

E. HOWE, PROFESSIONAL ROLES AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST IN PLANNING, 6 *Journal of Planning Literature* 230, 231-32 (1992).

[The author provides extensive textual citations to the existing literature. These have been edited out, but for ease of reading the omissions are not indicated. C Eds.]

PROGRESSIVISM AND POSITIVISM

The municipal reform arm of the Progressive Movement was one of the major forces shaping the new profession of planning. The Progressives had considerable faith in the capacity of professional expertise to solve problems ranging from environmental degradation caused by speculative resource extraction to the ugliness and disorder resulting from speculative urban development. This professionalization of reform may well have been a convenient way to mask and legitimate the particular social and moral values of planners. But in adopting this paradigm, planners accepted the ideas that politics can be separate from planning or administration and that professionals would provide nonpartisan, expert advice to elected officials or municipal elites. This was the dominant image of professional planners into the period after World War II. In the 1950s and early 1960s, as the direct influence of the Progressives waned, the principle that planners should be value neutral was given new life by the importation of positivist metaethics into the social and policy sciences.... [Those] who wanted philosophy to be more scientific, drew a sharp distinction between “meaningful” questions that could be verified empirically and “meaningless” ones concerned with judgments about all kinds of normative values-moral, aesthetic, or political-that could not be verified empirically. These latter judgments were simply viewed as expressions of emotion, and the resulting theory is often called “emotivism.”

At a time when planning techniques were becoming more scientific in nature, the emotivist theory supported the idea that planners-as-technicians should focus on meaningful questions of means, where they could provide good, empirically-based advice, leaving

“meaningless” or emotional questions of values and ends to public officials. The assumption was that means could be considered rationally, while ends were “only” value judgments and could not be justified rationally.

Just as emotivism, in effect, wrote ethics out of philosophy, it was certainly possible to argue that neutral planners needed no moral principles, since they never made value judgments....

THE CRITIQUE OF POSITIVISM

... [The] critique of positivism in planning ... has had two elements. One is the argument that value neutrality is simply impossible. Political scientists from outside the profession initially raised this critique [in the early 1960s], but it was rapidly accepted, at least among planning academics.

The second argument is that the effect of positivism has been harmful to professional practice for a variety of reasons. From a practical standpoint the idea of value neutrality narrows the role of rationality in decisionmaking by putting all choices of values beyond analysis. It also reduces the possible influence of the planner or analyst by making him or her an isolated, largely passive actor. From a moral point of view, it produces moral impoverishment or alienation and reduces sensitivity to the moral costs of action by creating a false sense of moral distance and reduces moral decisions to the choice of “going along” or resigning.... Perhaps most damaging from a political point of view, the analyst=s insistence on only answering questions of means rather than framing questions of ends leaves particular kinds of interests that never ask for policy advice simply unrepresented in the process. Interests of powerless or devalued social groups, of widely diffused interests, of future generations, or interests not associated with persons are all likely to receive short shrift.

The critique of positivism in planning asserts that planners do exercise discretion, that their personal values do influence their work,

and that they are called upon to make moral choices in their professional activities....