Chapter VII
Planning, Interests, and Argumentation

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ABSTRACT

Within the organisational development people's arguments rise from their personal or group interests, which in turn are based on the systemic differentiation of society and technology at a given time. We face a crucial issue: Must we accept separated group interests as inescapable circumstances, or can we reach out for universal human interests? This chapter addresses the issue combining Rawls' idea of an original position behind a veil of ignorance with Habermas' concepts of communicative rationality and discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Planners and decision makers encounter competing interests that emerge from the division of labour and of our economic system, but the interests do not provide any rationally motivated legitimation basis for planning. People's arguments rise from their personal or group interests, which in turn are based on the systemic differentiation of society and technology at a given time. The group interests and the division of labour reproduce each other all the time, technology often being the major driving force behind the new division of labour. The choice between technological alternatives is an ethical issue because it affects people's rights and position in the organization in question, as well as through its products and side effects external society and, in the long run, also future generations. The focus of this chapter is inside organizations, but we briefly touch upon the broader perspective in the discussion on future trends.

The theoretical background of rational planning has two main sources, the economists' notion of rational decision making and the systems approach (March, 1982, Simon, 1982, Churchman, 1968). Planning theorists with a more practical stance have been looking for a theoretical basis for planning professionals. Planning theorists take into account the multi-agency view of decision

making, and the planner should bring different political and technical aspects of relevant alternatives into the open (Faludi, 1973), or even demand that the planner should take an active political role so as to defend the interest of the oppressed (Forester, 1989).

We face a crucial issue: must we accept separated group interests as inescapable circumstances, or can we reach out for universal human interests? The situation is a challenge for rational argumentation, since, if there is a possibility of a generalized interest, it is only rational argumentation that can lead us out of the dilemma. By means of the accounts of two outstanding thinkers of last century we can address the problem of the universalisation of interest: Habermas and Rawls.

RAWLS

Rawls (1973) derives his theory of justice, justice as fairness, through a very simple but powerful concept of rational choice in an ideal 'original position behind a veil of ignorance'. His aim is to derive principles of justice that equal, rational persons would agree on when they do not know their share of the utilities ensuing from the principles and their social circumstances or personal characteristics. The veil of ignorance guarantees the universalisation of the principles. When the participants do not know their social position or any personal characteristics, they are in a position to think of the principles from the generalised position of any rational decision maker. They can only make their decision with regard to the principles of justice, not their contingent natural fortune (p. 18). Rawls sees the original position as a procedural interpretation of Kant's categorical imperative (p. 256).

Their rational choice will then be to define justice as fairness. Rawls (1973) derives two basic principles of justice. (1) The principle of liberty says: "Each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for other" (p. 60). (2) The difference principle states: "Social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged and (b) attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity" (p. 83, also p. 302). Accordingly, the optimum configuration of economy is achieved at the maximum point of the least advantaged members. The principles are arranged by two priority rules: (1) According to 'the priority of liberty', liberty can only be restricted for the sake of liberty. (2) According to 'the priority of justice over efficiency and welfare', the equality of opportunities is prior to the welfare of the least advantaged (p. 302). Partly due to the criticism of his 'Theory of Justice', Rawls gave up the central role of the above two principles in his work Political Liberalism (1993) without abandoning the idea of the original position. (For discussion on Rawls, see Freeman, 2003). Rawls' later work expanded the view from the rules of a democratic state to the rules of nations (Rawls, 1993) and between nations (Rawls, 1999), so his views have hardly been discussed at all in a limited organisational context, which is our aim in this paper.

In his later work Rawls (1993) accepted it as a fact that people can adhere to different notions of freedom, due to, for instance, their religion. In this context we can leave the detailed debate concerning the above principles aside, although they are most interesting from the point of view of ethics in general. The second principle also addresses technology as it replaces Pareto optimality as the notion of efficiency. (An economic situation is Pareto optimal, if it cannot be changed for the benefit of anyone without worsening it for someone else.) Efficiency as a driving force of social development will be discussed briefly below, but we focus on Rawls' idea of 'the original position behind a veil of ignorance'. The notion of the original position was challenged by Habermas' communicative rationality.

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