

Urban dissensus

Description

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To achieve *consensus* is a laudable aim of any decision-making body. *Dissensus* is the opposite: a condition of widespread dissent. Forays into the philosophy of Jacques Lacan (1901-1981) support the role of *dissensus* within communities, including urban communities.

I examined the relevance of Lacan to digital media back in 1999 in my book *Technoromanticism*. I also excerpted from the book in a blog post in 2015: Is cyberspace real? My focus then was on the idea of cyberspace and the contention by some that cyberspace challenges concepts of reality: what is reality, the real, the virtually real? etc.

That investigation was a while ago now. ChatGPT helped me to summarise that blog post. So, the following section is aided by AIâ??s ability to summarise text files.

Lacan and the real

In the blog post I noted Lacanâ??s relationship with Surrealism and his use of language, including puns and word games, to provoke and even confuse. I likened reading difficult philosophical texts such as Lacanâ??s to engaging with challenging art works. Understanding Lacanâ??s texts is like interpreting and wrestling with art. See post: Art challenges life.

I discussed the surrealistic idea, as proposed by AndrÃ© Breton (1896-1966), that the world of dreams and the everyday life world are strongly related, implying that cyberspace could be a type of *techno-surreality*. For Breton, the real world dips into the surreal, â??the current of the given,â?• to reveal differences in intensity between truth and illusion, which are inscribed in one another, â??our mental equilibrium seeming obviously to hang upon this very precise distinctionâ?• [56].

I drew on Slavoj Å½iÅ¾ekâ??s interpretation of Lacan which he relates to paradoxes and jokes to illustrate *the real* as a cause that doesnâ??t exist but is present in various effects. I cited Freudâ??s psychological theories, particularly on the Oedipus complex, as further examples of Lacanâ??s paradoxical real.

I concluded that cyberspace, while not a physical reality or a technology that links our brains to a data matrix, functions as a metaphorical stand-in or a wildcard in digital narratives. It serves as â??a pure void which functions as the object-cause of desire,â?• fitting into the Lacanian concept of the real, characterized by paradox and contradiction. Thus, I am inclined to accord a â??realityâ?• status to cyberspace in Lacanian terms, as metaphor, provocation, and paradox.

Urban imaginaries

The concepts of *fantasy* (illusion) and *desire* are central in Lacanâ??s theory. Fantasy is not some extraneous or incidental pastime within human experience, but is crucial to it. Thatâ??s the condition of being human. We fantasise about the things we desire, as if to imagine that we possess, touch, or consume them. More significantly, fantasy fills the gaps of the incompleteness and inconsistencies inherent in our experiences. Fantasy structures our desires and wants. Itâ??s a way to cope with the fact that our desires are never fully met or satisfied.

There are several important implications for cities of Lacanâ??s theories about the centrality of fantasy and desire. First, they affirm the importance of so-called *urban imaginaries*: what people want to get from urban living, whether flights of fancy or *grounded in reality*.

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As is well known to architects and designers, itâ??s possible to take the lead from the expressed desires of clients and user groups wherever they lie on a spectrum of practical or fanciful. Reality tv lifestyle shows reveal the complicity of design and desire: he wants a house extension that captures the solidity and symbolism of an Egyptian pyramid; she desires a tropical jungle (BBC, *Your Home Made Perfect*).

From a Lacanian perspective, the whole field of desires within communities is *agonistic*, conflictual, drawing on *dissensus* (as well as consensus). Desires inevitably conflict. Many are irreconcilable and unrealisable.

Such fields of contradictory desires and illusions contribute to the collective identity of a city and its inhabitants. In conventional planning terms, understanding the fantasies and desires of different community members can lead to more inclusive and representative urban development. On the other hand, an appreciation of the agonistic character of urban living and urban narratives opens space for listening to *the other*. See post: Interactive architecture.

Lacanâ??s psychoanalytic approach to philosophy adds weight to a consideration of the psychological and emotional dimensions of urban living, including that of its decision makers, politicians, urban leaders and professional planners. As a post-Freudian discourse, the emotional admits the erotic, passion, disgust, melancholy, transgression and other symptomatic affects into the urban discourse.

What planners think

Planning theorists Michael Gunder and Jean Hillier have specifically applied Lacanâ??s and Zizekâ??s theories to the way urban planners and their audiences tell stories about cities.

They identify how planners, in some ways, deal in fiction (conceptual visions and plans for future developments). Planning, like other social realities, is constructed through ideological fictions and fantasies. Such constructions are essential for maintaining a semblance of coherence and stability in societyâ??. Claims to professional expertise and authority add weight to these narratives.

Gunder and Hillier seek to vindicate the role of the planner. Planning should not be dismissed for its use of ideological constructs but rather seen as an essential part of societyâ??s fundamental desire for harmony and security, despite the inherent risks of denying the desires of those being planned forâ??.

Gunder and Hillier position Lacanâ??s theories as an alternative to Habermas and his emphasis on ideological distortion in discourse, as well as Foucaultâ??s focus on power dynamics. Lacanâ??s psychoanalytical teachings, centred on human desire, are used to explain how discourse shapes public agency and planning action towards the futureâ??.

Gunder and Hillier recruit Lacan to support the idea of urban planning as a form of persuasive storytelling that uses metaphors and rhetoric to create a desirable future. They compare this process to advertising, highlighting the role of fantasy in planningâ??. They identify and dismantle several master narratives (fantasies) that inform planning practice: planning, certainty, good, risk, growth, globalization, multiculturalism, sustainability, responsibility and rationality.

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Lacan provides a means to critique the idea of consensus in planning policy, suggesting that agonistic *dissensus* might be more valuable than a forced consensus that could stifle diverse voices and choices.

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