Professionals, planning and ethics: can (and should) the end justify the means?

Heather Campbell

Department of Town and Regional Planning
University of Sheffield

Structure

- Background
- What makes an issue ethical in nature?
- What are the qualities of professional ethics?
- Case study
- Concluding observations

Still planning to change the world?
Ethical dilemmas?

• Give me some examples of ethical dilemmas?

Ethical dilemmas?

• Give me some examples of ethical dilemmas?
  – What makes these ethical dilemmas?
Professional ethics?

• Give me some examples of professional situations in which you’ve encountered ethical dilemmas?

Professional ethics?

• Give me some examples of situations in which there are professional ethical dilemmas?
  – What makes these ethical dilemmas?
  – Are professional ethical dilemmas different from everyday ethical dilemmas?
  – What does it mean to be a planning professional?
  – How far does context influence the nature of appropriate action? Why?
  – How far can / should professionals be partisan?
Oldport: the Hazards of Population Projections

In Oldport the mayor retained a planning firm as consultant to develop a comprehensive twenty-year plan for urban renewal, housing, schools, and social service facilities. The planners’ preliminary report projected moderate population growth but a dramatic and continuing shift in racial composition, with minority groups reaching a majority in twelve years. A black majority was predicted within five years in the public schools. The mayor reacted strongly to the preliminary report. If these findings were released, they would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. All hope of preserving an integrated school system and maintaining stable mixed neighbourhoods or developing an ethnically heterogeneous city with a strong residential base would disappear.

The planners were asked to review their figures. They agreed to use the lower range of their projections – minority dominance in the public schools after eight years and a majority in the city in sixteen. The mayor was not satisfied. He told the planners either to change the figures or to cut them out of the report. They refused, feeling they had bent their interpretation of fact as far as they could. Without a discussion of these facts, the balance of the report could not be professionally justified.

The mayor lashed out at them privately for professional arrogance, asked a professional on his own staff to rewrite the report without the projections, and ordered the consultants not to release or disclose their findings on race under any circumstances. The professional on the mayor’s staff initially demurred from rewriting the report but ultimately complied. The consultants remained silent, completed the formal requirements of their contract, and left. The mayor never used professional planning consultants again.

(Marcuse, 1976, later in Wachs)
Questions for discussion

• What’s your assessment of the actions of the various ‘planners’ (actors) in the case?
• Identify the ethical issues at stake in the case
• What assistance are professional codes of conduct in addressing these issues?
• How far does context influence the nature of appropriate action?
• How far can / should ‘professional planners’ be partisan?

Further issues

• Is it enough to follow the rules? [What are the rules? Who sets the rules?]
• Can / should the end justify the means?
  – Outcomes – good and bad
  – Processes – right and wrong
Concluding thoughts

• We can do better
  – The lack of a perfect conceptual definitions (for example of justice) does not stop us doing better
  – That there are unlikely to be perfect policy solutions does not stop us from learning and doing better
  – There are constraints, but how far they constrain us from doing better, depends on the decisions we individually and collectively make
  – The framing of problems is crucially important and influences the potential to find better policy solutions
  – The quality of our arguments are crucial – we need to be smarter and do better

• Professional practice is about the art of situated ethical judgement

• References:
“40 years ago, rolling along on a great wave of postwar reform, we believed passionately in a better, more socially equitable, more beautiful future than is now the fashion or expectation. As I near the end of my life, I question whether we have the knowledge or education, the philosophical or ethical wisdom necessary to implement something such as this Plan – for planning the corrective of action is, as Geddes noted, ‘simply playing into puzzles of the maze.’

I hope that this fine reproduction of the Clyde Valley Regional Plan will remind its readers of the passion and idealism which fuelled its genesis. We all live by myths, whether we would wish to recognise it or not; our moral skill as human beings lies in choosing life-giving as opposed to death-dealing myths to inform our social decision-making.

But after a period in our history during which we have been invited to immerse ourselves in materialism, and encouraged to believe that there is no such thing as society, do we still have it in us? Is our society up to the challenge posed by such a plan?”

Professor Sir Robert Grieve, Autumn 1995

“I lost several years in promoting urban ecology because the experts felt we needed a 10 year study to ‘prove’ the value of urban Greenspace! I feel that we need to rediscover the approach of Dr John Snow in stopping cholera in London (i.e. turn off the tap even though we do not have all the research to prove it).”

Vincent Goodstaadt, Strategie Planner, (pers comm, 2011)
Professions

• Characteristics of a profession:
  – unique area of expertise
  – institutionalised bargain with the state to ensure professional autonomy
  – value neutrality and technical expertise
  – altruistic motivations which serve the public interest
  – an Institution (professional body) which regulates and validates knowledge