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Book Reviews

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Rachelle Alterman, *Planning in the Face of Crisis: Land Use, Housing, and Mass Immigration in Israel*. London: Routledge, 2002. ISBN 0415273838, 224 pp., £65.00/US\$96.00 (hbk); ISBN 0415273846, £19.99/US\$31.98 (pbk).

I have followed Rachelle Alterman's impressive body of work in crisis planning and comparative land-use planning for some time now, and thus eagerly opened this telling of an epic tale of the planning response to the massive migration to Israel from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s. I was not disappointed, for it is a valuable addition to planning literature. From 1989 to 1992, some 500,000 immigrants arrived in Israel, constituting an astounding 12 percent addition to the pre-crisis population of the country (p. 129). The basic research question applied to this crisis is: can a planner's skills and expertise be effective in handling a major crisis? Alterman answers affirmatively, but there is a great deal more to the book than professional self-congratulation.

The book is divided into 14 chapters organized into 5 parts: Part I: Theories about planning during crises; Part II: Land policy, housing, and planning on the eve of crisis; Part III: Phases and modes of policy response to the crisis; Part IV: The local government perspective; and Part V: Planning in the face of crisis: challenges for planning theory. In addition, the book contains several tables on data such as rates of immigration in Israel and other advanced-economy countries and on conceptual matrixes of planning problems and decision-making according to various theoreticians. The book is amply illustrated with 25 black and white illustrations, with graphs, maps, plans, and most significantly, photographs of actual housing projects described in the text.

Alterman defines a crisis by seven attributes (pp. 19–20): a high degree of uncertainty and surprise; a high degree of change and turbulence; high risks and threats, system-wide and complex effects of anticipated impacts, a low degree of knowledge about solutions, a challenge to the symbolic level and to the social consensus; and finally, urgency because of the high cost of delay. The theoretical core of the book is the second chapter on planning theories and attributes of crises, though I confess my attention wandered as Alterman led me through the rather dry literature. For example, the standard planning response to a crisis is the preparation of a plan for the next crisis. Alas, those plans are often narrow, bureaucratic, and inept. Planning institutions cannot predict every conceivable life-, health-, or property-threatening event that cities face, and examples abound of disaster plans failing to become the vehicles necessary for effective crisis recovery. Fundamentally, the concept of a crisis as just a unique event requiring immediate response and material aid ignores the critical relationships between the crisis and other issues, such as the ability of planning institutions to adapt, learn and enhance their effectiveness in the urban development process.

In order to understand the role of planning and public policy in handling

the crisis, Alterman adopts an inductive approach and develops an analytical framework consisting of five phases of the policy-making process: shock, focusing, action, planning, and post-crisis management (pp. 71–4). The chronological analysis of the five phases in the Israeli crisis is the most significant portion of the book because of its rich empirical material. In this part of the book, readers will find the story of the planning response particularly appealing to understand why certain types of strategic plans can be almost useless (p. 77), how absence of policy and lack of information can actually be a blessing (p. 80), and how defining the problem in narrow rather than broad terms can be beneficial, e.g. primarily as a housing problem (pp. 82–4). Furthermore, Alterman briefly describes how crises can be opportunities for bringing some of the best minds together as a sort of mini-think-tank (p. 86), how one family can influence national policy (pp. 89–90), under what circumstances can an ailing regulative planning system be made more vibrant (p. 94), and how an old housing strategy is made new and useful (p. 97). Even though this material is specific to the Israel of the early 1990s, I believe such stories have relevance to other times and places: which elements are needed for an effective government program to stimulate the private housing market (pp. 106–13), the manner in which a relatively short-term crisis can give rise to long-term planning (pp. 116–18), how a group of academics can actually influence national-level planning in a country the size of Israel (pp. 119–23), and how a post-crisis window of innovation might be utilized to experiment with new ideas for making housing prices affordable (pp. 135–7).

While this analysis makes for worthwhile reading, the framework does not appear to do full justice to the empirical material. I have found the persuasive integration of theory and empirical material in crisis research to be a challenge in my own work. So, taking advantage, perhaps unfairly, of the luxury of hindsight, I would like to suggest two different ways of making the book a more compelling read, and thus offering its readers a more significant impact.

One possible and compelling approach to organize and analyze the rich material contained in the book would be through a strong theoretical approach, not simply with the idea of ‘applying theory’, but to modifying or contributing to theory as well. Much of the literature on crises and disasters tends to be rather thin and somewhat dry, as even Alterman partially acknowledges (p. 23). Examples of richer and more sophisticated theories applicable to crisis response originate in areas other than planning or public administration. These include the economist Albert Hirschman’s concept of the ‘hiding hand’ (i.e. not knowing fully what you are up against can actually be a good thing); the sociologist Charles Perrow’s notions of complex systems and loose coupling (i.e. institutional redundancies – often criticized in the name of efficiency – can be beneficial in crisis response); and the architectural theoretician Jean Pierre Protzen’s principle of ideoneity (i.e. that which is achieved through the concrete practice of trying experience,

exacting effort, critical discourse, and most importantly, dialectical technique).

Particularly fascinating, and I believe, appropriate to the mass immigration crisis response in Israel, is the work of the sociologist James March, whose theories capture the awkward messiness of political and organizational decision-making. For example, Alterman suggests that Israeli decision-makers did not act as the rational decision-makers (p. 39) suggested by rational choice theorists in economics and political science. March argues that the lack of rational decision-making is not exceptional; in fact, it is the norm. Thus, often, information is gathered, participation is encouraged, and discussions are pursued more to reassure observers of the appropriateness of actions being taken than actually to influence actions (March and Olsen, 1989: 48). Furthermore, as in the Israeli case, changes in policies and strategies often seem to be driven less by problems than by solutions (March and Olsen, 1989: 62) – a phenomenon I have discovered to be present in my own empirical research on crisis recovery in different contexts such as Mexico City and Los Angeles (Inam, 1999).

A possible and compelling second approach would be to construct varied narratives from the point of view of different participants. Indeed, I wish that Alterman had described in greater detail her own uniquely multiple roles in the flow of events. For example, in October 1989, she was a first-hand witness to history in the making (p. 34) when, participating in an international planning seminar in Moscow, she interacted with the Israeli delegation who visited the former Soviet Union to issue visas to immigrants through the office of the Dutch ambassador. In the middle of the crisis, in 1991–2, she served as consultant in a project to help local governments (p. 193) develop a strategy for coping with accelerated growth, including for the two towns that are local case studies in the book, Carmiel and Nazareth Illit. A third example of her participant-observer status was as a member of the Board of Directors of the Society for the Protection of Nature (p. 192), Israel's leading non-governmental environmental organization, which had to rethink its basic tenets (e.g. from opposing higher residential densities to supporting them) due to the crisis. What would such a carefully constructed narrative from multiple participant-observer points of view have to contribute to planning theory, or practice? I suggest a number of elements, including plot and meaning, which refer to patterns of events and relationships with differing degrees of significance.

The most important element of a narrative is its structure or plot, 'a structure of relationships by which the events contained in the account are endowed with a meaning by being identified as parts of an integrated whole' (White, 1987: 9). The second most important element of a narrative is meaning, which helps us make sense of the narrative: 'the demand for closure in the . . . story . . . is a demand . . . for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama' (White, 1987: 21). The significance of narratives, or

stories, is three-fold. First, it is basic to cultural beliefs: 'we force our stories on a world that doesn't fit them' (Cronon, 1992: 1368). Second, it is a fundamental way of organizing experience because 'we inhabit an endlessly storied world' (Martin Heidegger, cited in Cronon, 1992: 1368). Third, we have a natural impulse to narrate because it 'might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely the problem of how to translate knowing into telling' (White, 1987: 1).

Social scientists are quite skeptical of the narrative format because of its supposed lack of rigor, highly subjective nature, and limited applicability. However, there exist various criteria for judging the validity and usefulness of narratives: depth of explanation and thoroughness of details; breadth of scope; simplicity of the story which reveals useful insights; inclusiveness of different voices and events; coherence through tight linkages in text – based on scholarly tradition while simultaneously pushing its boundaries; and lucid and engaging reading. Furthermore, one could pay attention to the significance of the narrative in terms of the importance of plot, scene and character; beginnings, middles and ends; the rhetoric of storytelling; and the different agendas of narrators and readers. Such narratives are also powerful tools for policy analysis, because they relate a succession of events, help us understand patterns of decision-making, highlight the roles of important actors and provide meaning to such events, decisions, and actors.

In the final analysis, I believe the book is an example of the kind of detailed, yet broad, empirical research that is to be welcomed so that we may develop more sophisticated and useful theories of actual planning practice. Students, scholars, professionals, and policy-makers will find the book to be a rich source of empirical knowledge and valuable stories that not only have practical application to different contexts, but could also be the basis for important theory building.

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