

Toward A Critical Pragmatism: The Contemporary Relevance, Promises, and Problems of Critical Theory

What is the contemporary relevance of critical theory for the study of public administration, planning, and public policy? To begin to answer this question, we can explore six closely related areas of inquiry: (1) methodological approaches; (2) the analysis of practice; (3) the political analysis of rationality; (4) the examination of action and learning; (5) the “double structure” of organizing and organizational behavior; and (6) the analysis of policy initiatives. By surveying these thematic areas briefly, this chapter introduces the main lines of argument and the research implications of the chapters that follow.¹

1. Methodological Approaches

Theories do not provide answers to problems; people do. But a theory can provide a framework for analysis. We do not need to make a falsely forced choice here between the most recently debated functions of adequate social theory—to explain behavior or to understand the significance of action. Theories are also coherent accounts that serve as reminders. Powerful theories redirect us toward problems and issues we might otherwise have ignored—or

from which we have been ideologically or methodologically distracted.

In all these varied ways critical theory is relevant to our grappling with the methodological problems of assessing planning, policy, and administrative issues. The legacy of critical theory, and particularly Habermas's more recent work, challenges us to devise methods of investigation that are: (1) empirically sound and descriptively powerful; (2) interpretively plausible and phenomenologically meaningful; and yet (3) critically pitched, ethically insightful, as well (Fay 1976, 1987; Bernstein 1976, 1983). Further, critical theory also challenges us to overcome the troubling disjunction between actor-focused and institution-focused ("micro" and "macro") research strategies (Giddens 1984). That much is easy to say but very difficult to carry out in practice.

These challenges work not only against the grain of those who claim that the behavioral sciences alone will give us explanatory power while interpretive studies will produce only (perjoratively!) "stories," but also against the grain of those who insist that the assessment of social facts will simply never allow us to develop the basis for systematic social criticism. These debates are neither settled, nor foolish. But neither do they need to paralyze research efforts.

Critical theory brings us right into—and then through—the middle of these debates about interpretation and the problematic radical distinction between facts and values. Habermas's theory of communicative action enables us to study meaningful action as it is systemically staged and structured. In the staging of communicative action, we are confronted with the causal influences of institutional context and history. In the enactment and utterances of communicative action, we are confronted with the actors' own theorizing, interpretations, articulations of self and other. Thus in the study of organizations, for example, we can assess not only the meaningful and carefully contextuated character of members' actions, but the institutionally resisting or maintaining character of those actions as well. Likewise, in the study of planners' or policy analysts' work, as chapter 2 argues, we can study the situated, performative qualities of their conversations and texts and realize how far broader institutional and structural questions of power, class, culture, ethnicity, and control manifest themselves in daily speech, writing, and gesture.²

Yet even if we could better integrate micro- and macroanalyses, assess meaningful action as pragmatically communicative performances in institutional contexts, would we have progressed an

inch toward the goal of social and political criticism? Perhaps and perhaps not. If, for example, we could understand more powerfully how particular actions *betray* their own professions (both institutional and rhetorical professions), would not this be important, social scientifically and politically? Would the fact of such betrayal be either a descriptive or normative proposition or both at once? If, to be more concrete, we can show how self-professedly democratic institutions (say local planning agencies) selectively include and exclude members of the public they are supposed to serve, is the resulting account "factual" or "evaluative" or indeed both? Surely the answers to these questions hold that the simple distinction between factual and evaluative propositions is no longer tenable. But that is virtually trivial good news. The problems of articulating political criticism in a systematic sociological sense remain.

Here we can simply note three possible research strategies. The first strategy involves, but hardly relies upon, the terribly misunderstood Habermasian notion of "the ideal speech situation," a counterfactual anticipation we make, Habermas argues, whenever we seek mutual understanding.³ The "ideal speech situation" is one characterized by the absence of coercion and the presence of the force of better argument alone; it characterizes Habermas's idea of discourse, the form of argumentation we presuppose we are able to step into, he argues, *when we seek to step aside* from the flow of action and (suppose that we could, in principle) *check* a problematic claim. Putting ideal speech aside, then, we might explore instead the actual social and political conditions of "checking," of political voice, and thus too of possible autonomy, even if we, again, do *not* hold those conditions up to the standards of any "ideal speech situation." Think here, for example, of doctor-patient interactions. We might expect that interaction to be characterized by complex relations of inequality, and we might accept that in large part because, or to the extent that, patients can enter the interaction willingly, with access to information, with the ability to seek independent third-party opinions, free of blind faith, and so forth. Our acceptance of certain inequalities of power and resources often depends, particularly in liberal democratic contexts, on an evaluative condition: the patient's ample ability to check, to test, to explore the conditions of his or her patienthood. Here Habermas's work alerts us to the possibilities of actors' contingent difficulties of having actual "recourse to discourse." This evaluative strategy orients us toward the always tenuous conditions of (roughly speaking) "informed consent." This approach is suggestive, but it faces difficulties quickly. How are we to assess the no doubt imperfect conditions of checking

we will find? Which reflect domination, and which reflect instead the forces of necessity?

The second and third normative strategies are different versions of one another. Both direct our research attention toward the always vulnerable and precarious intersubjectivity of social actors. From one angle, we can investigate this social capacity to act from the standpoint of (as Habermas puts it) "the colonization of the lifeworld." With this second strategy, employing Habermas's "system-lifeworld analysis," we assess the ways that institutional pressures work through the media of power and money, bureaucratization and commodification, to preempt or encroach upon autonomous or even tradition-appropriating social action. Here we might see, for example, how routine notions of planners presumptively identify and preempt indigenous ideas of community and territory from community members. Here we attempt to explore the struggles over, the dialectics of, social rationalization at a level of administrative organization, planning processes, and public policy making (Fraser 1989).

From another angle, we can explore the contingencies of ordinary social interaction and assess how organizational and institutional contexts render "making sense together" problematic and politically vulnerable. With this third strategy, whatever we may lose in institutional generality, we gain in the analysis of the very conditions of interaction itself. In the analysis of planning, for example, here we can see how subtly the everyday claims of planners can have political effects upon community members, empowering or disempowering, educating or miseducating, organizing or disorganizing them (Forester 1985, 1989; O'Neill 1989). In both the second and third strategies, we have normative analysis in its most sociological clothes.

Critical theory does not solve these problems, but it poses them powerfully for us. It brings us yet closer to developing a framework of social research that neither ignores normative problems nor shunts aside interpretive and phenomenological issues. With critical theory, we have a research framework that confronts us with the challenge to assess the vulnerabilities of our basic capacities to act with one another, to act meaningfully together, and to protect and nourish forms of social cooperation, forms of sociality. We are given the beginnings of a framework with which to integrate critical ethnographic and more structural and historical work.

But what issues might such a research framework illuminate for us in our analysis of public administration, planning, and public policy? Let us review several "areas of application" briefly.

2. The Analysis of Practice

Studies of practice in public policy, planning, and public administration are often social-psychological in character, paying somewhat peripheral attention to questions of politics. In the insightful and interesting work of Donald Schön and Howell Baum, for example, we learn a good deal about individual practitioners but wonder about the political significance of their actions (Schön 1983, 1991; Baum 1983, 1987, 1990). In the work of Andreas Faludi, we have a renewed Popperian approach that focuses largely upon issues of justification in its concern with decision-centered action (Faludi 1987).

By contrast, critical theory gives us a rich sociological formulation—of communicative action—that allows us to explore the political implications of practice in powerful ways. Practice is intentional and purposive, to be sure. As intentional, it is phenomenologically accessible to us: we can investigate the ways that practitioners formulate and come to reformulate problems as they explore them (indeed as Schön's analysis does). As purposive, that practice is partially instrumental to be sure; it makes sense for us to ask what particular actors are after and how they may think strategically about reaching the ends they seek. But practice is far more than that. The ends that planners and political actors seek are far more diverse than they know at any one time, and the close analysis of any flow of conversation will demonstrate as much. The analysis of communicative action allows us to look closely at the "how" and the "what" of practice, at the phrasing of talk, for example, to see how practitioners read their political environments in skilled ways to reproduce political relationships even as they satisfy a complex host of "goals," values, commitments, obligations, and senses of self and others.

We can assess practice not simply as the achievement of goals, but more subtly too, as chapter 3 shows, as the practical, communicative organizing (or dis-organizing) of others' attention to relevant and significant issues at hand. Such attention-direction is behaviorally observable, phenomenologically powerful, and deeply political at the same time. Recall E. E. Schattschneider's dictum (Schattschneider 1960; Lukes 1974) that all "organization is the mobilization of bias." But organizations do not mobilize bias in the abstract; their members do that as they select some issues as appropriate to address and others as inappropriate, as they serve some clients and not others who may need services, as they attend to some problems and put others aside. This formulation of ordi-

nary practice suggests normative results: any organizing of others' attention is simultaneously a structuring of their neglect as well (Bruner 1990).

This analysis allows us to link planning and administrative practice directly to the exercise of influence and power. Most obviously, the ability to shape others' attention generalizes the form of power commonly discussed as "agenda-setting." Less obviously, but perhaps more importantly, recognizing the attention-organizing character of practice raises crucial questions about the organization, administration, and planning of democratic participation in a modern polity (Krumholz and Forester 1990). Following the normative directions discussed briefly above, this understanding of practice suggests a distinctively counterhegemonic or democratizing role for planning and administrative actors: the exposure of issues that political-economic structures otherwise would bury from public view, the opening and raising of questions that otherwise would be kept out of public discussion, the nurturance of hope rather than the perpetuation of a modern cynicism under conditions of great complexity and interdependence.⁴

Note that this formulation of planning and administrative practice is purposive but not reductively instrumental. It is phenomenologically sensitive—to the shaping and reading of action as meaningful—but it does not treat meaning making as a disembodied and apolitical activity. It is political and interested, too, without automatically being cast functionally in the service of one class interest or another. But this notion of practice leads to a closely related problem, that of rationality. If we are to consider practice as the situated, practical, politically charged organizing of attention, when can we call that activity "rational," and when not? For if we cannot make sense of the rationality of such practice, our very formulation of practical activity will be suspect.

3. The Political Analysis of Rationality

The situated, attention-organizing formulation of practice leads to an intriguing reformulation of our notions of administrative and planning rationality. Thirty years ago, the equation of rationality with optimization was broken by Herbert Simon's ideas about bounded rationality (Simon 1957). Simon argued that the real constraints of decision makers' own information-processing abilities led those decision makers not to optimize but to "satisfice," to meet

lowered expectations, expectations that could then be satisfied rather than optimized, given that the ideal conditions of perfect information were not to be met. In planning and administrative theory, such "bounded" rationality has long appeared to be virtually natural: "Of course we can't really optimize! We have to 'satisfice' instead" (Friedmann 1987; Denhardt 1981).

Chapter 4 argues that the theory of communicative action leads us to a powerful extension of Simon's account, an extension that recognizes both politics and structural, systematic distortions of decision making and cooperative action. Simon's powerful attack on the optimizing model focused on a particular category of constraint: constraints that were both *necessarily* present and independent of contingent political-economic *structures*. By considering administrative practice now as communicative interaction rather than as the cognitive activity of decision making, we can explore further questions about the bounded nature of rational action. Shouldn't we distinguish necessary from unnecessary bounds upon such interactions? Shouldn't we distinguish structural from non-structural bounds?

Just as Simon argued that the satisficing model of bounded rationality called for distinctively different strategies of action than the optimizing model did, so a Habermasian reformulation of bounded rationality points to yet further, and indeed politically richer, strategies too. We need not carry through this line of argument here, for that argument has been developed elsewhere (Forester 1989, chapters 3 and 4). Yet note that the response to "bounds" upon action that are both socially unnecessary and structurally based must be a response that challenges or seeks to alter present social structures, a response that challenges any perceived "necessity" or "natural" or reified character of such constraints. Here we have the link between a tradition of ideology critique and political action and a previously altogether depoliticized understanding of administrative and planning rationality.

4. The Examination of Interaction and Learning

The analysis of communicative action also points us toward a rich and multilayered formulation of social interaction. When we speak, we do not send messages as senders electronically linked to receivers. We perform speech acts in socially rule-structured contexts in which we seek to make meaning and in which we interpret

the meanings of others' speech (and gesture) in turn. So we know that a simple "hello" is not so simple: depending on context, inflection, tone, and history, for example, what is heard literally as an utterance of greeting may be instead an affectless, if not curt, acknowledgement of one's presence (from a harried clerk), a grudging act of obedience to rules (from a child), a soft expression of desire (from a lover), or a sarcastic comment upon an obligation betrayed (from a housemate kept waiting too long for one's arrival).

When we assess the structure of speech acts, we find a curious "double structure" that communication theorists have long noted: speakers simultaneously *enact relationships* with one another as they *speak about* whatever they do. Habermas suggests that speakers seeking mutual understanding—even if they only ask for the salt at the dinner table—ordinarily make four pragmatic claims upon their listeners, claims: (1) to the truth of what's referred to (there is salt on the table to be passed); (2) to the legitimacy of the norms invoked in the context (having prefaced my request, for example, with "please," I am now entitled as a full participant at the dinner table, to receive the salt); (3) to the trustworthiness of self by the speaker (no, I'm not kidding); and (4) to the meaningful character of the words, gestures, or tokens used (perhaps a whispered "please" and a point of a finger toward the salt so that another conversation will not be interrupted).

This pragmatic analysis of claims making suggests effects upon listeners under ordinary conditions just as it tells us something about what we do when we speak. So we can now explore how claims to the truth of states of affairs may alter listeners' *beliefs* about what is so; how claims to legitimacy may alter their *consent* and deference to norms; how our expressive claims may alter listeners' *trust*; and how claims to have formulated meaning coherently may alter listeners' basic *mode of attention paid* to the issue at hand.

This analysis in turn suggests a provocative extension of theories of power that focus upon the mobilization of bias and agenda-setting. For now, as chapter 5 shows, we can assess administrative and planning action as it shapes what others know, the norms and rules they may take to be legitimate, the expectations of others they internalize, and the frameworks in which they come to pose issues. This suggests how, in speaking practically, administrators and planners shape quite pragmatically (and politically!) the ways that other citizens learn or fail to learn.

Significantly too, this analysis of the structure of pragmatic interaction suggests the nature of doubt faced by participants in

administrative and planning processes, when claims making may be contested or challenged. Doubts about truth claims raise uncertainties, but doubts about legitimacy, expressive, or meaning-constituting claims raise not uncertainties but ambiguities. This result is important for two reasons. First, uncertainty and ambiguity appear to call for quite different practical responses. Facing uncertainty, we need information. Facing ambiguity, we need practical, perhaps authoritative, judgment. Second, in administrative and planning contexts, questions of ambiguity (what do they really *want*?) are likely to be reduced to those of uncertainty (shall we devise a questionnaire to see what they really *do want*?). The resulting call for more information (and perhaps more information-processing equipment) may then only further obscure the political and social judgments that must inevitably be made. If this argument is half-right, then the reduction of ambiguity to uncertainty may have subtle and perverse depoliticizing effects.

5. The "Double Structure" of Organizing and Organizational Behavior

We can turn now to the study of organizations and organizing practices. The analyses of communicative action, dimensions of social learning and doubt, and the link between the organizing of attention and the play of political power have instructive implications for our understanding of formal and informal organizations.

Most importantly, the double structure of communicative interaction has a powerful organizational analogue. Political organizers must pay attention simultaneously to the goals they wish to achieve *and* to the ways in which their actions—their speech, gestures, pronouncements, expressions—reconstitute their own identities, shape their reputations, and thus further enable or undercut their future abilities to act. The same is true more generally of organizational continuity. Organizations do not survive by themselves, for they are reproduced by their members. Organizations have both productive and reproductive elements, if not functions. Whether we have in mind a city hall bureaucracy, a labor union, or an environmental advocacy organization, as organization members act purposively to accomplish their ends, so do they reproduce, for better or worse, in more and less skilled ways, the very social relations that may sustain their organizations in the first place. Dealing with the problems at hand raise productive or instrumental

issues; maintaining or building "the membership" raises reproductive issues.

The structural features of the pragmatics of communicative action have their organizational counterparts too. But now we can explore the organizational repertoires of skills and knowledge that actors draw upon to pitch their claims rhetorically as they seek to shape others' beliefs, consent, trust, and formulations of issues. We can expect that organizational action will draw upon these elements in quite variable ways. Here the examination of advocacy and oppositional organizations can be instructive.

In chapter 6 we consider the experience of organizers' efforts to build community-labor coalitions concerned with industrial pollutants and workers' and community members' "right to know" about industries' use of toxic chemicals. In such cases, we can see immediately the organizers' attempts to frame issues selectively and to educate the public about information suppressed by powerful corporate actors. At the same time, we can see the careful attempts by the organizers to constitute their own organizations: to build their "selves," their reputations, through expressions of solidarity with the interests of others, to build their legitimacy through coalitions with respected others in the community. The "double structure" of speech, as Habermas put it, has a direct organizational analogue: organizations concern themselves with goals, substance, and content to be sure, but as they do so, they must also continually renew themselves, work to maintain relationships, work to maintain reputation and identity.

This balancing act has two central risks, of course. First, a narrow concern with instrumental outcomes can weaken an organization's ability to maintain itself. For example, voluntary organizations typically go through cycles in which task performance drives out attention to recruitment, burnout of the shrinking core members begins to set in, and a crisis of identity ("Can we continue this?") ensues. Second, a narrow concern with organizational maintenance and reputation, conversely, can drive out attention to task performance and instrumental production. Thus we have the stereotype of career bureaucrats who are risk averse, risking so little in the way of reputation, political and professional support, and trust of other actors that only the most routinized and non-controversial tasks can be achieved.

A critical theory of organizational behavior and organizing leads to many more questions than it answers. In particular we must explore the strategies organizations and their members use to reproduce beliefs, consent, trust, and attention in highly politi-

cized contexts. These questions lead immediately to those of the maintenance and vulnerability of hegemonic power.

A critical account of organizing leads us directly to a dialectics of power and resistance: power exists as a social relationship reproduced by concrete actions. Power, too, has its limits, its vulnerabilities. If we can investigate how the reproduction of power, as hegemonic patterns of attention, for example, can be itself vulnerable, we would be able then to inform possibilities of resistance to various forms of domination.⁵ Furthermore, if policy making shapes our political future, in part by restructuring the political and administrative organization of schools, hospitals, relief services, banks, regulatory agencies, and so on, then the theory of communicative action should inform our understanding of the political significance of various policy proposals and alternatives.

6. The Analysis of Policy Initiatives

We have too little cogent sociology of public policy today (Bell 1976; Alford and Friedland 1985). We have instead two forms of policy analysis, incrementalist and utilitarian, which severely constrain our vision.

The incrementalist analysis focuses on the negotiations involved in the formulation and implementation of public policy. As policy is being formulated, advocates of various interests lobby and exert influence to shape the (typically legislative) proposals being considered (Wildavsky 1979). As policy, once legislated, then mandates administrative and organizational action, a new round of negotiations takes place. Given limited resources of time, expertise, knowledge, and the established organizational interests at hand, how now is a broad policy directive actually to be carried out in practice (Lipsky 1980)? The utilitarian line of policy analysis is best typified by the widespread interest in variations of cost-benefit analysis as a foundation for the examination of alternative policy proposals (Tribe 1972; Paris and Reynolds 1983).

In each case, policy initiatives are treated as tools, as instrumental strategies to reach ends. The incrementalist asks how compromises are made along the way so that the original ends are displaced; the utilitarian asks how, whether, and which ends have been reached. Yet neither approach—helpful as both of these may indeed be—helps us to understand how policy making and policy implementation reshape the lived worlds of actors, restructure

social worlds in ways that alter actors' opportunities, capacities to act, and self-conceptions too. Here critical theory can help us in intriguing ways.

Habermas's social theory poses problems of social learning at two levels of analysis. Following but drastically reformulating Marx on a societal level, Habermas argues that societies learn in both technical-instrumental (productive) and moral-practical (reproductive) dimensions. The former echoes the development of forces of production; the latter echoes the development of social relations of production. At the level of action, however, we learn in the dimensions in which we act communicatively: those of making and testing claims about states of affairs in the world, about appropriate and legitimate social relationships, about personal and social identities, and about ways of framing issues at hand.⁶

We must ask, though, how the particular claims of social and political actors can ever be established or even routinized in enduring social and political structures. How can we connect the interactions of claims-making actors to the structural learning embodied in developing institutions? How, alternatively, can an institutional pronouncement be challenged and reformulated so that institutional developments are redirected?

We can answer these questions if we explore the nature of the social infrastructure that mediates: (1) between enacted truth claims and the social stock of knowledge; (2) between particular legitimacy claims and political patterns of authority; (3) between our expressive claims and social patterns of identity and membership; and (4) between particular claims formulating the significance of problems and the socioeconomic institutions that allocate social attention. As such mediating institutions (the knowledge industries, courts, and legislatures, and cultural organizations, for example) change, so do they affect the social levels they mediate between: structural learning and actors' developing beliefs, patterns of consent, relations of solidarity, and investments of attention.

This analysis leads to wide-ranging but closely integrated questions in the examination of public policy. We can now explore how particular policy proposals promise to alter this socially mediating infrastructure, this mid-level range of institutions that links the lived worlds of actors to the broader structures of society. For example, with the onset of policies promoting environmental deregulation, not only will corporate actors be instrumentally given greater autonomy of action, but public *knowledge* of private action is likely to suffer, false claims to public safety and corporate vigilance are likely to manipulate public trust, and issues of prof-

itability are likely to preempt public attention to those of public health and alternative possibilities of public investment and control. Here a critical communications theory can integrate a structural analysis of institutional change with a phenomenological analysis of the ever-vulnerable and shifting lived worlds of social actors.⁷

Concluding Notes

These introductory claims have been abstract, promissory, and broad rather than deep. The chapters that follow seek to show how a critical communications theory of society might inform our methods of social research and our analyses of administrative practice, rationality, interaction, organization, and public policy analysis.

Whether these claims can be extended and built upon rather than revised altogether only subsequent research efforts will show. The attempt to “apply” critical theory to issues of planning and administrative practice is still in its early stages.

Habermas’s work has been provocative, controversial, ambitiously pitched, and consistently metatheoretical: it provides a framework rather than a series of particular explanations; it poses systematic questions rather than sets of hypotheses to test; it seeks to integrate styles of analysis and research approaches in fresh ways. It shapes our inquiries rather than providing operational tools with which we might manipulate data. It brings us insistently to the intersection of concerns with action, rationality, politics, structural change, and history—and then leaves us to carry out more concrete analyses, to investigate concrete cases, to try to marry ethnographic analysis with social structural accounts, and to do so without taking a pledge of normative agnosticism (Forester 1992a).

The glass of critical theory is surely half-empty: we are still missing a good deal of guidance about the most fruitful ways to carry out empirical, historically situated, phenomenologically cogent, normatively insightful analyses. Here surely the balance must now shift from necessarily abstract methodological analyses toward the effort to assess specific cases, concrete attempts to work out the implications of a critical communications framework in particular cases, specific analytical experiences on the basis of which our collective research abilities and judgments will develop. But the glass is also half full: the theory of communicative action

represents certainly the most systematic rethinking of action theory in the context of societal rationalization that is available today. That it draws not only from the classical sources of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Mead, but depends heavily too, if more implicitly, on the work of Wittgenstein and Austin, Gadamer, and Apel, makes the work both more challenging and more daunting. As a result, a critical theory of public administration, public policy, and planning is likely to be provocative and instructive, but remain marginalized too. Both its insistent attention to a dialectics of power and resistance and the very theoretical reach it demands will provide counterweights against the pressures to absorb it into more conventional theories of public administration and public policy.

Critical theory remains, these chapters will argue, a rich source of insights, a source of challenge to social and political analysis, and a reminder of the structured vulnerabilities and contingencies of social action throughout society. Critical theory reminds us, too, of our continuing need to explore the contingencies of power and our possibilities to organize a just and good life in the diverse settings in which we live.