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– COMMUNICATIVE AND AGONISTIC PLANNING THEORIES IN THE FACE OF POPULIST RHETORIC: Reflections on Minneapolis 2040 Process

HANNA MATTILA, AINO HIRVOLA AND TOM BORRUP

Abstract

This article discusses populist rhetoric in the context of participatory urban planning. Populist rhetoric builds on emotionally charged expression and juxtapositions between 'the people' and 'the elite' including planners. In so doing, it poses a challenge to planners who have learned to follow the ideals of communicative planning, highlighting public, rational problem-solving and orientation toward agreement. Recently, the agonistic theory of planning has put into question these ideals, advancing a view that disagreements, passion-driven resistance and populist rhetoric can advance democratic political culture, and by extension, planning culture. If populism can advance democracy in planning, should planners then reject the idea of countering populism with consensus-oriented communicative strategies and turn to agonistically oriented theory instead? What are the pros and cons of each theory in the face of populism? How do they help planners in identifying when populism serves democracy and when it works for anti-democratic goals? The article examines these questions, illustrating the discussion with reflections on populist public feedback and planners' response to this feedback in the Minneapolis 2040 comprehensive planning process.

Introduction

While populism has been an oft-discussed theme in political and regional studies recently, in the field of urban planning scholarship it has thus far remained a relatively marginal topic (Sager, 2020). One reason for this marginality may be that populist movements and the related rhetoric have been argued to find resonance, particularly in people in peripheral, declining regions, rather than in urban populations. In regions lagging behind, anti-establishment movements have tended to appeal especially to white, working-class people with few qualifications, people who have anxieties related to globalization and urbanization (Edelman, 2021; see also Cramer, 2016; Goodwin and Heath, 2016: 325). Nonetheless, recent research has shown that the geographies of populism are far more complex and that they structure around centers and peripheries on various scales. For instance, it is well-known that many Trump voters are affluent suburbanites (Edelman, 2021). It is thus not surprising that populism has an increasing influence in the planning of cities and city regions in the United States and beyond (e.g. Filion, 2011; 2018; Trapenberg Frick, 2013; Trapenberg Frick *et al*., 2015; Fainstein and Novy, 2023).

In this article, we are not interested in populism as it is manifested in party politics or voting behavior; we focus on citizen participation in planning. We build on the observation that recent polarization of the political scene in the United States and beyond has surfaced in urban planning, where populist rhetoric is making its way into the mainstream of public input in planning and local resistance movements against plans (see also Fainstein and Novy, 2023). Populism is characterized, among other things, by its resistance to the establishment. This resistance is communicated through

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emotionally charged (Aalberg and de Vreese, 2017) and passionate (Mouffe, 2018b) expressions. Populism seems to appeal to feelings rather than to reason, especially negative feelings such as anger (Müller, 2016: 1). The aim of populists is typically to build juxtapositions and tensions between groups of people, especially between the imaginary 'authentic people' and the ruling 'corrupt' elites (Müller, 2016: 3), including experts in public offices. Right-wing populism, in particular, uses rhetorical means as it builds the identity of 'the people' by demonizing as the 'others' of 'the people' not only the elites but also marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities.

Some recent studies on populism and urban planning have examined how populist resistance to new development—and especially to the arrival of new resident groups—poses threats to planning goals related to ecological sustainability and social justice (Fainstein and Novy, 2023; see also Filion, 2011; Trapenberg Frick *et al*., 2015). This article focuses on procedural aspects of planning, examining how populist rhetoric compels planners to rethink how they engage in communicative processes with local publics. The article asks what kinds of tools the communicative and the agonistic planning theories offer for planners as they address and engage with populist modes of communication.

In recent decades, the hegemonic planning paradigm has been formed by the communicative theories of planning. This paradigm views planning as an inclusive, democratic, rational and agreement-oriented process of 'shaping places' and 'making sense together' in pluralist societies (Healey, 1992; see also Forester, 1989). Communicative theories of planning draw from many sources, in particular, from Jürgen Habermas's philosophy (e.g. Healey, 1992; 1997; Forester, 1993; Sager, 1994) and the pragmatist tradition, especially John Dewey's philosophy (e.g. Hoch, 1984a; 1984b; 2019; Healey, 2009), with Dewey's philosophy having been important also for Habermas. Both traditions emphasize the role of rationality in the steering of collective action. Habermas focuses on consensus-oriented deliberation and 'communicative rationality', which is inherent in argumentative speech through speakers' implicit or explicit validity claims, asserting that what is said is true, normatively right and meant sincerely (Habermas, 1979: 2). Communicative rationality forms the basis of Habermas's discourse ethics, which addresses the testing of the validity of norms through discourses (Habermas, 1990), and his related, broader theory of deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1996). Dewey's political philosophy, in turn, promotes rational problem-solving through 'public inquiry' (e.g. Dewey, 1927), a helpful ideal for planners in contemporary societies where solutions typically must be based on both democratic practices and evidence (see Davoudi, 2006). Dewey's rationality extends beyond arguments and evidence, as he questions traditional juxtapositions between emotions and reason, or imaginative creation and argumentative justification of solutions (e.g. Healey, 2009). Nevertheless, both traditions, rationality oriented as they are, offer little insight into situations where people are mobilized by forces other than reason, as it seems to be in populist movements.

Recently, the agonistic theory of planning has emerged as an alternative to the communicative paradigm, providing an explanation of the popularity and political power of populism. The theory has been inspired especially by Chantal Mouffe, who suggests that populism may represent an opportunity for democracy, as resistance and disagreement are a part of a healthy democratic culture (Mouffe, 2005b: 86–88; see also Mouffe, 2018a). Proponents of agonistic planning argue that a planning culture that welcomes disagreement allows marginalized groups to voice their interests, whereas in the rational consensus-building processes, powerful groups in society often dominate the discussions (Hillier, 2003; Pløger, 2004; 2018; Purcell, 2008; 2009). Furthermore, Mouffe emphasizes that passionate modes of expression are legitimate and even desirable in political communication. According to Mouffe (2005a: 6, 24–25), passions drive political participation, and therefore democratic politics must resonate

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with people's needs, desires and aspirations. In recent work, Mouffe (2018a) argues that populism—with its orientation toward disagreement and passionate resistance—can advance democracy, provided that it does not build on anti-pluralist attitudes typical of right-wing populism.

Communicative and agonistic theories offer contrasting approaches to address public opposition expressed through populist rhetoric. Communicative planning theory typically views populism as an obstacle to rational dialogue and consensus-building, focusing on mitigating its disruptive effects. In contrast, agonistic planning theory speaks for the value of passionate or confrontational rhetoric, viewing it as a vital part of democratic politics that can spur political engagement and transformation. These differing perspectives provide planners with distinct strategies for engaging with populist opposition.

We explore the explanatory and normative power of these two theories, using the Minneapolis 2040 general plan process as an example, and focusing on the populist public input in the planning process. The plan sought to address the city's severe segregation caused by past land use policies. However, the proposed radical measures, such as significant densification through multiplexes, sparked intense public debate and revealed sharp divisions within the community. By analyzing populist rhetoric in public comments on the plan and the strategies planners employed in their response, we examine how communicative and agonistic planning theories manage to capture the dynamics of this opposition. Moreover, we assess the normative takeaways of these theories for practicing planners in the face of populist resistance.

Populist rhetoric in light of communicative and agonistic planning theories

'Populism' is a term that escapes definitions. Even though populism is literally about appealing to people, this does not yet provide a basis for a definition, given that almost all political communication aims at public appeal (Taggart, 2000). Yet, there seems to be something specific in the way in which populists articulate their messages (Aalberg and de Vreese, 2017). In this article, we focus especially on the communicative aspects of populism, particularly the interactions between residents using populist rhetoric—understood as a persuasive style of expression that appeals to emotions and serves as a key tool in constructing political identities—and planners responding to public resistance.

A key characteristic of populistic communication is its anti-establishment approach, often building on juxtapositions between 'the people' and those in power. Populist rhetoric frames the people as being in conflict with a ruling class that is viewed as detached from the concerns of the people. Populism often grows from public frustration and dissatisfaction with current policies, and it is fueled by grievances and the feeling of social marginalization.

According to Müller's (2016) widely recognized view, populists define 'the people' in exclusive and moralistic terms, portraying them as an authentic, proper, righteous and morally pure group that should reclaim its right to rule from the corrupt and immoral 'elite' (Müller, 2016: 3). This juxtaposition is typically established through the use of simplified and totalizing expressions and language use, appealing to feelings—especially anger, frustration and resentment—rather than to arguments appealing to reason (Müller, 2016: 1). Such 'people-elite' dichotomy oversimplifies complex societal dynamics and marginalizes anyone outside the narrow conception of 'the people'. This exclusionary logic, as argued by Müller (2016), renders populism and pluralism mutually exclusive, as populism dismisses diverse voices, frames the other side as morally inferior and ultimately fosters division, thus threatening democratic values (see also Rosanvallon, 2008).

Another typical rhetorical move for populists has been to refer to the good old days, when 'the people' still had power, when the world consisted of nation-states, when populations were ethnically homogeneous and when lifestyles were based on a

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patriarchal ideal of family (e.g. Gandini, 2020). As such, populism seems to be essentially about identity politics, where not only the elites but also many subaltern groups are viewed as the 'others' of 'the people', scapegoats to be blamed for a bad status quo.

Planning studies have so far mainly focused on this sort of authoritarian or right-wing anti-pluralist populism, which can be argued to be anti-democratic and thus against the ideal of inclusivity, an ideal cherished by theorists of communicative planning (see e.g. Filion, 2011; 2018; Trapenberg Frick, 2013; Trapenberg Frick *et al*., 2015; Sager, 2020; Fainstein and Novy, 2023). Communicative planning that has thus far largely provided the framework for the research on public participation embodies varying ideals concerning inclusivity. The Habermasian strand of communicative planning builds on the liberal emphasis on universalizable rights, such as participatory rights, which are supposed to guarantee everyone access to participatory processes and thereby support inclusion (Mattila, 2016; 2020).

As many planning theorists have argued, however, universalizing approaches such as Habermasian are of limited relevance for the everyday planning practices where planners encounter the plurality of needs of the stakeholders (Campbell, 2006; see also Campbell and Marshall, 2006; Healey, 2015). Dewey's pragmatism provides for communicative planning theorists an approach that is more sensitive to the ethical and esthetic values of the particular communities that planners encounter in their daily work (e.g. Healey, 1997; 2009). Moreover, Deweyan theory is not only focused on the processes of justification as is Habermasian theory; Dewey also explores the collective, creative processes from which possible solutions to societal problems emerge (e.g. Hoch, 2019). Emotions motivate communities of inquiry engaged in such problem-solving, and they have been important also for planning theorists who wish to mobilize various kinds of stakeholders to make better places (e.g. Healey, 2009; 2010). Unlike in the agonistic theory, however, in Dewey's theory, emotions have a cognitive component and they 'presuppose a mind-independent reality that holds them in check' (Cojocaru, 2018: 622).

Pragmatist-inspired communicative planning theories are normative theories, and they typically build on positive emotions such as hopefulness (e.g. Forester, 2004; Healey, 2010). Nevertheless, appealing to emotions such as anger and resentment can also be an effective means for political movements to mobilize support from those who feel ignored or sidelined by mainstream politics. Some variants of agonistic theory, unlike the Habermasian and pragmatist theories, see populist rhetoric, which often taps into these emotions, as strengthening democracy rather than weakening it. Especially, Mouffe's agonistic theory suggests that populism could also come in a pluralist form. According to Mouffe (2018a), populist movements and interventions may enable silenced groups to claim their political agency and challenge neo-liberal hegemonic projects, which she argues dominate cities and societies today.

Mouffe's (2005a) theory moves beyond the framework of deliberative theory, which, according to her, falsely assumes away the inherent antagonism in the realm of the political. By celebrating disagreements and resistance, Mouffe aims to ensure that marginalized groups can challenge dominant power structures. Disagreement forms the basis for political struggle and the potential to resist and reshape hegemonies. It creates the 'us/them' opposition, which is essential for shaping political identities and allowing diverse groups to express their distinctiveness. Along with political, collective identities comes the collective power to resist hegemonies. Mouffe does not wish to sharpen antagonisms in society, though; this is what she thinks the theory of deliberative democracy runs the risk of doing. By contrast, she wishes to transform antagonisms into agonistic relations, where disagreements may be communicated fiercely yet respectfully, thereby providing a democratic outlet for passions (Mouffe, 2005a: 14–19, 30).

Passionate and persuasive styles of communication, and at times also artistic modes of communication (see especially Mouffe, 2007), form a central part of Mouffe's (2018a) progressive 'left populism' and agonistic politics in general. According

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to Mouffe (2005a: 6, 24–25), passions give rise to collective forms of identification, essential for establishing the us/them division, which embodies the partisan character that Mouffe argues is central to vibrant democratic politics (Mouffe, 2005a: 6, 24–25). Mouffe uses the term 'passion' instead of 'emotion' to emphasize the collective nature of experiences, which she thinks deliberative theories of democracy fail to recognize (Mouffe, 2005b: 86–88).

Mouffe follows Ernesto Laclau's (2005a; 2005b) theory of the social logic of populism focusing on the discursive and rhetorical construction of political identities and the centrality of antagonism in mobilizing support and creating collective movement. Laclau introduces populism as 'a way to construct the political by establishing a political frontier that divides society into two camps, appealing to the mobilization of the "underdog" against "those in power"' (Mouffe, 2016: npn; see also Mouffe, 2018a). In this process, the performativity of language is essential, and rhetoric plays a far greater role than mere persuasion—the function traditionally attributed to it. For Laclau, rhetoric constitutes 'the anatomy of the social world' (Laclau, 2005a: 110, see also, Laclau, 2014), encompassing the mechanisms through which social meanings, identities and structures are constructed and power relations are established.

A crucial aspect of Laclau's theory, as noted by Mouffe (2018a: 62–63), is that the process of discursive articulation of the identity of the 'people' does not require erasing internal differentiation and pluralism within the group. There is a specific mechanism for preserving diversity while enabling unity and collective political action. To explain how successful political movements emerge, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) introduce the term 'chain of equivalence', which refers to the way in which diverse demands, arising from various grievances and injustices, can come united to form strong coalitions, collective political actors capable of challenging established power. According to Laclau, the rejection of these demands by the established power generates solidarity, which in turn activates the logic of populism. Despite their differences, the demands are equivalent in that they remain unsatisfied and share a common enemy: the existing order, blamed for the inequalities (Laclau, 2005a: 19, 72–74, 96; see also Hirvola, in review).

For Mouffe, the logic of populism as conceptualized by Laclau provides a model for such construction of collective identities that respects the multiplicity of demands and perspectives, making it compatible with her agonistic approach to democracy. The demands can be linked to the chain of equivalence through populist articulation, which is 'a way of forming group unity' (Laclau, 2005a: 73). However, to transform these diverse demands into a unified collective will, the movement requires a popular symbol that can accommodate the plurality of demands. Laclau uses the Lacanian concept of 'empty signifier'[1] to explain how these heterogeneous demands come together, highlighting the contingent nature of the process that is nevertheless goal-oriented. To serve the formation of the new political subject, the empty signifier must be vague, lacking specific cognitive and epistemic content that would unify the demands (Laclau, 2005a; see also Santarelli and Serrano Zamora, 2020). Indeed, the demands are equivalent only in their dissatisfaction; each retains its distinct nature but is connected through equivalential links (Laclau, 2005b: 38).

The purpose of 'emptying' the signifier of its particular meanings, allowing for a degree of simplification and imprecision, is to make it identifiable to a wide range of groups. A well-known example is the term 'bread'. In the French and Russian revolutions, this seemingly simple term was emptied of its literal meaning of nourishment and evolved into a powerful symbol that embodied a range of grievances and demands; the demand regarding bread was infused with the broader universal values like 'justice'

1 The concept of the 'empty signifier' is integral to Laclau and Mouffe's hegemony theory, which is influenced by linguistics and post-structuralism and emphasizes how social reality is constructed through language and meaning.

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(Laclau, 2005a: 97–98). Simplification, totalization and imprecision—elements required for the formation of the equivalential chain—are, for Laclau, elements of populist articulation. This process is not a cognitive or epistemic process of searching for common denominators but rather a 'performative' process where the heterogeneity of demands is preserved while creating symbolic unity (Laclau, 2005a: 95).

According to Laclau, collective political actors capable of challenging the existing power can thus emerge through populist articulation. 'Political', in this case, does not refer to the conflicting interests and fights over resources in everyday politics, but to a possibility of changing the whole power regime. But is the process necessarily a non-cognitive and non-epistemic one, or could the rational and knowledge-based approaches represented by communicative planning theory influence it? With these questions in mind, we turn to the Minneapolis 2040 comprehensive planning process, examining the ways in which the opponents of the planning goals articulated their discontent in their public feedback on the plan. Even though this feedback represents only a fraction of the communicative activities around the plan, we assume this feedback to exemplify the populist logic of the movement against the plan more generally. Furthermore, we look at the communicative strategies that officials of the City of Minneapolis used in responding to the public's articulations of their demands and identities.

Minneapolis 2040 comprehensive planning process

Minneapolis, with its approximately 430,000 inhabitants, is the most populous city in the state of Minnesota, USA. It forms a 'twin city' with the state capital, St. Paul, that is home to approximately 310,000 inhabitants. Located in the American Midwest, Minnesota is often viewed as one of the 'fly-over states', that are not among the hot spots of the new knowledge-intensive global economy. The decline of traditional Minnesotan sources of livelihoods, such as logging and mining, paved the way for Trumpian populism especially in rural areas of Minnesota. There populism has successfully tapped on, first, the nostalgia of 'good life' in once vibrant communities where white settlers made their living 'out of an empty land' and, second, resentment towards 'elite urban environmentalists' who 'favor urban people of color and immigrants', and who can be thus accused of the current decline of certain rural pockets of the region (Kojola, 2019).

At the same time, some other parts of Minnesota, especially the Twin Cities region, have been growing, urbanizing, and prospering, while also maintaining a politically progressive image. The Twin Cities region performs well economically, being in the top 10 of US city regions in terms of GDP (MN Employment and Economic Development, n.d.). Along with economic growth, population growth in the Twin Cities region has accelerated during recent decades, and the population has increasingly diversified in terms of ethnicities and races (Metropolitan Government, 2021). Even though the city of Minneapolis has scored well in many livability index ratings, there is an increasing body of research indicating that the city is not equally livable for all groups of people, and that wealth and well-being in the city are distributed very unevenly (Worthington, 2020). For instance, racial disparities in homeownership are notable in comparison to other US cities, influencing wealth accumulation patterns (Myers and Lee, 2018). The origins of these disparities can be traced, in part, to practices related to racial covenants and redlining, especially in the first half of the twentieth century (Mapping Prejudice, n.d.). Furthermore, exclusionary zoning contributed to racial disparities and segregation over the decades, as in many other US cities (Worthington, 2020; see also Manville *et al*., 2020).

The City of Minneapolis has a statutory responsibility to update its 20-year comprehensive plan every 10 years, and to subjugate the plan to the ratification of the Metropolitan Council. When the drafting of the Minneapolis 2040 comprehensive plan started in Spring 2016, it was already clear that the growing awareness of the history behind segregation would be reflected in the planning process. The Department of

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Community Planning and Economic Development that was responsible for the process stated that 'people of color and indigenous communities (POCI), renters, and people from low-income backgrounds have traditionally been underrepresented in civic processes'.[2] The Civic Engagement Plan shows that city officials wished to especially recognize the needs and demands of traditionally underrepresented groups (Minneapolis Department of Community Planning and Economic Development, 2016: 23).

The engagement plan covered an array of approaches for informing, interacting with and gathering feedback from the public. The plan was built largely on consensus-building-oriented dialogues that may be interpreted to represent the core ideals of communicative planning theory. To be able to recognize the diversity of identities of stakeholder groups, it also included creative and experimental methods such as visual storytelling, performances and narrative interaction (Minneapolis Department of Community Planning and Economic Development, 2016: 23–27).

After 2 years of engagement, the Department reported that the public wanted to be sure that 'as the city grows, everyone must benefit from that growth', which had not been the case in history.[3] The ambitious policies aimed at achieving this goal included city-wide upzoning of single-family neighborhoods, allowing multiplexes on lots previously allocated for single-family houses. Initially proposed as fourplexes, in the final plan, they were scaled down to triplexes. The elimination of single family or R1 zones attracted nationwide media attention, since no other major US city had taken this step before (Mervosh, 2018; Kahlenberg, 2019; Trickey, 2019). In Minneapolis, where 70% of residential land was allocated to single-family homes, this was a radical shift (Kuhlmann, 2021). The plan also included more intense densification along mass-transit corridors and the elimination of minimum off-street parking requirements citywide. These measures were supposed to make housing more affordable and accessible for disadvantaged groups and to contribute to ecological sustainability by promoting walking, bicycling and the use of mass transit (Worthington, 2020).

– 'The people' against the plan—Minneapolis for Everyone movement

The ambitious and radical nature of these policy proposals led to the polarization of the public in Minneapolis that was already divided due to racial segregation (Patterson, 2018). Especially, people living in single-family zones turned against densification, typically arguing that the plan destroys neighborhood character, blocks views from existing houses, increases disturbing traffic and parking and lowers the values of existing properties in single-family housing zones. Opponents formed a movement called Minneapolis for Everyone, the name being emblematic of the movement's populist communication strategy. The movement clearly did not represent everyone, but rather the part of the divided public that opposed the plan. 'Everyone' can therefore be interpreted to refer to everyone who counts as part of the idealized, authentic 'people'. Minneapolis for Everyone was followed by a countermovement, Neighbors for more Neighbors, which was committed to defending the Minneapolis 2040 goals.

Minneapolis for Everyone collected arguments against the plan in the movement's website, helping people to challenge the plan. The group also supplied lawn signs with slogans opposing the plan. A pro-Minneapolis 2040 community blog 'Street.mn' organized a project of observing and mapping the signs, and not surprisingly, results showed that the signs were concentrated on the wealthiest areas in the city (Johnson, 2018). Even though pro-Minneapolis 2040 actors succeeded in creating a picture of wealthy NIMBYists opposing the plan, we argue that the truth about the composition of the opposing front was slightly more complex and suggestive of the initial formation of a 'chain of equivalence'. While NIMBYists 'reject policies that they

2 https://minneapolis2040.com/planning-process/ (accessed 26 January 2025).
3 https://minneapolis2040.com/overview (accessed 26 January 2025).

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believe would adversely affect them, despite approving, or at least not disapproving, of relevantly similar policies elsewhere' (Quigley, 2023: 709), in this case the fundamentals of the planning policy—allegedly representing hegemonic order that does not serve 'the people'—were not accepted by the opponents. We also aim to show how the logic of 'empty signifier' was at play when the movement against the plan unified radically heterogeneous demands.

– Public feedback—constructing the authentic voice of the people through a flexible chain of equivalence?

In what follows, we picked out public comments of the opponents of the plan that exemplify the role of populist rhetoric in the movement against the Minneapolis 2040 plan. We do not aim at giving an overall view of all documented public input, which is available online and consists of files including more than 10,000 comments.[4] While the majority of comments provided by the public were either supportive of the plan or relatively neutral, many opposing comments—though not all—stand out because of their populist tones that break the traditional etiquette of discussing public affairs and that now seem to be making their way to the mainstream communication on planning affairs. Furthermore, we acknowledge that the feedback discussed below constitutes only a small fraction of the communicative activities of the opponents of the plan. While this feedback as such may not have had a key role in the formation of the movement, it reflects the dynamics of political movement formation—how unity emerges from rejected political demands, through the resistance of perceived inequalities and the opposition of those in power. Therefore, we treat this documented feedback as a proxy for a broader array of communicative acts as we assess the contribution of populist rhetoric to the formation of the movement against the plan.

In the comment below, the populist attempt to establish a conception of the 'people' is clearly observable. Furthermore, the comment puts forward a view of a small but powerful elite that has illegitimately deprived the true 'we' in Minneapolis or 'most' in Minneapolis of their powers to rule their city:

> Thus plan makes the assumption that most of our citizens agree with the plan. I am against it and from what I've read less than half of the city agrees with it. I do not want 4 plexs built on present single family lots in my neighborhood. I moved here 40 years ago to be in a great part of the city. The basis of this plan is full of errors. We in Minneapolis will drive our cars. Most, 96%, will not ride bikes or use public transportation. Most in Minneapolis, want our neighborhoods to stay the same. A minority is trying to shove a plan down our throats (Minneapolis 2040 Website Comments (Phase 5: 3/22/18–7/22/18), comment 759).[5]

While the author of the above comment may belong to a fairly established group (with an essentialist identity) in Minneapolis, the case also exemplifies a collective identity being politically articulated around a particular need. In this process, a key role is reserved for the moment of naming, which is typical of the hegemony theory approach (Marchart, 2005: 5). Popular identity is not a passive expression of what already exists. Rather, the subject, the collective 'we', comes into existence through naming (Laclau, 2005a: 99, 118, 227; see also Hirvola, in review).

Some opponents of the Minneapolis 2040 plan state in their feedback that the people in their neighborhood should preferably be like the original 'settlers' who moved there many decades ago, and that newcomers will not count as part of the community if they differ from the traditional ideal neighbor, who is typically a homeowner, not a

4 https://minneapolis2040.com/received-public-comments/ (accessed 26 January 2025).
5 The authors have not edited the language in the comments.

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renter; a good taxpayer, not a low-income person; a person leading family life, not a single or a young couple:

> Minneapolis was built upon 'the family neighborhood concept' that has worked very well. Why do you people want to destroy that concept. I love my neighborhood and the families that chose to live here and raise their children. COMMUNITY is why I live in Minneapolis! Do your urban experiments somewhere else! (Minneapolis 2040 Website Comments (Phase 5: 3/22/18–7/22/18), comment 285).

> I want to preserve the feeling of neighborhoods and people who have lived together as the kids grow up. Rentals plopped in between single family homes disrupts that feeling and creates transient people who come and go year after year. Renters never have the same interests as home owners, as they can just pack up and go at any time (Minneapolis 2040 Emailed Comments (Phase 5: 3/22/18–6/22/18), comment 44).

> As homeowners that have paid their taxes on time for nearly two decades and have spent time and money to improve our house and to keep up the neighborhood, we feel under siege and unfairly treated by this self judging tone about our city's past and know-it all plan for the city's future. Since when has it become a bad thing to own a single family home in Minneapolis? We have lived for the last eight years next to a rental property, which was rented mostly by young, often low income people (the folks you so desperately want to have more of), which more often than not did not respect their neighbors and did not help the quality of life. We could hardly stand it, living next to a house with four renters and we fail to see how a multi family dwelling is supposed to improve the situation (Minneapolis 2040 Website Comments (Phase 5: 3/22/18–7/22/18), comment 665).

In some comments the 'people', in this case white middle-class families, are presented as victims of the elite which illegitimately favors minorities in their policies:

> It's very telling that this policy explicitly excludes communities that the city doesn't care about — specifically those boring, white, middle class single family homes who would be disrupted by the aggressive upzoning to large multi-family buildings against their neighborhoods. The city leaders makes it clear in what they say verbally and in this document that disrupting these neighhborhoods, these families, is a 'feature, not a bug' of the plan, and their discomfort or disadvantage is of no consequence. I find that very offensive (Minneapolis 2040 Website Comments (Phase 5: 3/22/18–7/22/18), comment 444).

In many comments the conflict appeared to be between younger and older generations in the city. The authentic people in Minneapolis seemed to be those who have been living in Minneapolis for decades. The needs of this generation seemed now to be displaced by the unwanted and unwelcome ideals of the younger generation:

> Also, so far I see a theme in this draft: The city neglects an aging population. Age-ist policies on no parking, cutting down on cars, etc. Being told to ride your bike or take transit when you are an elder or taking care of elders is unrealististic and age-ist. This is driving people out of Mpls to suburbs that are now cashing in on Mpls' anti-car tunnel vision. Look around! They are more welcoming to certain groups, such as elders. I am one now — I notice this issue daily and will need to make decisions soon on whether I really want to remain in an unwelcoming, unbalanced city that is too gritty and difficult to be in. Mpls does

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> not respect its elders at all! (Minneapolis 2040 Website Comments (Phase 5: 3/22/18–7/22/18), comment 680).

Many comments demonized not only unwanted groups of people but also the character and appearance of multi-family buildings:

> I'm not sure I understand why you want to disrupt quiet neighborhoods. It's similar to building monstrosity houses in quaint neighborhoods. The big buildings look nothing like the houses that have been there for years. They block the sunlight for their neighbors and take up the whole lot. Most of them are just big boxes with no redeeming features (Minneapolis 2040 Emailed Comments (Phase 5: 3/22/18 - 6/22/18), comment 125).

> Eliminating zoning restrictions could lead to every neighborhood turning into a generic mid-density neighborhood with a Frankenstein mix of structures that don't fit together (Minneapolis 2040 Website Comments (Phase 5: 3/22/18 - 7/22/18), comment 316).

Importantly, opponents did not necessarily refer to a shared essentialist identity of the 'people', but the movement against the plan could also accommodate differences in identities, in line with Mouffe's understanding of pluralistic populism (Mouffe, 2018a: 62–63). For instance, those who wanted to promote sustainability goals were welcomed to the movement dominated by people 'driving their cars', if sustainability was understood in other terms than those of densification (*cf*. Fainstein and Novy, 2023). Especially preservation of existing buildings instead of building new ones served as a valid point of departure for sustainability (see also Minneapolis for Everyone, 2018).

> And many have said that the most sustainable building is the one that doesn't get torn down. Minneapolis has been blessed with quality housing stock built with old growth timber. This quality of materials and construction would be very hard to reproduce (Minneapolis 2040 Emailed Comments (Phase 5: 3/22/18–6/22/18), comment 16).

The logic of populism can be observed in the way in which very different people with diverse particular demands were able to group behind a common cause and build unity. Attempts to build a political frontier based on 'sustainability' from such divergent starting points must have required simplification, imprecision and totalization of the original demands, which for Laclau (2005a; 2005b) are elements of populist articulation. The original demands, linked to the chain of equivalence, were equivalent only in a sense that they remained unsatisfied by the ruling power (see, Laclau, 2005a: 19, 72–74, 96). 'Sustainability', indeed, is a concept that has been argued to often function as an empty signifier, expressing relations of equivalence between a range of different signifiers (Brown, 2016). Hence, it is not surprising that the concept favored by the planners became a field of contestation and struggle during the planning process.

In this struggle around the empty signifier of sustainability, a few comments challenging the goal of growth in general were made too, but this line of argumentation remained marginal in the movement that opposed the plan:

> Corporations want more people and higher population densities so that they can have more consumers and more potential employees to keep wages and benefits down. This in turn makes upper management and investors happy and contributes to an economically inequitable society. When is the Met Council and the city going to discuss and think about a sustainable economy based on zero

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> population growth (Minneapolis 2040 Website Comments (Phase 5: 3/22/18–7/22/18), comment 7891).

Though global capitalism per se was not questioned in the mainstream of the opponents' arguments, critique of the real estate sector's role in capitalist urbanity formed a notable part of opponents' criticism of the plan, bringing opponents close to the position of the critics of neoliberalism or proponents of Mouffean left populism at this particular point.

Especially, the contribution of upzoning to the goal of making housing more affordable was often questioned in comments where the power of developers was criticized, sometimes also hinting that decision-makers are corrupted (*cf.* Agnew and Shin, 2017):

> So even if the 4-plexes were allowed along existing transit corridors, it is not at all clear that if your goal is 'Affordable Housing' you could then declare, 'Mission Accomplished'. The math is simply not there. The plan strikes us as a wonderful gift to developers. (Please tell us they were not big financial donors to your campaign) (Minneapolis 2040 Emailed Comments (Phase 5: 3/22/18 - 6/22/18), comment 161).

While Minneapolis 2040 had developer-friendly features, not even this argument was appealing enough to turn the majority of the public against the plan. Even though public input suggests that a chain of equivalence had started to form around diverse demands presented by different publics, the chain did not become strong enough to pose any major threats to the Minneapolis 2040 planning goals during the planning process. In December 2018, the City Council approved the plan, and it was submitted to the Metropolitan Council for a review and ratification. The plan was finalized in October 2019, and Minneapolis 2040 policies and action steps were scheduled to take effect on 1 January, 2020.

Given the failure of the populist movement to sway the city council, mayor, Metropolitan Council, or to make a meaningful impact on subsequent city elections, opponents turned to legal challenges. Their initial assertion was that increasing density would pose a threat to the natural environment of city neighborhoods (Schieferdecker, 2023). While the plan was built on contemporary principles of sustainable development, it seemed unusual that organizations typically in concurrence with such principles took the lead in the court challenge. Smart Growth Minneapolis, Audubon Chapter Minneapolis, and Minnesota Citizens for the Protection of Migratory Birds filed suit in December 2018 (Smart Growth Minneapolis, n.d.), thus joining the chain of equivalence where the ecological interests now came together with the interests of those stakeholders who wanted to defend the car-dependent suburban lifestyle. In the first stage of what would become a six-year legal battle, in March of 2020, the first suit was dismissed by a judge.[6] Implementation of the Minneapolis 2040 plan moved forward.

Mounting an appeal, the environmental organizations leaned on a procedural requirement that assured citizens the right to have an environmental impact assessment on development projects. The 1971 Minnesota Environmental Rights Act (MERA) provides Minnesotans with 'an adequate civil remedy to protect air, water, land and other natural resources located within the state from pollution, impairment, or destruction' (Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, n.d.). In other words, it gives citizens the right to demand formal environmental impact studies when they perceive potential environmental threats. While such assessments are designed to evaluate individual projects, opponents claim the entire city-wide plan should come

6 Hennepin County District Court, File No. 27-CV-18-19587.

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under the same provision of the law (Smart Growth Minneapolis, n.d.). The groups argued that the Minneapolis 2040 plan is likely to cause increased pollution of city lakes, soil erosion, flooding, diminished air quality, and reduced wildlife habitat. While not ruling on the environmental impacts, per se, the court, in 2021, agreed that opponents did have the right to sue to require an environmental assessment report on the city plan.[7] This put a number of development projects, already underway, in limbo while the City put the 2040 plan on hold, reverting to 2030 zoning standards (Du, 2023).

The City of Minneapolis declined to launch an environmental study, an almost impossible task given the complexity of a city-wide comprehensive plan. Instead, the City initiated efforts in the Minnesota State Legislature to exempt such plans from environmental review (Callaghan, 2024). The legislation passed in the Spring 2024 session (Du, 2024a). During deliberations the law was opposed by some who claimed such a state-wide law would strip municipalities of local authority. Further, in August, 2024, the Minnesota Supreme Court declined to hear the earlier lawsuit and re-instated the 2040 Plan. 'Today's decision allows our City to continue our work to desegregate Minneapolis neighborhoods and build a diversity of housing options in every community', Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey was quoted in the Star Tribune (Du, 2024b).

The atmosphere had become more favorable for the City's views, and the equivalential chain of the opponents of the plan had started to unravel. In what follows, we examine how the planners' activities contributed to the collapse of the opposition to the plan.

Theoretical reflections: what made the chain of equivalence break?

Even though Laclau's theory insists on the non-cognitive and non-epistemic nature of the formation of equivalential chains, critical urban scholars have observed that established hegemonies can 'manage' heterogeneous demands before they succeed in forming a populist chain of equivalence. Also Laclau (2005a: 81) himself argues that this kind of management can take place through *institutionalist discourse*, within which 'all differences are considered equally valid within a wider totality'. It breaks the equivalential chain and prevents the formation of a political frontier, aiming ultimately at the replacement of politics by administration (Laclau, 2005a: 81; Laclau and Mouffe, 2012).

Laclau's institutionalist discourses have been associated with the concept of 'techno-managerialist governance' (Hirvola, in review), with which neoliberal politics and administration have been argued to have post-politicized urban planning and development (Haughton *et al*., 2016; see also Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012). According to critical urban scholars, administration can utilize techno-managerialist tactics to tame urban protest movements by engaging the protesters in participatory processes where their claims are addressed individually and discussed one by one in a rational and argumentative manner. In this way, the administration can prevent the particularistic social grievances from spiraling out into more universalizing demands of political change, and thus the articulations of discontent from 'spilling over' to a more general opposition to the regime of 'capitalist urbanity' (Haughton *et al*., 2016: 479, 482; Swyngedouw, 2014).

These scholars have been mainly interested in protest movements striving for noble aims such as protection of nature or promoting urban justice. However, as the case of Minneapolis 2040 shows, protest movements can be also targeted against climate-actions or equity and social diversity (see also Fainstein and Novy, 2023). Hence, planners are not always working against democracy and equity when breaking

7 State of Minnesota Supreme Court, A19-0999, Court of Appeals.

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the chains of equivalence and managing the articulations of discontent. The question is: when are they and when are they not? In his theory of populism, Laclau states that the original demands, which are linked to the chain of equivalence, must be democratic, with an implicit egalitarian dimension, and 'formulated *to* the system *by* an underdog of sorts' (Laclau, 2005a: 125, italics in the original). Therefore, in assessing the activities of the planners, one guideline is to examine the democratic nature of the original demands presented by the residents in the planning process. If the egalitarian dimension is missing—if the residents' populist articulation aims, for example, to preserving privileges (as may well be the case, when it is aimed at opposing social diversity)—it can reasonably be assumed that the planners have every right to fight it in the name of democracy.

From the pragmatist perspective, the problem with the Laclauian view is that the heterogeneous demands remain untouched through the formation of a new popular identity, and that this process appears as non-cognitive and non-epistemic (Serrano Zamora and Santarelli, 2021). This does not leave room for collective learning processes where people could reflect on their demands, let alone that they could publicly and argumentatively test—in a Habermasian manner—whether their demands are justified. Some pragmatist-oriented philosophers point out that both Deweyan theory and Laclauian theory build on the conceptual indeterminacy in the processes of articulation of political identities (Santarelli and Serrano Zamora, 2020). Laclau's notion of an empty signifier indicates that signifiers are never entirely devoid of meaning. While their connections to specific demands may weaken through simplification, original meanings persist, maintaining the potential for disagreement. Thus, the term 'floating signifier' may better describe this process, reflecting how symbols change their meaning depending on who wins the hegemonic struggle over their interpretation (Laclau, 2005b: 43). Dewey, in turn, starts from indeterminacy but emphasizes the process of rational inquiry that leads towards determination, a process that 'goes hand in hand with the progressive articulation of the identity of the group and of its values, aims, and needs' (Serrano Zamora and Santarelli, 2021: 503; see also Santarelli and Serrano Zamora, 2020). For pragmatists, the disadvantage of the Laclauian theory is that—unlike the Deweyan theory—it leaves the door open for authoritarian manipulation in rhetorical processes where the popular identities are formed (Serrano Zamora and Santarelli, 2021: 504).

Yet, pragmatist and Habermasian approaches are normative, while Laclauian perspective remains mostly analytical. Furthermore, the reality analyzed by Laclau might be vaguer and more undetermined than the one that Dewey witnessed (Serrano Zamora and Santarelli, 2021). Do the demands that are coming together in equivalential chains escape argumentative and knowledge-based planning approaches, or can planners analyze and assess those demands? If so, can planners foster reflective attitudes and practices toward those demands?

To return to the Minneapolis 2040 case, the methodically rich public engagement strategy of the City is likely to have worked against the formation of the chain of equivalencies. The institutionalist discourse adopted by planners to manage demands strategically intervened in the hegemonic struggle over contested signifiers—such as 'sustainability', 'people of Minneapolis' and 'the plan' itself. By occupying these signifiers with non-political and incontestable meanings, the City neutralized confrontation and prevented the opposition from linking their specific demands with broader, universalizing claims of injustice. For instance, while the opposition framed the plan as signifying the 'end of suburban life', the City's emphasis on 'affordable housing'—an uncontested and widely supported goal—diminished the populist potential of these claims. This approach proactively disrupted the formation of a unified political frontier by eroding counter-hegemonic discourses, depoliticizing contested signifiers, and shifting debates into a technocratic, administrative framework.

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The planners addressed the demands of each stakeholder group individually, which can be assumed to have played a crucial role in the breakage of the equivalential chain where the various opponents of the plan had started to join their forces. The orientation of the City was knowledge-based, on the one hand, and the planners were prepared to defend the plan—including the conceptions of justice included in it—with arguments. On the other hand, the planners relied not only on reason, but also on the recognition of particular community identities, which they addressed with such communicative methods that appealed not only to reason but also to feelings and imagination. For instance, they invited people to imagine the future of a more equitable city, adhering thus to a pragmatist ideal of collective imagination as a means for planning together and forming a collective identity (*cf.* Healey, 2009; Hoch, 2019). Further, they utilized artistic media and collaboration with artists in shedding light on the histories and identities of those groups that had been traditionally underrepresented in participatory processes (Worthington, 2020).

What might have been even more important for the breakage of the equivalential chain is that the planners made a specific effort in addressing the demands of the traditionally powerful communities in single-family zones. Even though the voices coming from these communities were not in need of extra support, the planners could perhaps foresee already in the beginning of the project that these communities might turn against them.

In Minneapolis, The Department of Community Planning and Economic Development made notable efforts to work with the anxieties and fears of this faction of the public vis-à-vis change. It was acknowledged that the fears were partly related to the fact that Minneapolis is 'missing the middle' (Worthington, 2020), that is the moderate density low-rise housing in between high-rise downtown and low-density suburbs consisting of single-family houses (Parolek, 2020; Wegmann, 2020). Perhaps because the local communities did not have much knowledge and experience of this housing type, some people ended up demonizing both the unknown form of housing and the people who might favor this type of housing. To counter the resistance and fears, the Department conducted architectural 'fit tests' aiming to prove that carefully designed moderate-density low-rise housing can be a good fit with single-family houses. Furthermore, they also engaged aging people living in single-family houses in exercises where they could imaginatively explore how their own housing needs might change in the future and whether these needs could be met by multiplexes tailored for them. The unknown, demonized inhabitants in the so far 'missing middle' could be they themselves. The concerns and demands of this group did not vanish altogether, however, even if they were addressed one-by-one with various communicative strategies by the planners.

As regards the result of the Minneapolis 2040 process, one might argue that when seen from the agonistic angle, in breaking the emerging chain of equivalence the planners might have calmed not only the anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic voices but also some pro-democracy and pro-equity voices, such as the voices of those who questioned the power of developers in the capitalist urban regime. These voices can be considered as genuinely political in Laclauian and Mouffean sense, given that they were not only voices representing individual interests, but voices questioning the legitimacy of the existing power regime of 'capitalist urbanity' (*cf.* Swyngedouw, 2014). However, the demands of the traditionally wealthy and powerful local communities concerning the exclusion of new resident groups from their neighborhoods were not political voices in a similar sense when seen from the agonistic angle, because these voices were mainly defending existing privileges that were put into jeopardy by the equity-related goals in Minneapolis 2040 plan.

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Conclusions

The theoretical discussion on populism and the analysis of the populist rhetoric in the Minneapolis 2040 process leave us with the conclusion that planners have lessons to learn from both theories of communicative and those of agonistic planning as they encounter populist modes of communication. Whereas the communicative approaches are typically non-adversarial, the agonistic theory of planning brings to the fore the need to recognize disagreements and dissent in pluralist cities. Furthermore, it gives planners a framework for analyzing how various, heterogeneous demands coming from the public can form chains of equivalence, growing into a significant political force. Planners should recognize how new popular identities are formed through chains of equivalence, because these chains may challenge the whole institutional framework of planning.

But should these kinds of challenges be tackled, or do they rather open paths toward more just and democratic urban development? Here, the communicative and agonistic approaches point to differing directions. For the agonistic approaches, the hypothesis is that because the hegemonic, neoliberal paradigm of urban development cannot serve democracy and justice, there is a need for movements that challenge the prevailing order comprehensively. Therefore, Mouffean agonism has made space for the logic of populist mobilization of people, but with the premise that populism could preserve pluralism even when building on us-them divisions. One could argue, though, that Mouffean theory cannot be transformed into a planning theory, because planning is a form of public administration and takes place within existing power regimes. Mouffean theory rather provides planners with a framework for analyzing the current, often post-political state of affairs. Communicative planning approaches, in turn, largely move within existing power regimes and can be criticized for being affirmative of existing power constellations, even though they aim at incremental changes toward more just and democratic development. When seeing populism as a challenge to be tackled, communicative approaches may halt the emergence of new, alternative and potentially more democratic and just power regimes.

Another question is whether it is even possible to challenge populist movements by means of communicative planning. Laclau's theory presents some ambivalence in addressing this issue. On the one hand, he suggests that the formation of the populist chains of equivalence largely escapes the cognitive and epistemic approaches typical of communicative planning. On the other hand, he analyzes how institutional discourses often break these chains before they even begin to challenge existing institutions. This insight offers planners a strategic tool for countering populism: by addressing each demand separately and focusing on the specific social grievances behind the popular identity, planners can do away with these demands in a techno-managerialist manner. Isolated, particularistic demands are easier to shoot down, one by one, compared to a unified chain of equivalence. The case of Minneapolis 2040 shows that knowledge-based and argumentative approaches can be impactful in tackling the challenge of populism. However, in the Minneapolis 2040 case, these approaches were complemented by Deweyan creative and imaginative planning and identity-building processes, which built on positive emotions, and which provided a notable counterforce to the populist rhetoric that was built mainly on emotions such as anger and resentment.

One of the progressive aspects of the Minneapolis 2040 public engagement strategy combining reason, emotions and imagination was that it facilitated the local communities to critically reflect on their own identities, whereas the unconstrained Laclauian populist, non-cognitive and non-epistemic identity formation would not have left room for analytical reflection, and thus, it would not have protected the public from the potential authoritarian aims involved in the process (*cf*. Santarelli and Serrano Zamora, 2020; Petersen, 2022). From a planning perspective, one of the limitations of Laclauian theory is that while it emphasizes equality, it provides few tools for differentiating between democratic and anti-democratic popular demands.

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Both types of demands have been part of the equivalential chain in the opposition movement of the Minneapolis 2040 plan. Yet, it is often difficult to assess whether people's expressed demands emerge from inequality since many perceive themselves as underdogs relative to others. Assessing whether we are dealing with inequality in these situations requires careful reflection: the pursuit of equal rights must be distinguished from efforts to reclaim lost privileges. One could argue that planners benefit from deliberative approaches in determining this distinction. However, the justification of the demands is still only one part of the process; passionate forms of expression, highlighted by agonistic theories, are also necessary to ensure the silenced and invisible needs become recognized. Above all, planners should understand the dynamics behind political movements and populist opposition—otherwise they cannot effectively address these issues using the tools at their disposal, such as communicative and argumentative methods.

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