The Proper Role of Planning Theory

Darrel Ramsey-Musolf
Question 1 Essay

Darrel Ramsey-Musolf
University of Wisconsin, Madison
I wrote the following preliminary exam essay while I was a doctoral student at UW-Madison. Even though I decided to pursue my PhD in Housing Policy and Analysis as a member of the Geography department, I am quite fond of this essay as the content clarified my beliefs about planning theory. Under accredited programs, planning students take coursework planning theory before they have any planning experience. As a former planning practitioner, I think planning theory is most helpful after one has obtained planning experience. At that point and as student of theory, the practitioner can reflect on what academics profess and what planners actually do.

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Prepare an essay in which you address the following points: who (which scholars or practitioners, in planning or from outside planning) would you ask to participate in the issue, why would you ask these particular individuals to participate (to the exclusion of others); what ideas do you believe should be addressed in such an issue, and who is likely to address them (that is, in inviting participation, identify specifically what would you ask specific individuals to write about); explain how the collection of individuals and ideas would, in fact, give the reader an appropriate and useful overview of the literature, ideas and field of planning theory at this time; finally, present the “outline” (in essay form) of your introductory essay for the edited volume, explaining the above points and also addressing how your concept of planning theory draws from – fits to – extends – departs from past discussion in the field.

Introduction

Having been asked to edit a special issue of the Journal of the American Planning Association, I write this essay to explain this issue’s focus, as this edition will be based on my concept of planning theory. This essay will also include who I think should participate in this discussion and why I find their perspectives valuable. I intend to charge these individuals with explicating key planning issues that illustrate, debate and may even contest my own concept of planning theory. I hope that this special issue allows those in the field, as well as other interested persons, to regard the discipline of planning, to better understand the purpose of planning theory, to join in the theory’s paradigmatic debate, and ultimately transform theory’s future history.

In this special issue, I intend to call for a re-grounding of the purpose of planning theory. If one reads the leading authors of planning theory, then one may conclude that nothing good has
ever arisen from the discipline (de Neufville, 1983, p. 37). On the other hand, in a survey of planning practitioners, one would find little regard for planning theory as most planners remember theory as a painful rite of passage required for their degree (Beauregard, 1995, p. 163). A comparative examination of the medical sciences reveals a unitary purpose to heal the sick. Another comparative examination of the physical sciences, such as engineering, reveals a dual purpose for determining the minimum requirements for component materials and the gestalt of construction practice (Moore, 1978, p. 388). However, planning is rooted in the social sciences; where the “the scientific study of human society and social relationships” ("The Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English," 2005) permits theory to continually illustrate the field’s dilemmas of authenticity, authority and legitimacy (Brooks, 1988, p. 243; Klosterman, 1980, p. 331) because “cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete” (Geertz, 1973, p. 26). This incompleteness has allowed planning theory to operate as a hydra where theory reveres If Planning is Everything, Maybe it's Nothing [italics added] (Wildavsky, 1973), and its antithesis If Planning Isn't Everything, Maybe It's Something [italics added] (Alexander, 1981).

From my review of theory and my experience as a planner, I believe that planning theory is a contested and putative landscape in which actors divine wicked problems; where not only crisis predominates, but also opportunities exist (Hay, 1999). This polysemic state allows the actors to achieve the fulfillment of their self-interests via institutional agency and legitimacy. This concept of planning theory covers both academics who manipulate planning’s non-paradigmatic epistemology for scholarly repute, and practitioners who survey the uncertain dilemmas of urban morphology for capital accumulation. For in its essence, planning is the transformation of unique parcels (de Neufville, p. 36; Heasly & Guries, 1998; Kraushaar, 1988,
What this discipline needs, where the theorists and the planners eye the other with suspicion, is a conflated re-grounding of purpose—as the proposed solution for one dilemma may be the etiology of another dilemma.

My position of re-grounding is informed by Geertz’s, Thick Description: toward an interpreting theory of culture, de Neufville’s Planning Theory and Practice: Bridging the Gap, and Dalton’s Why the Rational Paradigm Persists—The Resistance of Professional Education and Practice to Alternative Forms of Planning. In his essay, Geertz reframes anthropology from its positivist practice of collecting factual data that begets “scholarly artifice” (Geertz, p. 16), to a more nuanced discipline where the ethnographer is conscious of contextual meaning (Ibid., p. 19), and is also conscious of their inherent agency that produces the meaning (Burawoy, 1998, p. 11; Healey, 2003, p. 106). In her essay, de Neufville identifies that the chasm between theory and practice is caused by a planning education epistemology that does not help planners “achieve the diverse and contradictory goals in practice or to resolve the…. [dilemma between pluralism], political reality and their faith that they should do rational comprehensive planning while [attempting to remain] aloof from [the] political process” (de Neufville, p. 35). Dalton has also evidenced this disciplinary lacuna in a related study of planning education, “up for promotion next year… [a planning educator] anticipates that the peer review committee will be more impressed by another publication or two than by her past teaching awards” (1986, p. 150). As resolution to this chasm, De Neufville suggests new topics for conflated research and charges that theorists should transform the dilemmas to opportunities (Planner as Technician, The Values Problem, Comprehensive versus Incremental, etc..) for epistemological expansion, and that they should also include new analytical perspectives such as Political Economy, Phenomenology,
Limits of Positivism, etc., within the pedagogy of planning education (de Neufville, 1983, pp. 38-42).

I believe that we should enjoin theorists and planners to re-ground theory’s purpose because planning, even in its absence, determines land-use that leads to the distribution of wealth, power, and identity (Babcock, 1966; Molotch, 1976; Rittel & Webber, 1973; Ritzdorf, 1992, p. 15). Reflecting upon the United States electoral history, land ownership conveyed certain privileges as only free property owners could exercise the political act of voting; a re-purposed theory can better effect the classes of society who operate without the means of power (Hoch, 1993; Last, 1998). If the act of planning of land allows actors to mitigate capital uncertainties that not only effect individuals, but also influence the socio-economic status of municipalities, states, and nations, then I believe that we should proactively influence those actors with theory, rather than reactively chastise their means and ends (Altshuler, 1965; Christensen, 1985; Dyckman, 1969; Hoch; Jacobs, 1984; Moore). Furthermore, when theory is successful at “explain[ing] the profession to itself” (de Neufville, p. 38), we will have better prepared planners for the balancing act of serving policy, politicians, and the public (Etzioni, 1967, p. 387; C. Hoch, 1984, pp. 342-343; Ritzdorf, 1992, p. 17). As society confronts contemporary issues such as the mortgage crisis, affordable housing, and the enduring jobs/housing spatial mismatch, we must actively use our cumulative knowledge of planning theory to aid planners who serve the taxonomy of public interest, rather than reactively use our knowledge to “scuttle the scow” (Moore, p. 390) or “confer legitimacy on one’s contrariness” (Beauregard, p. 165; Fainstein, 2005; Klosterman, 1980; Marron, 2007; Peterson, 2007).
In short, I assert that theorists should reify our body of knowledge. How can theory do this; by getting our “hands dirty with data” (de Neufville, p. 41) as we work within, and not outside, the whale of contemporary planning issues (Kraushaar, 1988).

I have divided this issue into three broad sections (birth, maturation, expansion) where selected authors will speak to my concept of theory. The individuals that I have asked to participate in the three sections are as follows: Rittel and Webber will address the birth of planning theory, Lim will address the maturation of planning theory, and Huxley and Yiftachel will address the future expansion of planning theory. I selected these authors because their perspectives speak not only to planning’s reformist roots, but also to the persistence of rationality (Dalton, pp. 147-148; Klosterman, 1978, p. 37). As a group, they have also recognized that a planner’s practice is as much as about the agility of persuasion as it is about the planner’s contextual position and identity (Howe, 1980; Krumholz, 1982; Susskind & Ozawa, 1984, p. 5). In short, they have documented the discipline’s pluralist genetics and have markedly contributed to the ongoing debate (should theory lead, follow, or inform) without succumbing to “fuzzy boundaries” (de Neufville, p. 36) or “fuzzy concepts” (Markusen, 1999, p. 702). I shall close this essay by addressing if I believe that my concept of theory fits, extends, or departs from this discourse.

The Birth of Theory

In this section, I have asked Rittel and Webber to address the birth of planning theory, as “planning theory was never part of the historical rationale for city and regional planning” (Beauregard, p. 163). While planning practice has been an ongoing concern since the 1910s with
the adoption of zoning codes in New York and Los Angeles, the emergence of discursive planning theory coincided with the publications of Jacobs’ *The death and life of great American cities*, Altshuler’s *The City Planning Process: A Political Process*, and Arnstein’s *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*. It is from the mid-1960s to the close of the 1970s, which were politically bracketed by President Johnson’s Models Cities program and the election of President Reagan, that a chorus of voices rose in opposition to the status quo of rational comprehensive planning methodology. Rittel and Webber, authors of *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning*, come from this period. In this section, they will cover the origins of planning, the cacophony of planning theory, and the emergence of wicked problems. But first, I would like to briefly discuss their essay and why I value their perspectives.

The thesis of Rittel and Webber’s argument is thus, “the kinds of problems that planners deal with—societal problems—are inherently different from the problems that scientists and perhaps some classes of engineers deal with. Planning problems are inherently wicked…. Wicked problems… include nearly all public policy issues” (p. 160). To frame their argument, the authors question planning’s adequacy for resolving social issues by outlining the disjunction of goal formation, problem-definition, and equity issues. While many authors in this era examined these topics, giving the topics currency, the authors’ examination was exemplary due to the depth of their discussion. For example, with the task of problem-definition, they moved beyond the normative discussion of who defines and why (Fainstein, 2000, p. 468).

Their problem-definition discussion leads with an examination of public administration’s rising efficiency and replication where, “planning was then seen as a process of designing
problem-solutions that might be installed and operated cheaply [i.e. zoning]… during the early industrial period, the task could be assigned to the technically skilled, who in turn could be trusted to accomplish the simplified end-in-view” (Rittel & Webber, p. 158; Taylor, 1911 ). As society matured in the 1950s, “with arrogant confidence, the systems analysts⁴ [planners] pronounced themselves ready to take on anyone’s perceived problem, diagnostically to discover its… [etiology, and skillfully] excise its root causes” (Rittel & Webber, p. 159). By the early 1970s, these same planners and their critics discovered that: “two decades of experiences have worn the self-assurances [of expertise] thin” (Ibid., p. 159) and yet, when evaluating the synoptic planning process, “we all know that such a planning system is unattainable,⁵ even as we seek more closely to approximate it” (Ibid, p. 159). From this point, we are presented with their central argument, “the classical paradigm of science and engineering—the paradigm that has underlain modern professionalism—is not applicable to the problems of open societal systems” (Ibid., p. 160).

*Rittel and Webber’s Charge*

With birth, there is pain; in the field of planning, both theorists and planners experienced growing pains. In three sections, Rittel and Webber will discuss the birth of planning theory with an eye toward the view that the discipline’s landscape began as a reaction against dis-equilibrium (Dyckman, p. 299). First, they will begin their discussion of planning’s reformist roots and how the mastery of technique led the field to specialize into rationality—a proxy for control (Altshuler; Arnstein; Dyckman; Etzioni; Lindblom). Second, as the neighborhood effects of unintended consequences mounted, the authors will document how the emergence of academic and professional identity coalesced into the cacophonic chorus of competing planning theories (Forester; Hudson; Klosterman; Krumholz). Third, like Geertz and his assessment of
anthropological practice, the authors will describe the socio-economic gestalt of this period in order to highlight how planning’s tasks were more complex, more unknown, more wicked; thus giving rise to this embryonic period’s theoretical malaise (Beauregard; Forester, 1980a; Grabow & Heskin; Rittel & Webber; Wildavsky). The theoretical basis for this triadic exploration is the citations located within this paragraph, and I also encourage the authors to include additional research that not only sheds light into this embryonic period but also informs the concepts outlined above.

The Maturation of Theory

In this section, I have asked Lim to address the maturation of planning theory, because after twenty odd years of discourse, theory has moved beyond the synoptic discussion—rational comprehensive planning persists as no alternative methodology consistently provides private taxable goods (Moore, 1978, p. 388). In retrospect, one may find evidence of the successes of the planning theory’s first wave: Citizen Participation—the extensive public review and participation of the National Environmental Protection Act as well as California’s Environmental Quality Act (Arnstein, 1969; Beatley, 1989, p. 18; Chapter 3. Guidelines for Implementation of the California Environmental Quality Act; Hillquest: An Urban Guide to 92103, 2008, pp. 20-21), Advocacy—with the dissolution of categorical grants, Community Development Block Grants allow planners and practitioners to advocate for the dispersal of government funds to a myriad of community needs (Davidoff, 1965), Incrementalism—the five year review cycle of the Housing Element in mandated California Comprehensive Plans (Lindblom, 1973; Peterson, 2007). It is this period, the 1980s to the late 1990s, that we witnessed the rise of neo-conservatism, the fall of communism, the emergence of globalism and the recognition of
indigenousness knowledge. Lim, author of *Towards a Synthesis of Contemporary Planning Theories*, comes from this period. In this section, he will cover the persistence of the rational comprehensive plan, the inclusion of new voices and the widening disconnect between planning theory and practice. But first, I would like to briefly discuss his essay and why I value his perspective.

Lim opens his essay with the familiar point that the synoptic model is debated, disputed and despondent as he notes that “few planning theorists would agree that there exists coherence and consensus” (Lim, 1986, p. 75). Lim then presents his syncretic view on planning that rests firmly on the synoptic mode by eschewing the usual attacks on “goals, instruments, and resources” (Ibid., p. 76), but reframes the triad by subjecting them to tests of consensus, confidence, rigor and realism. He further develops a rubric that tests the planner’s expertise in Technical, Intersubjective and Critico-ethical competencies. This test acknowledges the planner’s contextual agency (Forester, 1982, p. 68; Howe).

Lim’s synthetic theory operates as thus, a city council must decide if it should commit to an urban renewal project. Using Lim’s rubric, the planner would first examine each piece of the triad: was the goal obtained by consensus or coercion, are all the participants confident that the goal can be attained, has the goal been rigorously defined so that the goal is clear and unambiguous, and finally, is the goal realistic, concrete, and practical. The planner would then subject instruments and resources to the same evaluation. For Lim’s triad to be fully functional, this process is dependent upon a planner who is cognizant of his/her competencies as well as the competencies of their institution.
Lim’s Charge

With maturity, there is responsibility; in this period of planning, theorists not only continued to comment on planning practice, but also to question the means and ends of theoretical epistemology and production. In this section, Lim will discuss the maturation of planning theory as it examines itself and its purpose. First, he will note that in spite of the presence of alternative methodology, there is a persistence of rational comprehensive planning as encouraged by planning education and planner practice (Dalton; C. J. Hoch; McLoughlin; Moore). Second, while planning theory has aspired to doing good by being right, he will evidence the inclusion of new voices, and will pay special attention to their claims of exclusion from the academy of accepted thought (Campbell; Milroy; Morrone; Sandercock & Forsythe). Third, unlike other fields where there are significant cleavages intra-field, Lim will illustrate how the quest for legitimacy has lead to planning’s cleavage between the academy and practice, and how some theorists proscribe bridging that gap (Beauregard; Brooks; Dalton, 1989; de Neufville). Again, the theoretical basis for this triadic exploration is the citations located within this paragraph, and I also encourage the author to include additional research that not only sheds light into this maturing period but also informs the concepts outlined above.

The Future Expansion of Theory

In this section, I would like to suggest that planning theory has moved from a “period of crisis” (Fainstein, pp. 451-452) to an expanded period of testing, reflecting Kuhn’s second stage of Paradigm Change. Kuhn’s theory of Paradigm Change occurs in five stages:

1st. Pre-Paradigm—no consensus within the community on a central school of thought,
2nd. Paradigm Development—a period of testing theories,

3rd. Paradigm Articulation—the parameters of research and problem solving are guided by the accepted paradigm model(s),

4th. Paradigm Extension—the community attempts to codify the anomalies into the accepted paradigm model,

5th. Period of Crisis—when the paradigm cannot accommodate anomalies, the paradigm is scrutinized and ultimately leads to paradigm substitution (Galloway & Mahrayni, 1977, p. 64).

During the birth of planning theory, we observed with the rapid proliferation (stages 1-3) of competing theories—evidenced by the Rational Comprehensive, Incrementalism, Transactive, Advocacy, Radical, etc. (Altshuler; Davidoff; Grabow & Heskin, 1973; Hudson, 1979; Lindblom). During the maturation of planning theory, we observed the extension of epistemology (stage 4) with the addition of Policy Analyst, Communicator, Mediator, Political Economist, Progressive, and Strategist roles (Forester, 1980b; Kaufman & Jacobs, 1987; Kraushaar; McLoughlin, 1994; Susskind & Ozawa, 1984). In this maturing period, we were also told by the feminists, the environmentalists, academics, and planners that theory was wrong (stage 5) on all counts (Beatley, 1989; Beauregard; Dalton; de Neufville; Howe; Howe & Kaufman, 1979, 1981; Ritzdorf; Sandercock & Forsythe, 1992).

I assert that in this period of expansion (late 1990s to present), planning theory has returned to stage 2 because theorists and planners have recognized that no unitary theory (Hudson, p. 387; Kraushaar, 1988, p. 92; Sandercock & Forsythe, p. 51) can adequately resolve
the issues and etiologies of uncertainty (Christensen, p. 63). This recognition is grounded by the nearly 100-year experiment of planning since theorists and planners neither have perfect knowledge, nor have they fully captured the effects of project/plan completion (Kraushaar, p. 96). I have asked Huxley and Yiftachel, authors of New Paradigm or Old Myopia? Unsettling the Communicative Turn in Planning Theory, to address the future directions of planning theory, as this reiteration of Kuhn’s stage 2 reflects a more chastened schema—selecting components from established philosophies and applying those proscribed techniques where the methodology, context and planner are appropriate (Campbell, 1996, p. 297). In this section, Huxley and Yiftachel will map the expansion of planning theory. But first, I would like to briefly discuss their essay and why I value their perspectives.

In their discursive approach, the authors examined the ‘root’ definition of theory, a “supposition explaining a phenomena; a sphere of speculation and concepts as distinguished from that of practice” (Huxley & Yiftachel, 2000, p. 334), in order to illuminate the wider debate—should theory lead, follow, or inform. I find that the key word of this definition discourse is supposition, “an uncertain belief,” (“The Oxford Dictionary of Difficult Words,” 2004)—which lends itself to the question, are theorists certain of their recursive alternatives as many of these alternatives are based on thought, not experiential testing? Planners are not shielded from this question either, as much of land development is a one-shot deal. As a corollary, one may extrapolate how this ‘uncertain belief’ continues the proliferation of competing, contesting, and dialectic theories of urban process and morphology. In this suppository debate, the authors turned their attention to Communicative methodology and employed a 6-phase theoretical test (Huxley & Yiftachel, pp. 336-339) that not only illustrated...
the Communicative assumptions, but can also reify any other proposed planning theory. In my opinion, this test evidences the fruits of maturing theoretical thought.

I found their discussion of Proposition 2—the conflation of theory with prescription, and Proposition 5—theory requires outside discourse and invigoration most insightful. Proposition 2 includes a discussion that emphasizes the usage of critique, analysis, and prescription. In their analysis, the authors note that academics have a tendency to cling to unitary myths of planning theory that promote the ability “to predict rational behavior of all human actors” (Ibid., p. 336). The authors further undercut unitary theory in Proposition 5 by the supposition that “perhaps planning theory is better seen as the translation of general social, political, economic, and, increasingly, design and ecological theories into the planning office.” This is reinforced by their import of Castells who identifies planning’s inter-disciplinary and non-dominant paradigmatic discourse (Ibid., p. 338). In his essay, The Education of City Planners in the Information Age, Castells writes:

Planning is a profession, not an academic discipline. A tradition of professional work, not a meta-ideology of rationality. It has always drawn from a variety of academic disciplines: geography, history, economics, architecture, design, sociology, anthropology, engineering, biology, psychology, mathematics, philosophy, and even literature. Its strength was, and is, in its interdisciplinary character that allows for breathing space in dealing with new issues, that makes it possible to build tools from whichever materials are available, without having to surrender to the normative approach on which academic disciplines are bound (1998, p. 27).
In their conclusion, the authors return to the test of planning theory as symptomatic of supposition, “that there is a multiplicity of ways of thinking about planning” (Huxley & Yiftachel, p. 339), and I subscribe that in this expansion period, planning theory does not necessarily replace or dominate, but is contingent—reflecting this expansive period of tests.

_Huxley and Yiftachel’s Charge_

With expansion, there is newfound freedom. In this period, theorists have the retrospective opportunity to examine the contextual successes and failures of the past 100-years of theory and practice. In this section, Huxley and Yiftachel will discuss the theory’s expansion by suggesting theoretical frameworks that do not commit historic tautological errors by positioning planning theory in an arena requiring deliberative action that is informed by critical theory. In short, the planner drives, the theorist navigates, and most importantly, they arrive together. First, Huxley and Yiftachel will map the growing awareness of the limits of the field (Campbell, 1996; Castells; Hoch; Peck & Tickell, 1995). Second, in a global survey of planning theory, the authors will comment on the failure of capitalism and socialism using the analysis of national housing policies as a lens (Carliner, 1998; Daniel, 1983, 1985, 1997; Dreier & Hulchanski, 1993; *Housing Finance in Transition Economies*, 2002; Hulchanski, 2004; Schwartz, 2006; Wyly & Hammel, 1999). Third, the authors will reflect on the persistence of theoretical debate and suggest methodology for the combined journey of theory and practice (Fainstein, 2000; McLoughlin, 1994). Again, the theoretical basis for this triadic exploration is the citations located within this paragraph, and I also encourage the authors to include additional research that not only sheds light into this bright future but also informs the concepts outlined above.
Conclusion

In this essay, I have stated that I believe that planning theory is a contested and putative landscape. I have also stratified planning theory within three broad categories that evidences its evolution of thought. Within my own experiences, I see theory as a means of understanding action. However, for that ‘means’ to have any validity, it must be substantially tied to the actors and the actors must acknowledge their agency—no matter how “subtle, quite [or] hidden” (Howe & Kaufman, 1981, p. 266). If I depart from the current praxis of planning theory, it is due to the influence of Dalton, de Neufville, Geertz, Hay, Markusen, and Peck. In the last two stages of planning theory, the theorists have hid their agency within rhetoric. If we wish to move beyond the comfortable, then I feel that we must remove the mask and name the color of our agency— for this is the dialectic action lacking in Planning Theory.
References


Chapter 3. Guidelines for Implementation of the California Environmental Quality Act, Sections 15350 to 15387, Article 20 C.F.R.


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1 Brooks has noted “much of the planning of American cities is carried out by the individuals—developers, business leaders, elected officials… who are not members of the planning profession” (p. 241). Therefore, when I use the term practitioners, I am referring to a larger membership of City Council persons, Planning Commissioners, Developers, Architects, Residents, etc., in addition to planners.

2 When I use the term planners, I mean persons who are employed as land-use planners in the public sector and “guide (the decisions) of those in power” (de Neufville, p. 36).

3 A Comprehensive Plan legally establishes development strategies and policies that guide the future growth and development of the community. As noted by Porterfield and Hall, a plan can address long-term and “short-term goals and (can) explore future challenges while providing a platform for amendments to accommodate changes in the city’s economy, social services and revenues” (1994, p. 22). More importantly, “a (comprehensive) plan should be written as an integrated statement of policies” (General Plan Guidelines, 2003, p. 49). For anyone interested in land-use development, the Comprehensive Plan is “required reading for all who are contemplating land development or are in any way involved in the growth industry” (Porterfield & Hall, p. 23).

4 In the 1970, the field of Public Policy Analysis was formally introduced as an academic discipline by an infusion of Ford Foundation grants to schools such as Berkeley, Harvard, Duke, Stanford, etc. Shortly afterwards, there was a move in Planning to conflate the two fields; however, the basis for policy analysis skewed heavily toward Quantitative Analysis in a period were planners were introducing qualitative practices into the discipline. See Alterman and MacRae’s Planning and Policy Analysis: Converging or Diverging Trends for further discussion (1983).

5 In his book The City Planning Process, which contains a case study of the Central Minneapolis Plan (Altschuler, pp. 304-306), Altschuler posited that comprehensive planning requires “more knowledge than anyone can grasp” (Innes, 1996, p. 462).

6 Instruments may be defined They are tools, measures, policies, methods, and techniques as they exist in conceptual form.” (Lim, p. 76)

7 Resources may be defined as “capital, land, and human resources essential to make any planning activity real, not simply intellectual” (Lim, p. 76).