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Bent Flyvbjerg. *Rationality and Power: Democracy in Practice.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998. xiii + 290 pp. $18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-25451-7; $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-25449-4.

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Anthropology of Power and The European City

The topic of power has long been of interest to anthropologists and other social scientists not only for how it is produced, distributed and challenged, but also for its symbolic and cultural significance in various areas of conflict. Recently, interest has intensified in the areas of gender, health, body, nationality, and public policy. Perhaps not by coincidence this trend has been accompanied by a greater concern about the future direction of planning, by international relations, and by greater emphasis on attempting to influence public policy. The book reviewed here is interdisciplinary in content and considers the relationship between power and policy with regard to urban planning. An analysis of Bent Flyvbjerg's book provides an opportunity to examine the role of anthropology and planning in addressing several key public issues concerning local development and power relations.

Rationality and Power was originally published in Danish in 1991, following a public outcry against irrational planning, overspending and environmental damage in the city of Aalborg. The English version has been translated by Steven Sampson, an anthropologist living in Denmark. But the book is not a direct translation of the Danish original, for it includes many new materials, explanations, and discussions for a wider readership. It is divided into twenty chapters and a Postscript detailing the mayhem over the urban renewal program in the downtown area of Aalborg, a city situated in the northern Jutland region of Denmark.

Between 1977 and 1995, the city council of Aalborg, together with local businesses and especially the city's bus company, argued over how to design, revise, and finalize its "Dream Plan" (*Drommeplanen* in Danish) to comprehensively regulate four elements of urban planning: (1) urban renewal, (2) land use, (3) traffic, and (4) environment. This book by Flyvbjerg, who is professor of planning at Aalborg University, is not however an easy and superficial look at local development from a single perspective. It is a highly theoretical argument that details the complex connections between rationality and power. In Flyvbjerg's words the readers will be awarded with "an awareness of issues of democracy, rationality, and power [that]…is central to developing judgment and expertise in political and administrative affairs and in carrying out research into such affairs" (p. 7).

In Chapter One, Flyvbjerg takes off from Machiavelli and Nietzsche, from the *verita effettuale* (effective truth) of the former and *wirkliche Historie* (real history) of the

latter. The author argues that the city planning conflict in Aalborg is a metaphor of modernity for the dynamics of rationality, power, and democracy, for "democracy is not something a society 'gets'; democracy must be fought for each and every day in concrete instances, even long after democracy is first constituted in a society" (p. 5). Nietzsche then is specifically coupled with Foucault in the "strategies-and-tactics" view of power employed to analyze contemporary urban affairs where power is seen as productive and positive and not simply as negative or restrictive. The author argues that if we truly want to understand how the city of Aalborg tried to implement its urban renewal policies for reshaping its downtown we must look at power as a dense and dynamic net of omnipresent relations.

Chapters Two and Three introduce the Aalborg Project, a city planning agenda initiated in 1977 by high-level city officials. A project which the OECD eventually acknowledged as a model for integrating environmental and social concerns in city politics and planning became monstrous and unmanageable. Soon after its initiation, several agencies, trade unions, police, local and national consultants, the business community, private corporations, the media, and interested citizens became involved in order to decide on issues such as redirecting traffic by creating a rational local and national bus traffic system. The first conflict arose between architects and the bus company over the location and size of the bus terminal. Originally just a minor disagreement, the discussion soon turned into a sour and embittered conflict over political solidarity and funding that resulted in power factioning among the main players.

Chapters Four and Five detail the way in which conflict has manifested itself between technical rationality and power, or, as the author summarizes the local council's proposition, "power defines rationality and power defines reality" (p. 36). But by citing Nietzsche's famous dictum "the greater the power, the less the rationality," the author convincingly reveals how the various players' "rationality," instead of bringing a viable solution for the city's transit problems, resulted in a deadlock. The continuation of such "frozen politics" is analyzed in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight. Once concerned citizens began participating in the Aalborg city Task Force, more and more problems surfaced and it slowly became evident that members of the business community, especially the small shopkeepers, grew increasingly dissatisfied with the original urban renewal plan to create a new Aalborg. This resulted in halving the original plan to construct a "spoke-and-wheel" bus terminal that would serve the interests of both the community and its commercial infrastructure. Just when it was thought safe to build the bus terminal, the Environmental Protection Agency began to question the environmental hazards and impact of the bus terminal, a new conflict described in Chapter Nine.

Chapter Ten introduces another source of local conflict concerning a sub-plan (referred to as the *lokalplan* or "local plan") to preserve the authentic character of the shopping streets of downtown Aalborg. The Town Council, forbidding all non-retail businesses (banks, insurance companies, and offices) from occupying the ground floor, gave precedence to local pragmatism over free-market ideology. But since non-retail business leaders were also present in the local Chamber of Industry and Commerce, the conflict gained new momentum. In Chapters Eleven through Thirteen, we learn that already in its first four years the Aalborg Plan underwent six rounds of reconstruction and modification; specific projects became more and more minute as well as more problematical in content and scope, generating in their path further animosities between locals. Adding to this was a scandal shocking everyone involved: the Social Democratic mayor and several high-level local officials were jailed on bribery charges. The overall legitimacy of the Aalborg urban renewal plan was thus severely challenged.

By this time, however, the original Aalborg city plan had undergone its eleventh (!) revision, a process described in Chapters Fourteen and Fifteen. Registering increased commuter traffic and business development, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce reversed its original stand and began arguing that redirecting traffic would hurt businesses by causing falling revenues. However, the city council's own survey rejected this fear by revealing that profits of retailers were on the upswing. Chapters Sixteen through Eighteen describe further complications for the Aalborg Project. New local leaders were elected who as a clever ploy decided to bolster the urban renewal project by emphasizing positive aspects of the dated original plan adopted a decade earlier. This led the Aalborg Project into a total impasse.

Where does this leave us regarding the rationality of planning and the Aalborg plan's ultimate results? As Bent Flyvbjerg illustrates in subsequent chapters, various sub-plans of the Aalborg Project not only helped to solve problems of this urban center. A policy of small-steps also had disastrous results: instead of reducing car traffic, it was increased by 8 percent; instead of creating an integrated system of bicycle paths, unconnected

stretches were built; instead of reducing traffic accidents, the number of fatalities and injuries among bicyclists has increased 40 percent; instead of reducing noise, measurements reveal that noise levels in downtown Aalborg substantially exceed Danish and international maximum limits; and finally, air pollution has remained constant, with soot and airborne particles actually increasing (pp. 219-21). The original democratic, rational, and modern administrative Aalborg Project has resulted in one major achievement: it received in March 1995 a high award from the European Union–"The European Planning Prize"–for having developed an "innovative, democratic urban policy and planning with particular emphasis on the involvement of citizens and interest groups" (p. 237).

Unlike other books published by anthropologists of Europe, *Rationality and Power* does not focus on long-term societal processes nor does it adopt a pig's eye-view from the village. Moreover, it does not embark upon discovering class, ethnic or gendered segments of urban enclaves in a metropolis. Instead it engages a dialectical discussion between ongoing debates on the local level as well as between data and theory on an intellectual level. This book is appropriate for graduate level courses in European anthropology, urban studies, and in developmental and power studies. But the constant oscillation between theory and data, and the incredibly detailed presentation of Aalborg's many political actors and their point of views, may frighten some undergraduates. Nevertheless the text's language is clear due to the competent translation by Sampson. I would have appreciated some photographs enabling visualization of the localities described in this book. This would help students (and not only American ones) who have difficulty imagining urban landscapes on Europe's northern periphery where Aalborg is located.

Flyvbjerg is extremely critical. Some might even argue that he engages a doomsday scenario of how city planning and policy can go astray in the hands of careless political impostors. Clearly, Aalborg's story is and has been replicated all over Europe and beyond. Similar horror scenarios are making the rounds from Greece to Hungary, from Italy to Portugal. While detailed accounts of these other stories are not available, we are fortunate to have Flyvbjerg's first-hand study of a Danish city–a real gem in the Anthropology of Europe and European studies.

In conclusion, I need to stress that Flyvbjerg undoubtedly has made a very significant contribution to European Studies and towards the development of an anthropology of policy by being among the first to investigate the latter. He may not have covered all the themes some anthropologists might attribute to such a study. In particular, scholars with a historical bent may be somewhat frustrated by his scant attention to the history of Danish urbanization. It is important to acknowledge, however, that his coverage is very extensive, not only in terms of the political players it introduces but also in regard to the diversity of theoretical themes included. The author has raised many issues, introduced stimulating and provocative questions, and attempted to resolve and answer some of the issues and questions. He has referred to the works of several classic and contemporary authors, described, discussed evaluated and critically analyzed them, and has very effectively used them to illustrate the points he makes in his book. I must stress that with all the talk of creating a social partnership in the new, and (dis)united Europe, emanating from Brussels and various western capitals these days, one should not avoid a book like Bent Flyvbjerg's. For it will push us to seek new research materials and explanations not attempted up until now. His book, moreover, will remind us that the road to a single Europe is bumpy and paved with many potholes.

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