

Rationality and Power - Democracy in Practice, by Bent Flyvbjerg, 1998, University of Chicago Press, pp.290 & xiv.

Review by Des Gasper, in *'Development and Change'*, 2000, vol.31 no.4: 911-912.

Flyvbjerg narrates in intense detail a decade of politicking around physical planning of the Danish city of Aalborg - a story of how business interests step-by-step blocked and gutted a long debated, internationally praised plan centred on restricting private motor vehicle access to the old city centre, despite its overwhelming approval by the city council. Underlying this account is an attack on idealist planners too exclusively reliant on Habermas-style visions of communicative rationality and discourse ethics. The book's dearth of reference to contemporary *planning* literature reflects this preoccupation. In the foreground is constant reference to Nietzsche; for if one takes Enlightenment ideals seriously, one must harness the insights of such opposed 'practical thinkers of power'.

The dispiriting tale will have few surprises for Third World development readers or activists, but deserves attention not only as an illustration of how power operates 'even' in democratic Scandinavia. Flyvbjerg closely links his blow-by-blow account of municipal manoeuvring to his generalized disquisition on rationality, power and democracy. The manuscript has attracted lavish praise, including from Dahl, MacIntyre, Lukes, Wildavsky, Schön and Forester. They and many other luminaries are listed as having advised the author earlier. After such fanfare it would be hard to fulfil the expectations aroused, and one senses a painful process of writing and publication. This 1998 book derives from a 1991 study in Danish, mainly based on mid 1980s research, largely about events of 1978-83. It strives perhaps excessively for a tidy story, garnished with epigrams. Yet it indeed has much of interest.

Flyvbjerg essays the following ten, overlapping, conclusions. Some are fresher than others, but all remain too readily and regularly forgotten. First: 'Power concerns itself with defining reality rather than with discovering what reality "really" is' (p.227). Only years after blocking most of the plan did the Chamber of Industry and Commerce begin to absorb its philosophy, as they experienced the suffocation of traffic overload in the city centre and saw well-functioning project elements that had survived to implementation.

Second: 'rationality is context-dependent and... the context of rationality is power', a proposition Flyvbjerg enjoys repeating. Its literary vagueness illustrates the weak side of the book. More helpful is a final remark: planning and democracy have to centre on channelling and countering power, not on waving it away.

Third, power frequently uses rationalizations, often difficult to identify as such within a relevant time-span. City centre speciality retailers dominated the Steering Committee of the Chamber, which in turn, in a money-based society, formed the biggest power centre in the city. Interests of higher-income car-driving consumers—or rather of the group of speciality store owners in the centre who wished to continue selling to them—acquired overriding weight. When consumer surveys revealed the relatively low importance of their purchases for the city as a whole, the sole newspaper trumpeted the opposite, with the chorus that what's good for motorists is good for business is good for Aalborg. The newspaper shared an interest in maintaining vehicle access to, and the high market value of, its city centre premises. In a period for which city centre spending was later found to have increased, the Chamber and newspaper conducted a successful campaign based on its alleged serious decline. 'Power, quite simply, often finds

ignorance, deception, self-deception, rationalizations, and lies more useful for its purposes than truth and rationality, despite all costs' (p.38).

Fourth, the more power an agent has, the less it bothers with giving reasons. At a decisive point, the Chamber's chair declared the plan 'dead', regardless of the City Council. The Chamber's ally the Police Department declined to enforce key components.

Fifth and sixth, power relations are constantly produced and reproduced, and the business groups in Aalborg were far more aware, skilful and determined in this practice than the politicians and bureaucrats. The Chamber of Industry and Commerce dates from 1431. Merchants' guilds acted as city regents for centuries. Democratic institutions are young and fragile in comparison. The municipality's Technical Department (TD) was repeatedly outmanoeuvred, failed to acquire allies, merely offered reasons, while its prize-winning plan was cut back bit by bit, year by year, until even the department lost commitment to it. Its final version, after years of experiments, delays and disputes, was an incoherent combination of the bits tolerated by the Chamber -- those to promote pedestrian, bicycle and bus traffic, and almost none of the elements to restrict automobile traffic -- with all talk of future phases dropped. Even the approved elements were mostly not implemented, despite continuing calls from the Council. The Council appeared even weaker than its TD, which could partly control what evidence and options the Council received.

Seventh, stable power relations are more typical than antagonistic confrontations. The alderman for the TD is always from the business-oriented Conservative party, even though it is not the largest. Key matters are often decided in direct negotiation between this alderman and the Chamber, without reference to either the TD or Council. When the Chamber produces a technically weak counterplan, city politicians prevent planners from criticizing it and radically dilute their own plan. Despite the concessions, this plan is further shredded by Chamber opposition over the years.

Why do groups remain in stable power relations where they are consistently outmanoeuvred? Eighth, ninth and tenth: reason is in difficulty in situations of stable power relations but has some scope for influence there; in open confrontation, rationality yields to power. The TD lost every time that disagreements became confrontations, and achieved some damage-limitation only when it co-operated as adviser to the powers that be. Bureaucrats and democratic governments operate under many procedural constraints and have far fewer tools to fight with than does an interest group like the Chamber. (Flyvbjerg delicately refrains from investigating the full range of tools employed.) Stable power relations are not equal ones, but do allow some communication, negotiation, and possible influence.

In sum: '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). The TD itself finally learnt a few more tricks. It invests so heavily in additional beautification of project elements that have been allowed only on a temporary basis that later reversal of them becomes very difficult. And in the 1990s a new approach to planning was adopted, partly triggered by Flyvbjerg's book in Danish and its evidence that Aalborg's outcomes were worse overall than in many non-prize-winning cities, and worse than with no planning, since they only intensified city-centre access. The new approach, with broader, more timely and structured involvement of interest- and citizen's groups, leads to a 1995 EU Planning Prize. Perhaps a new, less dispiriting, book will follow. The present one is worth the attention of students of policy

and planning who want a step-by-step case study of processes of distortion, presented through the recollections of the central actors.