role in identifying participants and in facilitating their involvement with councils with the purpose of ensuring that discussions and decisions would be as democratic and have as wide support as possible. I suggested that planning councils should be active in the decision-making process from beginning to end, from policy idea to design of plans, to political ratification, to practical implementation.

When the alderman and his staff decided to end the Aalborg Project and to build something new on its ruins, they looked to the measures I had proposed. Eventually, they launched a new round of planning under the name "Aalborg Better Town" (*Aalborg Bedre By*), including the use of planning councils, now called "planning panels." City officials took an active part in identifying external parties to participate on the panels instead of staying locked with the ideas and initiatives of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce.

In the process of starting up the panels, officials also contacted me and encouraged me to become a panel member. In this way, I would be able to use my knowledge about Aalborg to improve the new planning. I was tempted but felt I had to choose between roles. Also, at this time, I was moving into another area of research, namely, that of megaproject planning and decision making. I was keen to see what the phronetic research methodology honed on the Aalborg Project might do in this field. Instead of becoming an expert on Aalborg and local planning, I wanted to get back on the steep part of the learning curve, as when I began the Aalborg study, and I deliberately chose megaproject planning as a contrast to Aalborg: I wanted to move from local issues to national and international ones, and from small projects to very big and very expensive ones (Skamris and Flyvbjerg 1997; Bruzelius, Flyvbjerg, and Rothengatter 1998; Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, and Rothengatter forthcoming). Right or wrong, I decided not to participate in the planning panels. Nevertheless, when a few years later, the European Union in Brussels awarded Aalborg its European Planning Prize for the new planning, I could not help but feel—however impudent this might seem to others and to myself—that in a small way, perhaps I had a share in what had transpired. Triumphing over 300 nominees from all over the European Union, Aalborg received the prize for having developed what the jury viewed as an innovative and democratic urban policy and planning with particular emphasis on the involvement of citizens and interest groups.

▶ Conclusion

What typifies a work in phronetic planning research is that for a particular area of concern, it focuses analysis on praxis in answering the four value-rational questions that have given structure to this article: (1) Where are we going? (2) Who gains and who loses, by which mechanisms of power? (3) Is this development desirable? (4) What should be done? The questions can be answered in different ways for a given area of interest, depending on perspective. And since there is always an urban politics in a democracy, the praxis that works in one situation does not necessarily work in another. Thus, there exists neither one fixed methodology for doing phronetic planning research nor only one typical example of such work, nor one kind of praxis related to it. To the extent that the example given in this article may be an example to follow, this would be mainly as regards the questions asked, with their focus on

power, values, and praxis. It would not necessarily be for the answers given, because such answers will vary from context to context. The article is, as the title says, only one researcher's story. It is hoped that other researchers will develop other narratives. We need them as points of reference for praxis in planning research. The aim is not to tell planners in the usual manner how we think *they* can make a difference but to understand how *we* ourselves may make a difference with the work we do.

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► Note

1. The City Council has thirty-one members, among whom four aldermen/-women plus one mayor are elected, each holding a powerful position with responsibility for a large budget and a large staff in each of five municipal main areas of policy and administration.

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