Chapter 6  An Ecosocial Semiotic Description of a Planning Event: Seeing Planning ‘Under a Different Aspect’

6.0 Introduction

This chapter will address issues that have arisen in the course of the discussions and analyses offered in the previous chapters. My main foci will be ‘consequences for semiotic analysis’, on the one hand, and ‘consequences for theories of planning’, on the other. I will set out with the latter, as it will naturally lead to the former. Another reason for presenting my conclusion in that order is that the social practice under focus here has remained the focal point of my description, and that the perspective of planning as praxis is what has motivated the description rather than any specific aspect of semiotic-sociological or linguistic theory.

6.1 Planning as De-differencing: The Production of Agency

6.1.1 Theories of Planning

In this section the issue of planning as practice is addressed, and placed briefly within the light of prevailing accounts of planning. Within the conventional literature, planning continues to be presented either as a comprehensive application of science based techniques, or as a disguised form of politics. While implementation of the former is said to advance efficiency and effectiveness in the allocative and coordinating functions of planning (the purposive-instrumental view), the latter is claimed as being important for negotiating what is pragmatically feasible among competing partial interests (the political view; Degeling 1996).

Many of the purposive-instrumental theories of planning proceed “from the view that planning is the mainspring of effectiveness and efficiency ... and that it is an essential tool for hierarchical organisational steering” (Degeling 1996: 103). In this view, facts exist independently from values.

The discipline of planning has been developed, so the argument runs, to consciously and systematically bring together authority and science in the interest of overcoming the baleful effects of politics. (Degeling 1996: 103)
Purposive-instrumental theories see planning as the application of technology and technicality, and hence as the guarantor of both truth and utility. It makes use of these expert discourses for the legitimisation both of its own generally exclusionist practices and of its decision outcomes.

The political conception of planning foregrounds the bounded nature of decision making associated with the proximal nature of the available information (a complete view of all the factors that play a role in a proposed project is impossible; Simon 1965). Hence planning necessarily tends towards ‘satisficing’ (i.e. a satisfying oriented to ‘sufficing’; Lindblom 1959) rather than towards some optimal agreement and understanding presupposed by the purposive-instrumental view. For these theorists, stakeholders restrict their attention to what is politically, functionally or legally possible, and disregard alternative values or outcomes. A host of publications have focussed on the ways in which both decision making and planning selectively and strategically shape, mobilise and suppress data and information in ways which further particular interests (Degeling 1996: 104; e.g. Mechanic 1962, Pettigrew 1972).

Currently, however, there is a growing interest in the discursive characteristics of planning, as represented by the work of critical theorists such as Forerster (1989,1993), Healey (1992, 1993), Majone (1989), Højér (1993) and Fischer (Fisher & Forester 1993a/b). In contrast with the purposive-instrumental and political constructions of planning seen above, critical theorists highlight the discourse dependent character of planning. They argue that a detailed analysis of the discursive means by which problems and issues become the focus of planning is central to an understanding of planning.

The politics of discourse is best seen as a continuous process of giving meaning to the vague and ambiguous social world by means of story lines and the subsequent structuration of experience through the various social practices that can be found in a given field. (Højér 1993: 48)

The Habermasian orientation of this trend in planning theory makes for a construction of the planner as a communicatively rational and knowledgeable individual (who should be) striving for ‘ideal speech situations’ (Verständigung; Habermas 1979: 1).

The ideal speech situation can be characterised on the basis of three kinds of ‘validation’: rational-technical reasoning, moral
reasoning, and aesthetic-expressive understanding (Healey 1992: 9; cf. Habermas 1984: 99). "Systematised, rationally grounded knowledge is now understood to be only one among several knowledge forms. [There are] three ways of knowing, understanding, and reasoning" (Healey 1992: 9). Forester sees the various possible inputs to planning exercises as 'practice stories' from which we 'can learn': "[w]e can learn practically from such stories in many of the ways we learn practically from friends. Both help us see anew our political situations and our possibilities, our interests and our values, our passions and our 'working bets' about what we should do" (Forester 1993b: 200).

Critical theorists recognise the close links among discourse, knowledge and expert power, and acknowledge that these are neither benign nor insignificant. Thus, once specific professional, disciplinary, cultural and scientific lenses have marked out the parameters of debate, the solutions appropriate to these problems are also determined. Further, expert discourses legitimate expert knowledge and marginalise other ways of knowing, including lay knowledge. This means that expert discourses include and exclude; they both create visibilities and mask and deny the possibility of other constructions of the "real"; they protect the biases of existing institutionalised agendas and rule-out alternative constructions of what can and needs to be done.

With this in mind, critical theorists enjoin planners to disown both the 'scientistic' and the 'politistic' constructions of planning. Rather, in performing their role they are encouraged to proceed from the recognition that what transpires in planning will be a product of the discourses in use and hence of the range of interests that are represented in information searches and clarifications, and in negotiating and bargaining.

The existence of a multiplicity of apparently incommensurable analytical frames is devastating to the authoritative ambitions of the positivist, critical rationalist, and analycentric policy analysis... frames can be used as sources of arguments that make no claim to be authoritative. The task of analysis then becomes either to construct arguments that draw on one or more frames or to test and strengthen the frames from which arguments might originate... (Dryzek 1993: 223/5)

Dryzek concludes that the role of the planner is "not to test hypotheses or to develop policy evaluations or prescriptions but,
rather, to enhance the rationality of particular ideologies” (Dryzek 1993: 226).

Accordingly planners should ensure that communication between participants is "other regarding" so that participants are respectful of each other's perspectives, interests, concerns and sensitivities (i.e. their multiple discourses) and no one party is able to dominate the play. They are also encouraged to seek to construct and develop 'ideal speech situations' in which the participants' willingly avoid (self)deception, domination, and partisan exclusionary strategies. Finally, they should develop a set of communicative ethics which commits them to exposing and countering agenda manipulation, illegitimate exercises of power, skewed distribution of information, and attempts to distract attention (Forester 1991; Dryzek 1993; Healey 1993).

The foregoing espousal of reflexivity and critique (while laudable) begs questions about how planners should proceed in establishing these as their principles of practice. Although the critical theorists acknowledge that “planning typically occurs in complex institutional settings” (Healey 1992: 17), there is little emphasis on the ways in which bureaucratic planning practices will involve stakeholders who are not necessarily immune to institutional (promotional) or perhaps even financial interests, and who will therefore be engaged in political and interpersonal 'dramas' (a term which Pettigrew 1979: 570 borrows from Turner 1957) which tend to extend beyond the duration of the projects in question. This is evident from the fact that Ian Forbes, for example, had his career as architect-planner to consider, which depended to a large extent on government contracts. Forbes knew several of the people involved in this project from previous jobs (viz. both the AHS official [JC] and the Dept. of Health official [AT]). And surely the AHS official would have had to consolidate his track record as 'effective' bureaucrat, whose projects do not blow out nor stall due to disagreement or other problems.

Moreover, not only the interpersonal relations implicated in planning have a history that precede the planning project, but also the way planning issues have been and are being formulated. As noted by Schaffer (1984) and Apthorpe (1984) 'the problems' which bring planning into play neither emerge out of nor exist within a vacuum (Degeling 1996: 106; also Lukes 1974: 24; Clegg 1989: 201). Rather, aspects of social life are framed as 'problems' in the course of becoming the focus of institutionalised expert work. Yet it is this 'framing' in terms of a particular discourse which the critical theorists take as their starting point, and which
they claim planners should be able to construe as a story (or ‘frame’) among other stories (frames). This necessarily involves going against the social values that have accrued to particular discourses and against the subjectivity investments which stakeholders hold in those discourses.

Hence, the critical theory approach to planning raises questions about how reflexivity as well as critique are to be established in practice. For example, in light of critical theory's own analysis of the pervasive structuring effects of dominant discourses (e.g. Forester 1989), planners might wonder about the circumstances and the resources required to get acceptance for the view that the power/knowledge dimensions of individual discourses should be open to critique.

Similarly, the differential relations of power which are structured into specific planning exercises (as between, for example, those who are "known about" and objectified ['the users'] and those who are construed as knowledgable and hence are accorded the initiative ['the engineer', 'the bureaucrat', 'the architect']), planners might wonder about how they should proceed to get general acceptance for a critique of this structuring. More specifically, they might ask: under what circumstances will players, who are advantaged by existing institutionalised structures and agendas, be disposed to divest themselves of this advantage?

6.1.2 Reassessing Planning

Of the three approaches to planning discussed above - the positivist view which favours expert discourses, the political view which reduces planning to the manipulating and satisfying of personal interests, and the critical theorist view which sees planning as the opportunity for an emancipating reassessment of discourses and ideologies - only the second approach is descriptive-analytical rather than idealist and exhortative. This thesis aligns itself with this second perspective, insofar as it restricts itself to description and analysis.

In contrast with this essentially conspiratorial and manipulative perspective on planning, however, this study favours the view that action is by and large overdetermined and that it therefore cannot be reduced to a single unitary purposive ('political') principle. I would see planning decisions less as conscious outcomes of deliberate actions, than as the outputs of specific kinds of social practices ('ways of doing') modified in the process by more or less unpredictable co(n)textual dynamics (i.e. planning
is ‘epigenetic’; Edelman 1992: 46). Accepting the view that the planning decisions are marks of ‘power’, it becomes necessary to look for their genealogy and isolate their critical contexts or ‘nodal points’ (Clegg 1993: 28).

A theory of power [planning] must look to the field of force in which power arrangements [planning arrangements] are fixed, coupled, and constituted, so that, intentionally or not, certain ‘nodal points’ of practice are privileged in this unstable and shifting terrain. (Clegg 1993: 28; additions mine)

Within the context of the Waratah House planning project, the meetings discussed in Chapter 3 deserve the label ‘nodal points’. It was there where “channels and circuits of power [planning] are [were] fixed and reproduced”. In this view, planning is a dynamic process that passes through ‘distinct circuits of power and resistance’ (Clegg 1993: 28).

A radical view of power [planning] thus would consist not in identifying what putative ‘real interests’ are but in the strategies and practices by which, for instance, agents are recruited to views of their interests that align with the discursive field of force that the enrolling agency can construct. (Clegg 1993: 28; addition mine)

This view was already elaborated in Chapter 2 (section 2.7) where I drew on Thibault’s account (referencing to Gramsci) of the hegemonic process as an accumulation of minor events contributing to a discursive-actional drift. In similar fashion, Clegg’s emphasis refocuses our attention from what is said to how that which is said fits into the overall institutional process, or how interaction sustains, strenghtens or counters a ‘discursive-practical field of force’. Interactional description that takes this perspective respects the strategy or strategies that motivate(s) interaction; “it brackets moral judgments about the adequacy of social action to live up to the moral ideas of social theory or theorists” (Clegg 1993: 29).

In general, Clegg suggests, institutional processes operate on the principle that “[o]rganisation is essential to the achievement of effective agency” (Clegg 1993: 27), and that therefore existing organisations or organised procedures will favour the achievement of agency (whether human agency or not): “pressures toward institutional isomorphism in the circuit ... will tend ... to reproduce
existing fields of force” (Clegg 1993: 29; Clegg’s emphasis). This is what I have described as redundancy in Chapters 3 and 5 above.

Clegg also accounts for innovation in institutional processes “under imperatives of competition and environmental efficiency” (Clegg 1993: 29). If innovation can mobilise sufficient ‘discursive fields of force’, it will attain agency as a result of the molecular processes or ‘work’ it will have managed to co-opt and institute. This is what I have referred to as ‘morphogenesis’.

The discussions and analyses presented in the previous chapters of this thesis lend support, I think, to Clegg’s view that ‘isomorphism’ (labelled ‘redundancy’ in this thesis), as the reproduction of ‘existing fields of force’ or as ‘positional stasis’, characterises a dominant kind of institutional positioning (i.e. that of the AHS official). Innovation, or ‘morphogenesis’ in my terms (as the coming together of various meanings in new ways), represents another major kind of institutional dynamic, that which embodies sensitivity to a range of meanings (and possibly, non-meanings) and change. Then there is a third, not formally categorised by Clegg as ‘circuit of power’, namely schismogenesis: this dynamic involves a diverging of meanings, as it involves division and opposition.

More generally, this description of planning as a strategic investment in, contestation of, and eventual morphogenesis of meaning(s), I argue, is neither rationalist, nor instrumental, nor conspiratorial, nor can it be (pace Habermas) purely communicatively rational. Instead, it presents planning as working with a variety of resources (‘inter-texts’ and ‘intra-texts’) and through a variety of ‘circuits of power’ punctuated by critical (because historically privileged) ‘nodal points’ (i.e. institutional rituals; Clegg 1989, 1990, 1993). In this view, bureaucratic process can only be described in terms of modes of maintaining, becoming, or contesting meaning. The description, in turn, can only proceed in terms of “how organisational obedience is produced” (Clegg 1993: 27), maintained, or lost.

Planning, in short, is seen as the manipulation of meaning in the interest of ‘de-differentiation’ (and may be motivated by anything between or a combination of egocentrism or altruism). If successful, it achieves de-differentiation, which in turn enables agency, or the enactment of cooperative ‘work’. Through ‘work’ extra-somatic ‘in-form-ations’ (i.e. ‘giving form’) of matter and energy can be newly devised, sustained, or altered.
6.2 Semiotic considerations

As argued above, this thesis favours a view of planning as the manipulation or management of meaning. Planning interactions are seen as essentially overdetermined, and, for the production of agency (or power), require both redundancy (Clegg’s isomorphism) and morphogenesis (Clegg’s innovation). The division of labour between redundancy (procedures routinely enacted by government bureaucrats, project managers, etc.) and morphogenesis (the ‘creative’ integration of change by architects, planners) was argued to be crucial to the continued relevance of governmental power (Chapter 5). This view of planning brings me to the consideration of ecosocial semiotic analysis, my tool of investigation.

The view taken here is that the social process needs to be taken as point of departure of an eco-social semiotic analysis, not the specific and located interactions (‘texts’) that contribute to its instantiation. Taking discrete spoken interactions as starting point rather than the ‘multimodal social process(es)’ of which they are part, in my view, limits our attention to linguistic realisations of ‘difference’, and ignores precisely those resources which are equally as crucial for the enactment of the social. It is these resources which tend to be naturalised as ‘context’ (cf. my critique of ‘context’ in Section 2.6). An eco-social semiotic kind of analysis, by contrast, takes all informational/material processes into account (Lemke 1992b, 1993; Halliday 1993e; also Goodwin & Duranti 1992).

Lemke in particular has opened the way for a consideration of meaning makings beyond language, by extending the metafunctional analysis to meaning making in kinds of action other than the discursive (viz. his ‘Representation’, ‘Orientation’, and ‘Organisation’; Lemke 1992b: 82, also 1992a). This is not at all a reduction of everything social to linguistic principles of analysis; it is rather a view that recognises that semiosis, or the ‘informational relevance of the material’ (in Wilden’s sense), can generally be typified in generic (what happens sequentially), multimodal (what happens simultaneously) and metafunctional terms (what do each of these semiotic modes do simultaneously).

As stated, the work presented here followed on from a broader sociological investigation into institutional organisation and western technologisation as a whole, and from a description of the linguistic resources that play a role in those organisations and processes (ledema 1994/6). Principles seen as underpinning social
change (Sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4 above) have provided the framework for this more in-depth study of a located interaction: a planning project. The questions with which I started, therefore, were social-process oriented, not 'text' oriented (cf. text as 'linguistic unit'; Halliday 1978: 69):

i. how are broader organisational processes instantiated by interaction?

ii. how can western technologisation (in its Foucaultian sense) be said to relate to located (institutional) interaction?

iii. how does local interaction contribute to change in general and western technologisation in specific?

Based on Giddens' 'time-space distanciation' of resources and Wilden's and Preziosi's 'meaning inscription upon the extrasomatic', the hypothesis advanced in this thesis is that meaning is either more or less explicit, here-and-now, or 'linguistified', depending on the semiotic mode used to realise it. Managing meaning in the present, therefore, becomes a matter not only of controlling dominant meanings, or being sensitive to new meanings, and being open to integrating such new meanings into the existing or dominant code. It also is a matter of storing or recontextualising these new (resultant) meanings, thus ensuring control over the transmission and acquisition of discourse and agency (Bernstein 1990: 180ff). The analysis of such processes involves tracking the resemiotisation of meanings beyond the linguistic text.

Taking this institutional teleonomy into account, then, becomes an important explanatory focus for semiotic analysis. Action is now not to be explained exclusively in terms of people's intentions and understandings (à la Schiffrin 1990, 1994), since these are necessarily in tension to varying degrees with all kinds of unacknowledged social conditions and unintended interactional consequences. This is not to say that people do not have intentions or understandings, or that these are meaningless and necessarily misrecognised. I only want to emphasise that the explanation of kinds of organisational participation cannot proceed without accounting for the essentially institutional resources and conditions which enable such interaction. Intentions and understandings may affect institutional processes, but, on their own, they will not provide a comprehensive insight into the nature of the institutional process itself.

To talk about social organisation, bureaucratisation, and technologisation, then, necessitates explanatory principles which include but go beyond the personal. One such principle is that
meaning is not necessarily produced linguistically, or somatically. Somaticity, i.e. the face-to-face realisation of meaning through bodily (vocal, kinesic or gestural) resources, indexes a relatively high degree of negotiability and an explicit kind of realising semiotic ‘difference’. This in contrast to extra-somaticity, which is meaning realised through arrangements of matter/energy which involve bodily exertion for their production, but which, once produced, gain durability, and thence provide an alternative range of resources for subsequent action, by the original producers as well as others not involved in the original process (Berger & Luckmann 1966: 78). The realisation of meaning extra-somatically involves construing social distance, both spatially and temporally, and enables its effectiveness beyond contexts of co-presence. Meaning realised extra-somatically is ‘time-space distanciated’.

Therefore, to limit the description of interaction to talk in the here-and-now ignores those meanings which constitute the ‘objectified histories’ (‘classifications’) that surround us in interaction (and which we are predisposed to accept as natural), and which provide the backdrop or background (the ‘context’) from within which we act and speak. Making our description socially powerful requires a questioning not only of what is said, but also of how what was said constitutes what we, in the here-and-now, take for granted (cf. Bourdieu 1994: 13/4), and how what we say contributes to the further structuring of subsequent interactions. I argue that only such a perspective on interaction can be said to be truly political: it deconstructs all the resources (and not only the linguistic resources) which are mobilised in interaction (as text or ‘context’), and it assesses the degree to which interactions (re)produce such resources. More simply, this kind of analysis takes account of both how structure structures interaction, and how interaction structures structure.

This kind of analysis provides a way in to a consideration of interaction in the light of both the broader institutional process and of western socio-cultural change. In much the same way in which the strata of the linguistic system relate as orders of abstraction, I take the view that the meaning makings (the talk, the writing, the design, the building) realise the institutional process of planning, and that planning in turn realises higher orders of social becoming. This perspective allows me to address the interactions at various levels of abstraction, without being fettered to theoretical preconceptions prescribing analytical limits.

The result is an intersemiotic account of practice: meaning is accounted for, not as purely linguistic, but as truly intersemiotic;
i.e. as malleable, as adjustable to the expected and appropriate explicitnesses or implicitnesses of the situation, and as mode of interaction, not as product. This view of meaning is systemic, relational, and informational, in Wilden’s and Halliday’s sense. This ecosocio-institutional view of meaning making renders possible its analysis beyond the exchange, beyond the interaction, beyond the institutionally delimited ‘genres’ of the meeting, of the doctor-patient interview or the court hearing, into domains that link the smallest details of interaction to the largest questions of socio-cultural institutionalisation and change.

One last question presents itself: should discussions about the material aspect of semiosis be taken at face value, or do they need to be deconstructed as themselves being essentially semiotic renderings of an imputed materiality? In other words, materiality (matter/energy) is only perceivable and accountable as semiosis (information). This notwithstanding, the material expression plane of meaning making is often taken for granted in linguistic analysis, and it is my aim here to reinstate materiality as a discussable issue (also Kress 1997). It is only by doing that, I argue, that we are able to address aspects of cultural change such as technologisation and time-space distanciation.

The question as to how to address material reality in ontological terms is one I cannot solve here (but cf. Harré & Krausz 1996). As Sydney Lamb remarked, we are not in unmediated contact with reality, but we gain understanding about how we see reality by paying attention to our own ‘conceptual system’ which ‘filters’ reality:

So if we think of ourselves as scientists, it is essential to understand something about the conceptual structure with which we are operating. We have to get some notion of the properties of this filter, so that we can see to what extent our perceptions are properties of our own conceptual system instead of properties of the reality outside. (Lamb 1974: 214)

Even Porphyry-Boethius (ca 480-524 AD) was already very explicit about the options we have on this point:

concerning genera and species, the question indeed whether they have a substantial existence, or whether they consist in bare intellectual concepts only, or whether if they have a substantial existence they are corporeal or incorporeal, and whether they are separable from the sensible properties of
the things (or particulars of sense), or are only in those properties and subsisting about them, I shall forbear to determine. For a question of this kind is a very deep one and one that requires a longer investigation. (Porphyry-Boethius, cited in Ivins 1946: 60)

6.3 Conclusion

The reassessment of planning as overdetermined action aimed at managing and securing significance or meaning, and the application of both diachronic and synchronic micro- and macrosemiotic analysis lie at the basis of the conclusions offered here.

My reassessment of planning might seem inevitable in the light of an analysis which took Halliday’s metafunctional hypothesis as its starting point: all meaning making makes use of both ideational and interpersonal (as well as textual) resources. The point of the analysis, however, is not so much to gain a ‘truer’ account of what is out there, as to accomplish a view of the practice of planning ‘under a different aspect’. Ecosocial semiotic analysis, like the one presented in this thesis, achieves the seeing of an ‘object’ under a different (in this case perhaps broader) aspect, in the sense that it makes clear that conventional ways of seeing the object naturalise one kind of interpretation (one ‘filter’) as what is ‘real’.

The semiotic analysis presented here, in other words, is primarily a means to seeing “an object according to an interpretation” (Wittgenstein 1953: 200e). The analysis bracketed the conventional aspects under which planning is generally seen (whether as purposive instrumentality, political strategy, or communicative rationality), and suggested an alternative interpretation. It also bracketed the conventional aspects under which interaction is generally seen (as text, as genre, or as purposive-rational action). This was done to set up a tension between the original, conventional aspect (whether as ‘planning project’ or as ‘interactional text’) and an alternative aspect, based on different interests, values, and foci. As Wittgenstein notes, the mere possibility of recognition of a different aspect relativises both one’s original (conventional) and one’s alternative interpretation, and furnishes the possibility for new meanings.

In my analysis, I have not favoured formal systems as my ultimate objective (e.g. the computational modelling as in Sefton 1995 or move analytical systems as in Eggins 1990). Instead, I have proposed a metaphor for the various transfigurations which characterise the bureaucratic process, based on the theory of
grammatics as initiated by Halliday and as revitalised and extended by Davidse. This metaphor aims to capture and foreground the process of recontextualisation, or re-semiotisation: the transfiguration of meaning from one semiotic mode to another, and the importance of the role which re-semiotisation plays in meta-stabilising bureaucratic hegemony. I have thereby extended Bernstein's notion of recontextualisation to include semiotic modes other than language, and to take account of the metafunctional changes resulting from such re-semiotisation: morphogenesis.

This morphogenetic perspective becomes possible by taking a realisational view on interaction and institutional process, without reducing the one to the other and thereby lapsing into either methodological individualism or into structuralist anti-humanism. Rather, social life is seen as ecosystemic, as dynamic open system, within which we punctuate or delimit areas of interest (e.g. 'planning', or 'talk') and in which changes ('differences') never occur independently of the space surrounding them.

Our experience has been that it is largely through an understanding of broader configurations of cultural interactions, through an appreciation of culture as a dynamic, interactive, relational ensemble, that the unique properties of isolable components of that ensemble - whether environmental or linguistic structure - can be more clearly seen. These 'extensions' of ourselves ... behave like waves in a medium; a wave is a singularity of the medium, and its existence is dependent upon corresponding changes in its context. Ensembles within culture are not independent of the conceptual space surrounding them, and function like reifications of connections between ensembles (Preziosi 1984: 66)

This thesis represents an attempt to reason about one area (one punctuation: 'planning') of one of those ensembles, and about its 'logic', or 'grammar' (in Wittgenstein's sense). Hopefully, it contributes to a consideration of meaning making as multimodal phenomenon, and to a way of conceptualising one kind of 'wave' of change in relation to 'waves' in other modes of meaning.
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