

VIEWPOINT

Rational Planners and Irrational Politicians: The Ideology of Development Administration

by Edwin A. Brett*

Economists are the soothsayers of contemporary society. They read computer printout as their forebears read the entrails of the sacrificial goat. The process is more hygenic but no more accurate.(1) Plans fail to reach their targets or do so by accident. Long-term trends suddenly change course for totally unexpected reasons. But the oracles are not closed down. Societies need their soothsayers especially when they are unsure of the future - failure simply induces more investment to reduce the deficiencies thus exposed. If the old goats do not serve, then breed new strains whose anatomy corresponds more nearly to the empirical reality whose changes are to be anticipated. Theories, models, and techniques proliferate. Some even convince themselves that they have arrived at the promised land. Recently, a well-known development planner claimed to have successfully planned the economies of no less than sixteen countries over a three year period, Haiti, no less, among them. Truly there are no limits to the powers of modern science.

The science of planning and the science of goats have two characteristics in common - they are concerned to read the future and their connections with the real world exist only in the minds of believers. And this inability to connect is not simply the outcome of technical

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(1) Sidney Schoeffler (*The Failures of Economics*, 1955) is one of the few economists willing to set out the evidence and consider seriously the theoretical failures which produce this effect.

imperfections which more sophistication will remedy but derives from a profound misunderstanding of the nature of politics and of its relationship to processes of social and economic change. To substantiate this assertion let us consider the planners' creed, which has four primary and two contingent articles.(1)

1. Planning is rational. Value-free social scientific techniques can be used to discover least-cost solutions to problems posed by the attempt to achieve economic goals.

2. Planning is economic. The economic can be separated from the political and social spheres both analytically and in practice. In this way, scientific economic analysis can be applied to economic facts, and economic tools at the disposal of the state can then be used to influence these facts in the desired direction.

3. Contingent on the above, plan evaluation is in relation to the "measuring rod of money" and expressed in terms of growth in national product.

4. Politics is rational or irrational. Rational politics is when the government identifies the general interests of the nation and gives these to the planners as their starting point. It thereafter accepts the planners' allocations of the resources required to advance these interests and uses its power to get people to collaborate "towards a common end which will be to the profit of all."(2) Irrational politics (the more common variety) is where special interests use their power to oppose the plan for purely selfish reasons and thus create 'political obstacles to development.'(3)

(1) In case hostile critics feel I am simply erecting a straw man I would refer them to Ilchman's survey of actual planistrator's attitudes in R. Braibanti, ed., *Political and Administrative Development*, p. 472 ff.

(2) F. Oules, *Economic Planning and Democracy*, p. 242.

(3) Political Scientists are useful for studying and finding ways of overcoming these. In much the same category are "social obstacles to development". These can be studied by sociologists in developed countries and social anthropolgists in underdeveloped countries.

5. Planning is national and can be effective. Control over the key economic levers is lodged in central governmental institutions of the nation state. Governments can utilise these levers independently of the constraints imposed by the special interests of international and internal economic groups.

6. Contingent upon four and five, planning can only be implemented by an efficient and uncorrupt cadre of administrators. The highest form of administrator is the trained economic planner (hereinafter 'planistrator', to borrow Raymond Apthorpe's useful term) who know best and should be obeyed.

Let us now consider the implications of these propositions paying particular attention to their tendency to systematically misstate reality and hence misuse and mystify their adherents.

Article 1 raises at least two fundamental problems. First, not all planners are aware of the critical distinction between what Weber calls formal as opposed to substantive rationality. The first is simply concerned to find least cost routes to particular ends, the second with the "absolute values or the content of (those) ends."⁽¹⁾ Planistrators' rationality is by definition formal rationality only. Planistrators must take the goals given to them by politicians as their work would cease to be value free and therefore politically neutral. This would have adverse implications for career prospects in politically unstable situations. But formally rational techniques can be used to achieve substantively irrational purposes. It is of small compensation to people exposed to such policies to be informed that they have been worked out in accordance with the most up to date scientific principles. Thus we (and also those actually subjected to planistrators' rationality) are justified in questioning planistrators' decisions not only with regard to their tendency to attain their own goals (this tendency is called 'efficiency'), but also whether the goals themselves are substantively rational or not (this used to be discussed by old fashioned people concerned with outmoded concepts like 'justice' or even 'freedom').

⁽¹⁾ *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation*, 1964, p.185.

Secondly, if formal rationality is to operate successfully within the intellectual limits which it does accept, it must meet certain theoretical requirements. The use of rational technique requires working models which approximate in their main features the critical elements in the situations to be brought under control. To "work", the model must correspond to reality in the sense that a scientist who believes diseases are caused by germs will better understand the causation of diseases than one who believes they are caused by evil spirits. Thus to judge the adequacy of planistrators' rationality it is necessary to consider whether their model of reality (i.e. that set out in articles 2 to 6 above) does in fact correspond with reality and provides an adequate basis for diagnosis and prescription. Thus my argument does not depend upon an anti-scientific and intuitive approach to social reality. It depends upon an ability to show that planners' models do not in their main features correspond to the reality they are trying to control.

I have argued at length elsewhere⁽¹⁾ and it is now in any case generally accepted (in theory at least) that economic questions cannot be meaningfully examined outside the political and social context in which they arise. It is impossible to review all of these arguments here, but it is necessary to point out that even those who do accept this basic proposition often do so in a manner which takes them very little further forward. For what has tended to happen is for planistrators to recognise that they depend upon the government both to provide them with objectives and to carry out their plans. Thus their freedom of action is directly constrained by those political facts which they must understand and accept before they can get to work and produce politically acceptable prescriptions.

All planners profess a very sophisticated understanding of the 'politics' of the country they are advising derived from their experience of dealing with politicians and especially from the skills which they are forced to acquire in mediating between, and defending themselves within, the contending factions in any political arena. The analysis of politics is therefore seen as an essentially pragmatic exercise - finding out who is in, who is out, who can be relied on to support particular policies

(1) "Politics, Economics and Rationality," *Social Science Information*, 8 (2), April, 1969.

and who will oppose them. This kind of pragmatic political knowledge (which does not, of course, have the same intellectual status as 'scientific' economic theory) can then be used to overcome the problems of getting plans accepted and implemented. According to Alvin Hayne:

While the planner may feel that the current method of decision-making is not adequate, he must recognise that there is already a decision-making apparatus in being. Part of the task of the practical planner is to develop the strategic and tactical measures whereby the decision-making techniques called for by the development plan can gradually replace existing decision-making operation.(1)

Leaving aside the rather delicate questions of how a 'value-free' economic scientist recognises an 'adequate' decision-making process, it is simply worth noting that strongly elitist bias of this sort of thinking and, indeed, of those assumptions that substitute planistrators' rationality for demands from below as the basis from which economic policy should be evolved.

Returning to our goat analogy, perhaps the most significant entrail to be examined is the growth of Gross National Product. The fundamental point concerning this indicator (conventionally measured) is that it conceals far more than it reveals. In the first place, as Peter Wiles' brilliant chapter on this matter shows, "nearly all output and cost of living indices are wrong,"(2) and especially wrong in concealing changes in relative improvement or regression as between both rich and poor classes and rich and poor countries. Secondly, as is now becoming increasingly evident with the emergence of the pollution debate, growth figures take virtually no account of what economists politely call negative externalities. Expansion in car output features very prominently in American GNP figures; the fact that exhaust fumes are destroying the ecology over a radius of almost 100 miles around Los Angeles does not. To my knowledge, nobody has tried to work out any effective

(1) G.M. Meier, (ed.), *Leading Issues in Development Economics*, p. 496-7; also Ilchamn, *op.cit.*, esp. p.518-521.

(2) P.J.D. Wiles, *The Political Economy of Communism*, p.247.

index of the distribution of the costs and benefits of growth across communities and nations.*

This leads into the planistrators' assumptions about the proper purposes of politics which derive directly from their need to define politics in essentially organic or mechanistic terms. According to Oules:

There are only two possible economic policies; on the one hand the policy of those who know how to adapt economic mechanisms to the interdependent factors, the current requirements of the economy and the contingencies of their time: on the other hand the policy of those who take no account of (them).(1)

This kind of "economic and technological determinism"(2) implies not only that there is one really 'rational' solution to the problems of economic growth and that therefore very little real freedom of action is really open to any government whose "area of decision is, in fact, exceedingly small."(3) Thus even those who do look at the problem of political development theoretically see the problem as essentially one of developing a system of overarching control which will make it possible for essentially general societal interests in development to be identified and operationalised through the machinery of administration both public and private. Thus Braibanti, in his evaluation of America's strategy for inducing the right kinds of political development in client states, sees the "first attribute of political development" as "the requirement of common agreement on a fundamental policy of the state - an overarching purpose which gives form, cohesion, and direction to all public action within a sensed community."(4) Planistrators must necessarily assume that the government for which they work does, in fact, express such an overarching agreement, and the policies which they build into the plan necessarily give concrete expression to the attempt to achieve an ever more productive and equitable version of such

* Editorial note: *vide* M. Lipton, *Assessing Economic Performance*, London, 1968.

(1) Oules, *Op.Cit.*, p. 11. (my emphasis).

(2) Ilchman, *Op.Cit.*, p.499, referring to the attitudes of the planistrators in his sample.

(3) J. K. Galbraith, *The New Industrial State*, p.397.

(4) Braibanti, "External inducement of political-administrative development: an institutional strategy," *Op.Cit.*, p.37.

society. Failure to do so would be to see their work identified as the tool of special interests and therefore devalued as a scientific enterprise. The application of scientific technique thus serves to raise the status of the plan above that of mere 'political' policy; it acquires a special form of legitimacy reserved in more innocent days to doctrines sanctified by the writ of God. Everyone can thus be asked to express their concern for the plan "in the form of hard work and willingness ... to make the maximum sacrifice for the national good." (1) Conversely those groups and social attitudes which do not accept the planistrators' consensus as binding them to "maximum sacrifice" can be classified as anti-rational in their orientations and dismissed as "harmful to development." (2) Where such groups can organise and make their wishes felt they are then classified as 'obstacles to development' who need to be educated, manipulated or, in the last resort, forced to accept the changes necessary for the plan to go through. (3)

Planistrators, therefore, must identify with the ruling elite. If they do not like this elite, the most they can hope to do is to manipulate "decision-making techniques" from within, for they cannot think of alternative planning orientation directed towards the transformation of society in the interests of classes not included in the existing establishment coalition. They must also assume that this elite does, in fact, have autonomous control over the key economic levers, that the groups who control the internal economy are amenable to the incentives or sanctions which the government is willing to bring to bear on them, that the government will be willing to take measures against specific vested interests whose interests stand in the way of planned change, and that national government in essentially client states will be able to act independently of the interests of dominant foreign firms and countries whenever they need to do so. There is now a great mass of evidence which suggests that these assumptions are very rarely true. They can, in fact, only be believed by those who assume an artificial separation of political from economic life and do not see political power as, in part an expression, in part a realisation of economic power. When particular

(1) A. Milton Obote, "Preface", to *Work for Progress, Uganda's Second Five-Year Plan*, p.ii.

(2) Ilchamm, *Op.Cit.*, p. 496, 492.

(3) *Ibid.*, p.500.

plans are analysed it quickly becomes clear that they embody strategies which involve the promotion of some interests in preference to others - for example, the great bulk of the developmental resources involved in the second Uganda plan are likely to have directly benefitted less than 5% of the population. Again, almost invariably, structural economic change involves a net loss of income, security and/or status to numerous groups whose former skills are made functionally redundant by new ones. To assume that it is 'irrational' for them to oppose such changes is to assume that their interests have an objectively lower value than those of groups which benefit from it. To argue that this judgement is derived from a special kind of 'scientific' knowledge is merely to attempt to evade the problem of justifying policies in terms of those old fashioned concepts like justice, freedom and equality.

Thus it can be seen that the search for an essentially 'neutral' bureaucracy is about as profitable a quest as the one for a neutral social scientist. Planners do, indeed, need bureaucrats who will do what they tell them, but to assume that honest bureaucracy necessarily promotes the public good derives from the prior assumption that the proper execution of government plans and policies necessarily does so too. Since planistrators make plans they are not overly disposed to question this assumption; but those who are affected by plans may be. Scott notes that "peasants who avoid their land taxes by making smaller and illegal contributions to the disposable income of the Revenue Officer are as surely influencing the outcome of government policy as if they formed a peasant union and agitated for the reduction of land taxes."⁽¹⁾ In fact they are far more surely influencing such policy; in most underdeveloped states they would probably have been refused permission to form such a union on the ground that it would have constituted an obstacle to development. Thus the planistrators' view of the world ultimately succeeds in elevating the neutral economist/bureaucrat to the position of philosopher king; they are the people who can see across all the narrow concerns of sectional interests to the national interests which they alone have the ability to comprehend and operationalise.

(1) "Corruption, machine politics and political change", *American Political Science Review*, LXIII, 4, Dec. 1969, p.1142.

There is, of course, nothing very new in this. Perhaps the first planistrators blueprint can be found in Plato's *Republic*. The principles have not changed over two thousand years: the growth of modern science and modern technology have merely invested them with much more pervasive aura of rationality. But this rationality, like much else implicit in the dominant ideology of planistration, is spurious; it attributes special powers to those who control society and devalues the potential contribution of those groups whose interests are not symmetrical with the wishes of the ruling elite. Expressed in this way, the work done by planistrators is immediately open to an immense range of critical questions, and so are the functions which planning performs in the validation and perpetuation of particular economic systems. These are characterised by massively unequal patterns of change and high degrees of overt and covert repression in their treatment of disadvantaged groups, which often constitute the majority of the population.

All this is not to say that there should be no science, no planning, and that all politics are bad. It is to argue that planners must be seen to be instruments of political forces, and that the goodness or badness of what they do must be judged in relation to those forces. There is nothing inevitable or special about the decisions to which they arrive. A real change in political power must lead to new plans which will attempt to attain objectives which former planners found impossible because to do so would involve the elimination of classes whose interests had previously been sacred. Only thus could the Chinese move from a landlord dominated to a cooperative dominated agricultural system. This could not have been carried out by planistrators from above; it required the organisation of a massive political movement from below which forced the government to redefine its objectives and made it possible to create the new institutions required for the new forms of production.(1) Planners who take neutral economic theory as their starting point and the institution of a neutral bureaucracy as their agency are either bound to reinforce tendencies implicit in the existing political-economic power structure or end up disappointed and cynical men.

(1) W. Hinton, *Fanshen*; F. Schuurman, *Ideology and Organisation in Communist China*.