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STRIFE: URBAN PLANNING AND
AGONISM

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Abstract Conflict is immanent to planning, and perhaps particularly to practice within a pluralistic, multicultural society. Chantal Mouffe argues that there is a political need for an ‘agonistic pluralism’ as a democratic response to a context of diversity and conflict. Perhaps the key complex of problems in contemporary planning is how to work with ‘strife’. Proceeding from the perspective of a Danish urban regeneration project named ‘kvarterløft’, this article will discuss planning experiences with conflicts, empowerment, consensus-steering, and governance that point to the need to make ‘strife’ – the ongoing dispute about words, meaning, discourses, visions or ‘the good life’ – central to planning processes.

Keywords agonism, governance, planning, strife, urban regeneration

Introduction

What are the key dynamics of contemporary urban planning? Some suggest they are (as always) a matter of power plays (Flyvbjerg, 1991), while others suggest the lack of communicative democracy (Healey, 1997), planners’ communicative ethic (Forester, 1999) or habitus (Hillier, 2002b). Some

underline the ‘messy power and oppression’, the ‘symbolic violence and institutional victimization’ occurring when ‘the state acts upon citizens against their interests’ and allows them ‘no elements of choice, or freedom to resist’ (Gunder and Mouat, 2002: 125). Some suggest that urban politics and planning are moving towards a more complex, fragmented and historically layered field of action, resulting in a more unpredictable political field of action. This may sharpen collaborative, communicative and reflexive practice (behaviour and action within a complex field of interests, power relations and plural schemes of signification), and this may turn politics and planning into a more mobile and contextual kind of work (see Amin and Thrift, 2002; Ascher, 2002). Furthermore, planners must move within a political field of reason, interests, norms and ways of thinking about planning, plans and public participation; their actions are shaped by this field.

This article will focus on an element that is missing from these conceptions of contemporary planning, namely strife.¹ Planners experience what they see as antagonism – conflicts between irreconcilable views and interest – almost on an everyday basis, and believe they can be solved only legally or by political decisions. If these conflicts were understood as agonistic strifes, as disagreements between ‘adversaries’ and not enemies (Mouffe, 2000),² planners as well as public authorities and policy makers would have to treat conflicts in another way. There is one obvious political reason for seeing conflicts and disagreements as antagonism instead of as agonism, because antagonism as ‘unsolvable’ has to be dealt with by power (legal means), whereas agonism demands time-consuming or ‘endless’ communicative processes. On the other hand agonism could be said to be the ethos of a democracy respecting the legitimacy of difference and interests through public participation. Public planning should ideally be a place for strife about legitimate opinions and meanings on the road towards reasonable and commonly agreed solutions or consensus-building among mutual adversaries.

Although strife is indicated or mentioned in planning studies, it is not discussed in its own terms. That is to say, there is no discussion of what the concept means, what strife ‘looks like’ in practice, and how it is constitutive to planning practices, politics, democracy and discursive practices.³ Following Chantal Mouffe’s (2000) theory of agonism, I will argue that ‘the art of strife’ is what is to be expected in public planning in a world of agonistic pluralism. I will illustrate this problem-complex by looking at concrete manifestations of strife. Partly on the basis of a re-reading of material used earlier (Pløger, 2001), the aims are three-fold: (1) to make a precise conceptualization of strife; (2) to show the significance of the concept in studies of planners’ practice and public participation by outlining types of agonism within a Danish urban regeneration project; and, (3) to make clear that the concept of agonism may point to a significant aspect of an efficient and yet democratic art of governance, namely civil servants’ and planners’ ability to work productively with and within strife.

The article takes a Danish urban regeneration project – *kvarterløft* –⁴ to illustrate how agonism and strife are the shadows of democratic planning and public participation, communication and processes of negotiation and consensus-building. The article focuses precisely on how governance theories, planning theory and practice see strife as antagonism instead of agonism, and therefore treat disagreements and conflicts by using (political, discursive, legal) power and other ways of ruling instead of ‘practising strife’.

The following section covers the conceptualization of strife. The third section presents and discusses the problematic relation between empowerment and governance strategies exemplified by a Danish urban regeneration project ‘the *kvarterløft* project’.⁵ The fourth section discusses dilemmas of urban governance and empowerment strategies arising out of the case studies, emphasizing why conflicts *as* strife must be dealt with. The fifth section outlines forms of agonism inherent to public planning and participation. In conclusion, I argue why it is necessary to be able to work with strife – the ongoing dispute about words, meaning, discourses, visions, or ‘the good life’ – if the goal is to empower citizens and enhance their capabilities to participate in politics or planning processes.

Agonism and governance: strife in question

As is already known, the concept of ‘governance’ refers to ‘a shift from state sponsorship of economic and social programmes and projects to the delivery of these through partnership arrangements which usually involve both governmental and non-governmental organisations’ (Murdoch and Graham, 1998: 41). Governance studies are mainly about institutional design, models of policy making, policy and planning processes, and so about steering and cooperation rather than, for instance, deception, tactics or strife. However, new forms of urban governance are now very much on the agenda (Sehested, 2002). In most cases, governance here is about new forms of steering and managing urban processes, in many cases ignoring the ‘governmentalities’ framing urban governance initiatives and experiments. We here need an ongoing exploration of urban governmentalities – working ‘forms of thought’ (Osborne and Rose cited in Isin et al., 1998: 49) – whether tangible or institutionalized as commonsense, because these discursive and practical dispositives represent and refer to an understanding of ‘the real’, as well as turning ‘reality’ into politics and planning. Here, words and ideologies are working realities, and not least convictions about how people can govern themselves in the city are always present within these governmentalities.

Urban governance is a matter of conflicts of discourse and meaning to a greater degree than traditional governance perspectives on institutional discourses, power networks, partnerships and interest groups fighting within

a specific institutional design reveal. The aim of parties involved in planning is to shape some form of power-to-make-a-difference (Healey, 1997) in a field of conflicts, and this power is the power-of-the-better-argument or the better-discourse strategy. In this way the fight is about discourses, and here strife plays a role before juridical procedures are carried out. Most planning practice studies ignore this, preferring to follow a Habermasian-based theory of communicative, collaborative and deliberative planning, focusing on conflicts expressed as distrust between parties, concealments, abuse of power, and conflict solutions such as compromises, consensus-building or the use of legal forces. These forms of solutions illustrate the fact that agonism is not considered productive to politics and planning, but as a problem to be solved by external 'processual' means such as the law.

There is by now a huge amount of literature on governance, including institutional approaches, but the problem of conflicts and strife, or rather, the problem of agonism inevitably confronting politics, planning processes and public communication, is rarely discussed in detail within policy and planning studies.⁶

Michel Foucault hints (1982/1986: 221–2) that agonism must be seen as produced by 'the recalcitrance of the will and intransigence of freedom' that emerge as a 'permanent provocation'. Leaving agonism to 'the will' and 'the will to freedom' may mean seeing agonism as a 'force', but to speak of freedom indicates strife about meaning, content, values and rights. Mouffe relies in her discussion on agonism on the friend–enemy distinction (Mouffe, 2000), whereas Lyotard defines the strife as 'the unstable condition and the moment in language, where something, which ought to be put in sentence, cannot be' (Lyotard, 1990: 147).

Strife is in this article thought of as a strife between language elements (sentences), words said or written, interpreted, and therefore tied to discourses regimes, or in Lyotard's word 'discourse genre' that 'ties together' and order the words in legitimate sentences. The crucial point is that 'at every moment the relationship of power may become a confrontation between two adversaries' (Foucault, 1982/1986: 226). Foucault here indicates this confrontation as a confrontation about discourse genre or between discourse regimes or articulated sentences, and we may therefore define this situation, this form of agonism, as a strife working as 'disputes' (Albertsen, 2002). As defined by Lyotard and Mouffe the problem of agonism is to respect the difference ('le differend' of interpretations, meanings and interests) and to regulate the language games without suppressing the difference in values and discourse genres. And this is what Mouffe tries to point out and grasp by her definition of agonism, namely to see one another not alone as 'enemies', but also as mutual dependent 'adversaries'.⁷

Agonism is, according to Mouffe, constitutive to democracy and 'social life' (Mouffe, 2002: 85, cited in Hillier, 2002b: 46), and according to Hillier agonism is constitutive for identity and systems of social relations (Hillier,

2002b: 249). Agonism is thus seen as constitutive of planning in the form of strife, or as Foucault says, as ‘a permanent provocation’⁸ inherent to public participation processes constituted as they are on differences of interest, values and intentions, and ‘the agony of reason’ directed at ‘questioning the contemporary limits of necessity’ (Owen, 1999: 37). Strife is, in other words, the expressive form of agonism, and essential to disputes about words said and written, and therefore to meaning, schemes of significance, interpretations and discourses in play.

The concept of strife is suggested because governance processes, including those of public participation or partnership relations, will always involve situations where actors will ‘behave critically and justifiably towards each other’ and ‘create situations of public strife about what to do’ (Albertsen, 2002: 50). This is why strife must be seen as constitutive to politics, public participation and democracy.

Although strife is intrinsic to democratic and enlightened societies, the value pluralization of modern societies is treated ‘as antagonism’ to be solved (‘in the end’) by legal means or other forms of power. The legal solution corresponds well to a government ethos defined by the ‘right manner of disposing things . . . to an end which is “convenient” for each of the things that are to be governed’ (Foucault, 1991: 95). The strife can be managed rationally and legally if it is defined as antagonism, but is ‘troublesome’ to govern by legal means or other institutional forms of power if defined as agonism, as disagreements between ‘adversaries’. Agonistic pluralism is thus about developing ‘a manifold justice’. The problem of agonism is therefore not a problem that is made to disappear by legal procedures, but a problem complex that requires new ways of thinking about power, conflicts, and how to make strife the constitutive centre of planning.

Conflict and governance: the problem of empowerment

Neighbourhood regeneration became a crucial political issue in Denmark at the beginning of the 1990s, in relation to increased social problems in many (sub)urban areas all over the country. Politically speaking, ‘negative social spirals’ were produced by physical decay in the housing stock, leading to cheap rents, resulting in more marginalization and people with social problems moving in.⁹ On this basis, the government established a nationwide urban regeneration programme, inviting municipalities to apply for funds on specific criteria. At first, 3 urban areas in Copenhagen were chosen, and in the spring of 2002, a total of 5 neighbourhoods within the municipality,¹⁰ and 12 projects nationwide, were financed under the programme known as ‘the *kvarterløft* project’.¹¹

The main targets of the *kvarterløft*-project are to establish a holistic and coordinated achievement, with new forms of citizens' involvement and public-private or public-public partnerships. The Copenhagen municipality council especially emphasize the democratic aspect of the project. The project is therefore politically designed to apply bottom-up planning to empower local citizens, and the targets are to develop local partnerships, build networks and create local political arenas as a strategy to reconstruct a local public sphere politically engaged in and caring about the community.¹² Political empowerment means empowering communities' and citizens' discursive, communicative and negotiative capacities, and this will probably lead to more strife centring on diverging interpretations of statements, assertions, texts and plans (McGuirk, 2000).

The Danish *kvarterløft*-project and evaluations made of the project delineate how public planning among politicians and planners in principle is seen as conflicts among 'equals', and planners are the mediators between conflicting interests. The project, in this way, anticipates strife, but, as will be clear later on, also exemplifies how disagreements and conflicts are seen as antagonism instead of forms of (productive) agonism. So far, critiques have been made mainly from the perspective of political science, favouring empowerment and governance theories. These studies focus on or hint at conflicts that have emerged, but they do not recognize strife as a special issue for participatory and collaborative projects.

If empowerment, as in the *kvarterløft* project, is a strategic tool for urban projects, conflicts should be expected to be part of the public participation process, because we have local empowerment:

... if the neighbourhood gets greater penetrating and leverage power in the form of agenda-determining behaviour together with the ability to act tactically and strategically optimised in relation to municipality, region, and state, private and institutional investors. (Andersen and Nordgaard, 2002: 2)

Local empowerment strategies should be made in order to 'strengthen localities' internal political, economic and cultural power relations' (Andersen and Nordgaard, 2002: 3). The real outcome is often more modest. The effect of the *kvarterløft* project was that a specific kind of empowerment emerged, namely that of improving citizens' consciousness about the role of local involvement, and on how local political work can make a difference through such modest activities as writing letters to the newspapers. Andersen and Nordgaard find that local citizens (other than the 'professional' neighbourhood 'fathers') participating feel they have gained more confidence with regard to their own participation in a political discourse. Empowerment is, according to Andersen and Nordgaard, basically a matter of shaping this kind of social capital in neighbourhoods.

Andersen and Nordgaard find conflicts between local citizens and municipal authorities, but recognize this as antagonism (people feel

themselves 'cheated' when municipal authorities either change or postpone decisions made 'in common'). Therefore, they do not recognize or discuss how their study provides an example of how strife, and how to work with strife, is crucial to empowerment strategies.

Antagonism is always a problem to policy makers wishing to make planning more effective and predictable. However, including citizens in the political decision processes is also crucial if one wishes to promote a more efficient public administration. The *kvarterløft* is a political attempt to make the prevailing community democracy based on more active incorporation of affected citizens in discussions, and making them more responsible for the development of their neighbourhoods and communities (Bang and Hoff, 2002). The wish to empower local citizens politically within the heterogeneous, multicultural and individualized city makes it more difficult to govern through rules and predetermined goals and programmes, because the political space of action will depend more on the ability to include and legitimate multiple voices and demands.

Another crucial consequence is that everyday knowledge of life comes to play a more vital role in politics and efficient policy making and planning. It is everyday matters, experiences and cultures that (in)form people's understanding of policies and local projects. If the *kvarterløft* project politically were to take this development into consideration, it should work from shaping a local (open) network organization (ideally including inhabitants, politicians, administration and other relevant stakeholders) as a precondition for achieving efficient solutions to local projects, as well as shaping sustainable political decisions (MandagMorgen, 2002: 26). It is necessary to see citizens and local organizations as a knowledge-qualified and active partner in policy making on local issues. Dialogues are needed if governments want to improve efficiency, wholeness and cohesion in their policy making and in public processes. Citizens have knowledge, and thus power, that can strengthen both the process of policy making and the process of implementation. Bang and Hoff believe that political authorities' own efficiency depends on citizens feeling that their everyday matters are touched, and that they have some kind of influence on, and responsibility for, the outcome of projects. Citizens should not feel themselves to be non-influential and powerless pieces in an institutional design, or of secondary importance to governing procedures and rules. Citizens must be seen as and feel themselves to be active co-players in finding solutions to everyday problems and tasks.

Again the strife seems to be 'the matter of the game', but political institutions continue to treat strife as a form of antagonism instead of as a form of agonism. This is partly done because underlying the idea of public participation is the presupposition that people are consensus-directed if issues at stake are related to their everyday matters and worked for by somebody (planners) who 'knows' their lives and needs. Consensus-steering is a crucial part of policy makers' ideal of public planning. Consensus can be reached,

or forced through, in several ways such as through partnerships, contracts, administrative models, and a 'tug-of-war' model (Engberg, 2002). *Consensus-steering* is precisely a way of thinking implying that:

... actors do not have to share substantial ideals, values or preferences, but they have to negotiate and reach a consensus as a common platform for the process to move on. (Engberg and Bayer, 2001: 12)

Engberg and Bayer find consensus-steering to be a realistic strategy for several forms of planning, such as the decentralization of politics and administration as a means to include and involve citizens in the work of improving their own quality of life (Engberg and Bayer, 2001: 13). In the case of the *kvarterløft* project, for instance, this strategy is understood to be organized as a form of partnership planning. Engberg and Bayer, however, see the partnership model as 'a defensive mechanism for handling conflicts and turf fights' (Engberg and Bayer, 2001: 13), because the projects have not established a politically representative body that can handle conflicts in a new and decisive way. A possible source of this problem could be described as follows:

The civil servants who take part in partnership settings struggle with dilemmas relating to control and accountability in networks in which private partners seek to challenge and influence municipal decisions and priorities. (Engberg and Bayer, 2001: 13)

It is important to recognize that the Danish urban regeneration projects, and their local secretariats as well as active citizens, are situated at the bottom of a traditional political decision hierarchy and placed outside formal or informal political networks and informal political communication. This often places the civil servants working within the projects in an odd position, having to defend political decisions of which they may not approve or whose source they do not know. Civil servants here have the double role of (1) being the community advocates in relation to the municipal political authorities, and (2) being the political and administrative system's supervisor and controller regarding the project (Engberg, 2002: 17).

In this way the planner is forced to see disagreements as 'antagonism' that has to be solved by (political or juridical) power. Politically planners will not be given the position to handle conflicts as forms of agonism; because, for instance, consensus-steering politics and planning are a legitimization and depoliticization strategy using civil servants as 'neutral' mediators and advisers. Furthermore, consensus steering forces local parties to be the ones who must 'clarify mutual disagreements by themselves' (Engberg, 2002: 16). Consequently, a consensus strategy is a way of avoiding turning questions of interests, representation, justice or power into political questions and community controversies, and a strategy that may

help to limit these controversial questions to one of democracy and influence. Consensus steering can thus be seen as a way of ignoring antagonism or suppressing strife, because this form of governance prevents public disputes from unfolding and becoming important in planning politics. Disagreements and controversial opinions are left to citizens themselves; it is their 'own problem' to find solutions to disagreements.

Thus, consensus-steering as a strategy gives the political field and civil servants an opportunity to ignore agonism and strife, because consensus-steering is a way of working that makes no effort to solve the problem of informal politics so common to collaborative processes (see next section). Consensus steering may, however, turn out to be a positive political strategy in one respect; it has the possibility to form a capacity to collaborate, and it can provide political recognition to local active participants and interest groups. But efficiency and power are at the core, because consensus steering is 'an exercise of bureaucratic power that compels actors to reach agreement if they wish to move on, and it is a framework for deliberation and dialogue' (Engberg, 2002: 16) practised through networks and partnerships. Therefore, Engberg and Bayer say that the *kvarterløft* project shows that 'governance is governing' (Engberg and Bayer, 2001), and the project is a matter of efficiency and new forms of effective governance rather than an experiment in citizens' democracy.

These studies of new or distinct forms of governance developed through the Danish *kvarterløft* projects depict steering from an institutional perspective and do not reach the level of everyday conflicts. This may be why strife is not recognized as a form inherent to planning governance and democracy. However, the studies clearly illustrate several dilemmas that are inherent to public governance and point towards the need to place strife at the centre of planning studies.

Caught between governance and empowerment: dilemmas

Policy makers and planners have always had difficulty with conflict management and have not yet developed a respect for strife and its forms as a recurrent feature of power and decision-making structures. It is as if there is no political recognition of the idea that governance, planning and strife are a matter of how to acknowledge and manage people's common schemes of signification and social codes on 'how to live together' in cities (involving ethics, morality, commonsense and values). The hegemonic political discourse is that of governance and ruling through control and steering, even within the new empowerment politics, whereas participation is about coping with meaningful life and its diverse content.

Public empowerment should basically mean having the ability to govern

one's own life, and the new governance ideas described in the previous section represent a vision of steering through networks that says that networks should play a decisive role in designing and implementing policies (Rhodes, 1995). Governance cannot be distinguished from its governmentality (Foucault, 1991). Societies' institutional forms of government, such as public participation, are most efficient and rational when they build on a commonly accepted governmentality framed by politico-ideological schemes on 'how to think about governing' (Dean, 1999: 16).¹³ The production of an institutional governmentality is to shape forms of thought about subjects and issues, including preferred ways of life, conduct and behaviour. Plans contain politicians' and planners' political ideologies about 'the good life', and spatial planning and its schemes of signification ('good' planning for 'the good life') are part of what Foucault called societies' special form of government, namely 'the conduct of conduct' (Dean, 1999: 10). To Foucault, to conduct means 'to lead, to direct, or to guide' (Dean, 1999), and planning as a form of government is the practice of shaping human conduct and acts by material and discursive means.

Urban regeneration projects are not only projects, but build on politicized forms of 'thought . . . embedded within programmes for the direction and reform of conduct' (Dean, 1999: 18). Planning and urban regeneration programmes such as the ones studied are part of an art of government representing distinctive ways of thinking, seeing and reasoning; in other words, shaped by a certain governmentality. Margo Huxley (2002: 145) says more precisely: 'seeing planning as a form of governmentality is to trace its connection to various normalising discourses' – and, one might add, strategies and practices of normalizing.¹⁴

Planning as a form of governance is, as seen, not only about developing control and steering of processes, but also of shaping the public discourse, its schemes of signification, ways of communication, and on what to communicate about. It is also a matter of dispersing discursive and political power and making interests powerless through tactics, strategies, situations or unchangeable political end-goals. Thus, what about empowerment as a form of governmentality?

If one looks at the intended empowerment and bottom-up politics within the *kvarterløft* project, empowerment here means strategies of action aimed at giving weak groups in society greater control over their living conditions, and of giving citizens more influence on local projects (Andersen and Nordgaard, 2002). The *kvarterløft* projects should in the long run reshape local participatory and democratic capacities as a way to enhance citizens' capabilities to improve local resources and shape political interests. Specifically (inspired by Andersen and Nordgaard, 2002: 9):

- To shape local *political empowerment* is on the one hand about constructing and structuring a local capacity to act politically for the benefit of the locality, and on the other hand the shaping of an

institutional capacity and civil servants' competence to deal with a more politicized community and a more communicative form of public planning. To teach citizens about political processes and ways of thinking is a way to make them 'good democrats'. To be 'good democrats' requires, among other things, that active citizens be given insight into the 'rules of the game'. The goal is to prevent conflicts arising, partly by giving participants a feeling of being part of influential political networks and gaining benefit from having institutional relations or alliances. One of the political advantages, if successful, is the maintenance or even improvement of rational and efficient planning.

- *Institutional empowerment* means, in political terms, securing the public as fixed within an authoritative governance system, while slightly improving the processes of participation and influence, but to the benefit of the positions of institutional power relative to the public.

In effect, empowerment means institutionalizing a certain form of government and governance. Andersen and Nordgaard describe this as follows:

It [kvarterløft] becomes a top-down grounding of empowerment, where power to participate, information, knowledge and participative capabilities are provided, but [in a process and design] where the field of action is 'encapsulated' from the beginning. (Andersen and Nordgaard, 2002: 10)

The governance system, according to Andersen and Nordgaard (2002: 10–11), tries to expand 'their rules of the game' by only introducing themes for a local development agenda, but not giving the citizens an opportunity to introduce their own themes before the agenda suggested politically has been set, or giving citizens the power to convert political proposals. However, according to several studies, the governance system in Copenhagen really tries to play a more proactive role in empowering the neighbourhoods by inviting citizens concerned to comment on early plans and propose projects (Bang and Hoff, 2002; Engberg and Bayer, 2001). However, changing processes will not change the rules of the game itself or give citizens the opportunity to question existing planning discourses, the system of power, the form of political governance or the form of democracy. The policy makers do not want an empowerment process that can shape a politically transgressive and transformative form of participation, but wish to prove that it is possible to build more efficient institutional forms of governance, for instance by making new local alliances and partnerships, with a greater political commitment.

The *kvarterløft* project so seen comprises an ever-latent conflict and tension between government policies and governance practices in relation to stated intentions of implementing empowerment planning.

Empowerment theories and policies contain several tensions or ambivalences between the forms of governance preferred and the forms of empowerment process desired. Table 1 illustrates these tensions.

The success criteria for empowerment that are highlighted politically are participation, mobilization, inclusive democracy and a communicative-collaborative approach and, somewhat surprisingly, management-by-objectives. The table outlines how antagonism is immanent to every attempt to establish a governance–empowerment relationship. The tensions and conflict potentials described in the table are ever-present where citizens meet political objectives such as politically approved plans, efficiency or end-goal orientation, and it is hard, as shown, to appeal to citizens' involvement by promising influence, and then in practice confirming citizens' earlier experiences of how the political system rules. When the *kvarterløft* projects are criticized for in reality having developed into a 'co-operative network implementation, where one level only [the political level] designates the overall policy framework' (Jensen, 1998: 18), the leader of the national *kvarterløft* secretariat gives a non-reply on this particular question (recognizing only that people *are* in fact involved locally). Instead, he eagerly emphasizes that one should be 'careful not to judge the good as bad, if the best world is not achieved' (Munk, 1998: 92). In other words, it is presupposed in governmental planning politics that democracy means representative democracy and decentralization of responsibility, but not local power on local matters.¹⁵ It is a matter of strengthening governance structures through committed local participation and alliances on common

TABLE 1 *The agonistic tension between governance and empowerment*

<i>Governance as:</i>	<i>Empowerment as:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political government • Consensus strategies & politically defined consensus • Management-by-objectives • Framework steering through plans • Networks & partnerships • Cross-sectoral organization of the projects • Holistic planning • Efficiency & end-goal orientation • Seeking community commitment and responsibility • Citizens' approval of the system design and the 'rules of the game' • Accountability • Representative democracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local political mobilization • Citizens' involvement in matters of common interest • Agenda proposals • Influence on initial plan • Networks and local partnerships • Cross-organizational form of work • Interests • Communicative action and open structures • Process orientation • Understanding and acceptance of consensus • Trust & predictability • Local democracy

goals. The table however clearly illustrates that strife must be seen as immanent to public planning, empowerment strategies, and urban regeneration projects.

However banal it may seem to say that conflicts are crucial to public planning, this does not lead to the 'banal' recognition of strife as crucial to planning processes or planning studies. The realm of modern policy making, governance and public planning features cultural pluralism, individuality, reflexive modernization, discursive fights about discourses, contextual complexity with regard to mental maps, schemes of signification, norms and values, and an ambivalence concerning 'the right thing to do', and these are all realities that point to strife as constitutive to planning.

Agonism contextualized

In consensus-building theory, it is accepted, says Hillier (2002a: 116), that 'actors build shared meanings and interests, and generate new ideas for framing problems and approaches to move forward. Consensus-building is regarded as being transformative.' However, she also states (2002a: 111) that actor networks are always contingent, being formed in response to shifting interests and coalitions, and therefore consensus-striving processes cannot escape the tensions of agonism as soon as interests, values, and schemes of signification are involved.

Working with public participation in planning (Pløger, 2001), I realized that planners as civil servants were not only part of an 'art of governance', but had to develop 'the art of strife'. James Throgmorton (2000) provides a good example of how what was expected to be a process of persuasion turned into strife – a conflict of opinion – as a result of actors' different intentions and interests. The planner as a civil servant is placed within an agonistic field constituted by conflicts and disputes about what has been said, what is not said, who said what and when, and so on. In fact, planners are always situated in the middle of different interpretations of assertions, statements and opinions. These are fights between and about values, schemes of signification, and interests. In other words, planners have to work with an obstinate, and maybe recalcitrant, public. Furthermore, the civil servant has to defend him- or herself and work within a political discourse, attain consensus or viable political compromises, and make choices and decisions within this field of conflict and strife. Agonistic space is precisely the space in which people compete for 'recognition, precedence and acclaim' (Seyla Benhabib, cited in Hillier, 2002a: 121). Agonism means competing visions, understandings, discourses, values and norms at play in an indefinite struggle for and against the matters discussed or proposals suggested.

Chantal Mouffe (1999) criticizes theories of deliberative and communicative democracy for having no answer to the problem of power and

antagonism, arising in the political public sphere. As she says, 'if we accept that relations of power are constitutive of the social, then the main question is . . . how to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values' (Mouffe, 1999: 753). Mouffe suggests 'agonistic pluralism' as an alternative to these theories, as a way to try to acknowledge and respect the permanent conflicts in political communication within diverse societies. The aim, she says, must be to transform an 'antagonism' into 'agonism' between what she calls 'adversaries' rather than 'enemies'. In the political realm of agonism, compromises and consensus are possible, but 'should be seen as temporary' (Mouffe, 1999: 755). The task is to enhance 'passion' within politics and to realize that 'agonistic confrontation is in fact [democracy's] very condition of existence' (Mouffe, 1999: 756). A democracy should legitimize conflicts of interests and values, and therefore also be open to power mechanisms and forms of exclusion appearing during the process and in particular situations. One could also say that, where consensus politics and theorists expect reciprocity in policy making processes, they will probably experience agonism, either within the political field, in situations where actors compete for recognition and positions, or where citizens mistrust and are suspicious of political authorities or other stakeholders. The above analysis of local democratic processes finds that Danish public planning can be described as consensus steering and cultural steering, and then the authors ignore that what is really going on is the suppression of strife and agonistic pluralism. In fact, the Danish *kvarterløft* project illustrates many forms of agonism.

In his pre-study on citizens' involvement, Norvig Larsen (1999) indirectly hints at *forms* of agonism experienced within some of the *kvarterløft* projects. One of the agonisms is that between groups of citizens and politicians. Active and participative citizens within one of the *kvarterløft* areas experienced that 'the city council and mayors have short-cut processes of participatory planning by suddenly introducing quite new, non-local (and costly) projects based on an argument of general public interest' (Norvig Larsen, 1999: 9).¹⁶ Citizens saw this as untimely interference in an ongoing process and as a manifestation of ignorance of the existing plan. This way of acting creates great tension between municipal politicians and local activists. Another type of agonism arises when politicians, municipal authorities, community groups or individuals challenge 'the legitimacy and representation of some of the most active citizens' (Norvig Larsen, 1999: 9). This could be the case if citizens and community-based groups agreed to produce a plan of which municipal politicians or bureaucrats disapprove. Public authorities then begin to work against the plan, for instance by making counteractive local alliances (with people opposed to local activists' suggestions), by delaying the municipal approval process, by simply ignoring the plan, or by questioning the local representation behind the plan. These two examples demonstrate that a very easy way to produce agonism is to question the democratic credentials of activists, because very

few of them have been elected representatives or participate with a mandate defined and delimited by the community.

A third type of agonism is the production of internal conflicts between different community groups or between individuals. In one case, 'a city councillor at the first public meeting [founding the project] appointed members to the co-ordination committee' (Norvig Larsen, 1999: 10). Some of these appointed members did represent large tenants' associations, but others simply represented themselves and had no political or organizational hinterland. The result was that the members of the coordination committee spent most time discussing each other's representative credentials. A fourth, related type of agonism is when a single person or group of citizens is in conflict with the local community or tenants' associations.

Very often, these types of agonism are not dealt with in a communicative way, but solved by reorganizing the committee, the working group or the organization. In some cases, consultants have been invited to solve problems defined, and they too have suggested a new management or leadership. One crucial consequence of these types of agonism is that people, particularly those who do not have sympathies or antipathies to parties and interests involved, and who do not belong to groups or parties or just want to participate in work, grow tired of these fights about representation, struggles about the distribution of resources and the allocation of power, and just disappear from participation. They may disappear for the following reason: 'The wrong way is if you fight for the wrong things, if you fight for principles instead of fighting for substantial issues' (Andersen and Nordgaard, 2002: 16), meaning involving yourself in political fights for more or less private interests or solely political principles, instead of trying to evoke and fight for local interests.

These examples show how one negative effect of agonism is an atmosphere of mistrust, attitudes of conflict and, as a result, a strengthening of political power over projects and processes.

A fifth form of agonism is when people follow their self-interest although said to represent community interests, or people defending their own power position within the community. Norvig Larsen experienced how community representatives 'actively tried to hinder individual citizens from gaining influence', because they strove to maintain their traditional position in control of 'what is going on in the neighbourhood, which projects are to be initiated, etc.' (Norvig Larsen, 1999: 17). Here we refer to neighbourhood 'fathers' as well as representatives of tenants' organizations. As Norvig Larsen says, ordinary citizens are most often not able to change the rules of the game, for instance, by demanding that all decisions should be made open to all. Instead, they may experience that 'by mobilising all their influence and political contacts, by sorting and withholding information, by being present in all relevant forums, the traditional networks try to gain control over the new programme' (Norvig Larsen, 1999: 18).

Agonism is therefore a very important critical perspective in order to

understand community processes, public planning processes, and conflicts developing within public participation processes. Agonism is about personal and/or institutional power, values and interests, selfishness, about tactics and strategies inherent to policy making, cooperation as well as collaboration. In other words, agonism is a critical factor for all forms of policy making and communicative processes where interests, values and schemes of signification are involved. Further, this leads to critical factors concerning trust, reciprocity, and interdependency between all levels of politics and planning.

The real problem is that agonism cannot be dealt with in a productive way, because political systems, institutional designs and forms of governance and institutional ways of thinking cannot work with agonism and strife. Systems and institutional designs only repress or restrain disagreements in juridical or political procedures.

Concluding remarks

The overall argument in this article is that both politicians, planners and planning analysis pay too little attention to planning practices as strife, as a form of agonism within planning processes and instead planners (and governments and politicians) treat conflicts and disagreements as antagonism. Public planning implies conflicts and antagonism and the political goal is to transform the conflict to consensus either by partakers' acceptance of a compromise, majority votes, by political decisions, or by law. Antagonism is expected, but the Danish case shows that agonism is not seen as part of a democracy or the result of the play between 'differences' for instance on 'opinions' (Connolly, 1991/2002). The planning system favours the rational and legal solutions to antagonism above agonism, because public planning is viewed as a conflict between 'enemies' and not 'adversaries'. Conflicts are seen as something that need 'permanent' solutions (being legal, institutional, political), and not something to be disputed about.

I am certain that the Danish *kvarterløft* projects represent a deep-felt political wish to make people more politically active, but on the premises of the existing system. It is stated that a major political goal is to improve communities' self-monitoring capacities.¹⁷ What is needed is to make politicians and planners aware of the fact that their discourse on empowerment lacks reflection on how people powerfully can improve their lives on their own terms. This ability requires a personal feeling of *powerfulness* and *masterfulness*,¹⁸ because people's capacity to manage their lives is related to their feeling of having subject-power. 'Powerfulness' is understood as a matter of 'individuals and communities' actual opportunities to get through politically', and 'masterfulness' must be understood as a matter of being able to 'utilise the dispositional possibilities for influence in supposedly adequate ways' (Andersen and Nordgaard, 2002: 9). 'Powerfulness' here is

the possibility to influence processes and projects, political institutions and the political field on one's own premises, and 'masterfulness' is about capacities for actually exploiting opportunities for political influence where they arise. Until these capacities are taken seriously, no policy maker can say they are putting the citizen at the core of their policy making and planning. Mastering and monitoring one's everyday life require not only economic and social security, but a feeling of mastering one's life on one's own terms and having the power capacities to do so, not least in relation to politics and planning affecting everyday life and living conditions.

If those in power positions omit considerations of strife and agonism, they will probably not recognize the need to make people powerful and masterful as defined here. They would likewise ignore the democratic deficit that follows seeing conflicts and disagreements as the result of antagonism instead of as agonic strife. In any event, it's rather seldom that pluralist societies can construct a 'we', a politico-ideological and interest-based unity, that will act in concert, partly because (after Mouffe) 'wherever there is a "we", there must also be an excluded "them", a constitutive outside' (Hillier, 2002a: 122). The solution to this problem is not, as deliberalists believe, a procedural 'court' or voting schemes, 'a morally justified consensus' or 'bargaining' (Hillier, 2002a: 123). As Mouffe makes clear, conflict between different interests, values, and norms is inescapable, and this makes strife 'the order of the day'. Recognizing agonism and strife requires ways of communicating and processes of progress that can work with an infinite ambivalence inherent to power ('Power is necessary to limit power' [Flyvbjerg, 1991]) and social order ('Some form of social order is necessary, but any social order is repressive to someone' [Connolly, 1995]). Politics, planning and democracy projects such as the *kvarterløft* projects need to find ways of working *with* agonism without automatically recurring to procedures, voting, representativity, forced consensus or compromises. The system must make strife a productive force in the processes and make strife part of the institutionalized governmentality or ethos. I think public participation processes and political fields of action that stress openness, temporality (temporary solutions), respect for difference (in Young's [1995] sense of the concept), and the need to live with inconsistencies and contingency, are needed. This requires among other things open-ended processes, a politically autonomous but responsible institutional design, a plurality of discourses at play, and a form of ongoing, never-ending, critical and mutual inspiring dialogues between politicians, planning authorities and citizens.

A dialogical and reason seeking process is not established within public planning, and one reason may be that no one see agonism as constitutive to planning and policy making processes. The public authorities only see antagonism. To see democracy as agonism means to go beyond the friend-enemy thinking, and seeing the participant one heavily disagrees with or does not understand, as an adversary 'one can learn something from' (Mouffe, 2000). This does not require the negligence of interests and

power-mechanisms, but the need to respect differences and disagreements radically.

To respect and work with agonism is processually possible, but requires a political and planning *ethos* we yet have to develop. The *kvarterløft* project did not even manifest openness to these issues and its critical questions, problems and consequences.

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Notes

1. Others have noticed strife, but mainly in passing, acknowledging it as an important aspect of power analysis (Flyvbjerg). Recently, Jean Hillier (2002b) has presented a first substantial discussion of agonism in planning inspired by Michel Foucault and Mouffe, as a critical perspective on liberal theory and deliberative planning theory. Hillier (2003) came too late to be discussed here. My article is highly inspired by, and to a great deal consistent with, Hillier's views on strife and agonism, but I have tried to make a more conceptual and empirically sensitive focus on strife as a grounding modality of agonism than she does. As an example I find 'consensus' an impasse to planning practice, if we really want to acknowledge Hillier's expectation of permanent 'unresolvable disagreements', 'in-built transience', 'temporarities of commitment' and 'passion' or 'values and interests' to be part of planning practice.
2. I read Mouffe as she uses the concept 'adversaries' as meaning a kind of 'critical co-player'. A 'co-player' here seen as a person that one can learn from and dispute with, because it is a 'friendly' enemy or a not-antagonistic enemy.
3. The article represents an initial exploration of the theme in relation to a coming project on 'strife in planning'. This project, *Strife – to plan for 'the individual within the collective'*, is financed by the Danish Social Science Research Council, and is a collaboration between Senior Researcher Lars Engberg, PhD, Danish Urban Research Institute, Associate Professor Lars Hulgård, University of Roskilde, and the author.
4. Literally to be translated as 'neighbourhood revitalization projects', the government prefers to translate it as 'urban regeneration projects'. From the concept of 'urban regeneration', one might expect to find urban renewal, competitive planning or housing schemes at the core, but although the government says that it wants to find new ways to incorporate (selected) suburban areas into the dynamics of city development and inter-urban competition, in reality the projects have turned out to be social projects attempting to 'regenerate' local conditions for revitalizing self-regulative communities.
5. I will only describe the project briefly (see section 3), and not in detail on

policy-premises, purpose, contract-steering or projects established. The article only discuss experiences that illuminate or make legible more general problematics to (urban) planning and planning theory.

6. Not even within John Forester's detailed studies of different aspects of communicative planning. To my knowledge, Hillier (2002b) is the first to consider the subject theoretically within planning theory.
7. Lyotard will claim 'the insolubleness of justice' of agonism, because the agonistic situation 'lack[s] a rule of judgement that can be applied to both arguments' (Lyotard, 1990: 20). Judgements 'take sides'.
8. I do not here follow Foucault's discussion related to the power–freedom relation, as most commentators using this part of Foucault's discourse on power do (see Ashenden and Owen, 1999). Agoni is not, according to Mouffe, only a special effect of power relations (but that too), but related to reasoning, difference (values, norms, cultures) and reflexion (interpretation, frames of meaning).
9. Very often located there by the municipality itself.
10. The project areas in Copenhagen are Femkanten, Holmbladsgade, Kongens Enghave, Nørrebro Park and Nordvest.
11. The Copenhagen projects may affect 67,000 inhabitants.
12. These goals are supplemented by more traditional policy schemes aimed at improving housing standards and providing more jobs locally, as well as different forms of welfare policies directed towards marginalized and deprived citizens, because these improvements are thought necessary in order to reduce conflict potentials among citizens.
13. Including as just one example the pedagogical conduct of schools and kindergartens.
14. 'Normalisation strategies' are exemplified by architecture by Michel Foucault saying that space such as the house 'prescribes a form of morality for the family' (Foucault, 1972/1980: 149). Disciplines such as the architectural constitutes 'apparatuses of knowledge' that work as 'a natural rule, a norm. The code they come to define is not that of the law but that of normalisation' (Foucault, 1972/1980: 106).
15. Furthermore the Copenhagen municipality council in 2002 closed down several projects on building 'neighbourhood councils'.
16. The evaluation report that could be politically approved is Norvig Larsen (2001).
17. There is, as Tiesdell and Allmendinger (2001) describe for England, also a communitarian ethic at play within the Danish urban regeneration programme (Pløger, 2002a). Strong communitarian communities are intended to constitute an alternative to government control and costly welfare provision, and they deal particularly with 'soft' problems such as minor psychological problems, light forms of addiction, loneliness, or lack of self-confidence because of unemployment. And they should build up the commitment of resourceful people towards their fellow citizens. A communitarian ethic stresses people's duty to engage in their community. In other words, communitarian

communities should build on 'a strong inclusionary moral' to constitute the basic structure for monitoring the 'soft' community problems of everyday life, and thus enable communities to act as self-monitoring entities.

18. These terms/concepts are difficult to translate meaningfully to English. The Danish words are 'myndiggørelse' and 'mættiggørelse', meaning literally 'being masterful' in one's own life and 'being powerful' with regard to one's life, respectively. The meaning of the concepts can be traced back to the Frankfurt School and especially to Theodor W. Adorno.

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