Covert Planning for Social Transformation in Indonesia

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Since the Second World War, planning theory and practice has increasingly focused on how local people engage in the planning process. Indeed, this constitutes one of the most interesting theoretical and practical conundrums in planning. This focus is exemplified by work on citizen participation in synoptic planning, collaborative planning, and radical planning, which, taken together, can be understood as representing a continuum of varying degrees of citizen involvement, local power, and social and political consciousness. In broad terms, this continuum ranges from examining how local residents are incorporated into established planning processes to examining how they become empowered to plan for themselves within, outside of, and even in opposition to established planning and societal structures. At the same time, this continuum has expanded our understanding of what constitutes planning. This article is interested in a mode of planning that has not hereto been represented by this continuum—how local residents engage in planning for social transformation within the context of nonliberal, nondemocratic societies.

It is argued that a theoretical gap exists regarding our understanding of how local residents engage in planning to achieve social transformation. This gap has occurred because of the close association between our understanding of social transformation and the political expectations created by Western liberal democracies. In other words, we have not begun to theorize about how local residents engage in social transformation in an environment where there are threats of violent repercussions for social activism. This is not to suggest that community agency within limited social and political spaces has not been recognized. For instance, Douglass (1999) observes community agency in the form of “resilience” in the face of economic crisis; and Scheyvens (1998), along with other feminist scholars, documents the “subtle strategies” women use for self-empowerment. However, this work does not make the explicit connection between community agency, the character of social and political spaces for action, and how these activities represent an initial step in planning for broader social transformation.

Within restrictive political environments, like those found in Indonesia, planning for social transformation does occur, but it occurs in ways that are not yet represented in our theorization of this process. In many restrictive social and political environments, overt challenges to dominant power configurations are an ineffective and even

Abstract

Public engagement in planning can be viewed as a continuum ranging from local inclusion in synoptic planning schemes devised by the state to participation in grassroots social movements that seek broader social transformation. This continuum is incomplete because it does not elucidate how local people plan for social transformation within highly restrictive political environments where responses to social activism encompass real physical and social harm. The article draws on historical and contemporary analysis of social change in Indonesia and Malaysia together with a case study from Indonesia to demonstrate that social transformation does occur within environments where overt radical action is dangerous. In these circumstances, it takes a more subtle and nuanced form of collective action, here referred to as covert planning.

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dangerous way to initiate change. To understand how social transformation occurs within these contexts, one must look at more covert, incipient, and incremental forms of planning—here referred to as covert planning. Understanding covert planning requires acknowledging that planning encompasses local residents’ planning for themselves outside of, and sometimes in opposition to, formal planning and regulatory frameworks. However, covert planning differs from radical or insurgent planning in that it does not overtly challenge power relations.

The concept of covert planning is illustrated by the actions of residents in an informal settlement in Indonesia. This study was conducted over a six-year period between 1994 and 2000, thus bridging an important period of political reform. Although there are numerous examples of covert planning both within and beyond the particular case study presented here, this article uses an example of a community library as a heuristic device to illustrate this concept in empirical terms for the reader (for an additional example, see Beard 1999). The library serves as a particularly apposite example of covert planning because the action of establishing and operating the library is not immediately recognizable as transformative in the conventional sense. Over an extended period of time, this experience results in a social learning process that prepares local residents for more ambitious, radical practice—in this case, participation in public demonstrations for social and political reform. Unlike many forms of planning within liberal-democratic settings, the planning of the community library does not overtly challenge conventional power holders. Rather, it uses an advertent strategy—the eradication of illiteracy—that appears congruent with the state’s national development agenda. Given that the project takes place within a low-income, informal settlement, the acquisition of literacy and the resulting social learning process serves as an incremental step to establishing the social and political self-confidence necessary to achieve profound social change. Within restrictive political settings, observers seeking to understand social change should look more carefully for covert planning and the social learning and community agency that result from it.

The article analyzes how the literature conceptualizes participation in the planning process and in so doing identifies a theoretical gap. It then proceeds to build on the concepts of “avoidance protest” and “everyday forms of resistance” that provide insight into local responses in restrictive environments. Finally, the article seeks to illustrate the concept of covert planning through an empirical example.

Conceptualizing the Role of Local People in the Planning Process

Over the past fifty years, the field of planning has been criticized for excluding local people from the planning process. It has been argued that it would be both more democratic and more efficient to include these people. The move toward increased inclusion has resulted in both epistemological and methodological changes within the field of planning. The epistemological changes have meant an increased acceptance of other forms of knowledge (e.g., indigenous and gender-specific knowledge), whereas the methodological changes have meant that planning now takes into account informal processes that fall outside of state-regulated planning (e.g., oppositional planning). Planning has moved from a field that only values the knowledge of trained professionals to one that also values the knowledge embodied in social movements (Castells 1983; Clavel 1983; Douglass 1999; Friedmann 1987, 1989; Sandercoc 1998). The literature on this topic ranges from studies focusing on how to make state-planning processes more efficient and more democratic by involving affected parties to studies focusing on processes of social change and transformation initiated by local people.

Friedmann’s (1987) description of planning as the transfer of knowledge to action in the public domain captures the aforementioned epistemological and methodological changes. He identifies two types of planning—societal guidance and social transformation. With regard to societal guidance, he says,

This concept covers activities comprising primarily system maintenance and change. Though mediated by the state, processes of societal guidance are also promoted by central institutions from other domains, especially the corporate economy. . . . [I]t will be sufficient to note that it usually means top-down management of public affairs, which includes administration and planning as well as political practices that remain within the constraints of the political culture. Specifically, it excludes both revolutionary practices and the more politicized forms of radical planning. (P. 33)

In distinguishing between planning as societal guidance (planning from above) and planning as social transformation (planning from below), Friedmann dichotomizes the field of planning. Before Friedmann’s seminal work, planning had been primarily conceptualized as societal guidance. Conceptualizing planning as social transformation, along with the concomitant discussion of radical practice, made a tremendous
contribution to the discipline of planning. However, this dichotomy could not help but result in a gap between planning as societal guidance and planning as social transformation.

Collaborative planning partially bridges this gap, as it deals with both planning from above (as it relates to governance) and planning from below (as it relates to public interest). Healey (1997, 286) conceptualizes collaborative planning in terms of two interacting levels: hard infrastructure (i.e., the mechanisms of governance) and soft infrastructure (i.e., the process of consensus building). One of her focal points concerns the fact that formal governance structures have the potential to shape how local people are engaged in the planning process, and this, in turn, has the potential to fashion what they are capable of achieving. Underlying Healey’s work is the assumption that basic democratic expectations and structures of governance are firmly in place. Consequently, it is difficult to transfer this work to contexts within which these phenomena are absent. We are left to wonder how local people articulate their desires within nondemocratic environments.

Given the foregoing contributions, public engagement in planning can be viewed as a continuum ranging from local inclusion in synoptic planning schemes devised by the state (i.e., societal guidance), to collaborative interaction between local people and established governing mechanisms, to participation in grassroots social movements that seek broader structural change (i.e., social transformation). To see where the concept of covert planning makes its contribution, the following sections illustrate this continuum by examining three distinct modes of planning: (1) synoptic, (2) collaborative, and (3) radical.

Synoptic Planning

Almost everyone’s understanding of citizen participation in planning practice begins with Arnstein’s (1969) ladder. This seminal work posits different levels of participation ranging from nonparticipation to citizen power. While Arnstein recognizes that the participatory process may fail to increase the power of local people, she presupposes that local people are participating in a formal, institutionalized planning process. Within this conceptualization, local people gain power incrementally. Another key element of this conceptualization, and of much of the work on public participation in planning, is the assumption that there exist (1) basic democratic structures that allow citizens to engage in negotiations with public officials and formalized planning frameworks and (2) minimal levels of transparency and accountability.

Since the publication of Arnstein’s (1969) work three decades ago, the concept of power sharing with local people, as part of the synoptic planning process, has been modified and incorporated into projects throughout the developing world. Many of the countries to which these concepts have been imported do not have Arnstein’s presupposed planning processes, political structures, and societal expectations in place. Peattie (1990) finds fault with applying this North American–based model of citizen participation to developing countries. Using her fieldwork in Lima, Peru, she contrasts her experiences with what is implied by Arnstein’s ladder and argues that we need a more complex conceptualization of participation:

But I think that citizen participation is more complicated than a simple transfer of power from top to bottom. We must understand citizen participation as part of political and government institutions which are complex and shifting, in which strange alliances abound, in which the motives to participate on all hands are conflicting and far from simple, and in which multiple interpretations are usually possible. (Pp. 19-20)

As Peattie points out, part of the problem with Arnstein’s conceptualization of participation is that it assumes that citizens are struggling “upward to power via a single set of institutions.” The question then becomes, How do the desires of citizens get articulated in countries that lack these planning processes and political structures?

Collaborative Planning

Collaborative planning sits in the middle of this continuum: it conceptualizes participation both from the perspective of local people and from the perspective of state actors. As part of its normative agenda of institutional capacity building, collaborative planning seeks to revise governance mechanisms to create a sustainable balance of power between the state and its citizens. In practice, collaborative planning is concerned with fashioning effective partnerships between local civic organizations and the state for the purpose of achieving desired planning outcomes. Collaborative planning is increasingly favored in the subfield of environmental planning, and its agenda is often viewed as the “comanagement” of resources (or areas) by local groups and the state (Leach, Mearns, and Scoones 1999, 226). Conceptually, collaborative planning has emerged from three key phenomena: the recognition of the incomplete reach and capacity of the state, the advocacy of citizen participation in planning, and the rise of a diverse civil society (Agrawal and Gibson 1999).
Collaborative planning incorporates elements of both societal guidance and social transformation. Healey (1997) describes this dynamic interaction:

... an alternative notion of collaborative governance is developed, within which the formal institutions of government have a role in providing a hard infrastructure of a *structure of challenges*, to constrain and modify dominant centres of power, and a soft infrastructure of *relation-building* through which sufficient consensus building and mutual learning can occur to develop social, intellectual and political *capital* to promote co-ordination and the flow of knowledge and competence among the various social relations coexisting within places. A key challenge lies in the combination of the design of the hard infrastructure, and the inherent struggles which will take place as power relations are deliberately transformed, and the design of the soft infrastructure, which should be locally specific and collaborative. (Pp. 199-200)

The strength of collaborative planning is that it acknowledges the influence of structure and agency as well as the synergy between the two. This theoretical contribution to planning is particularly relevant to developing countries. However, much of what has been written on collaborative planning presupposes the existence of liberal-democratic state structures and societal expectations; therefore, it has limited utility within nondemocratic contexts.

Radical Planning

Radical planning provides a persuasive critique of the modernist planning paradigm. This critique is broadly based on the inability of modernist planning to incorporate local people into democratic decision-making processes, the failure of top-down planning to deliver meaningful improvements at the local level, and the inability of modernist planning to recognize and incorporate the diversity of needs in multicultural cities and regions (Beauregard 1991; Escobar 1992; Friedmann 1987; Grabow and Heskin 1973; Sandercock 1998). Radical or insurgent planning, as Sandercock (1998) refers to it, is concerned with social transformation: it attempts to address and redress unequal and unjust relations of power. It addresses a wide range of inequalities based on class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender as well as a number of inequalities experienced by developing countries (Friedmann 1992; Holston 1998; Kennedy 1998; Leavitt and Saegert 1990; Sandercock and Forsyth 1992; Sandercock 1998). In *Towards Cosmopolis*, Sandercock provides an account of the historical development, theoretical underpinnings, and practice of radical planning. However, this description of radical planning fails to address how planning as social transformation can occur within political environments where open challenges to power are both dangerous and ineffective.

This is where covert planning makes its contribution. Covert planning involves local people planning for themselves and, in so doing, taking incremental, incipient steps toward altering larger power relations. Covert planning is most closely aligned to the social mobilization tradition in planning thought, as it involves planning from below and embodies the desire for emancipation. According to Friedmann (1987, 225), “[The social mobilization] perspective was that of victims, the underclass of society; its starting point was a critique of industrialism; and its purpose was the political practice of human liberation.” However, not all planning in the social mobilization tradition must lead immediately to a radical planning practice outcome. Throughout Indonesia, where the average person fears violent repercussions in response to political activism, social transformation from below takes a different form than it does in the West. Despite its roots in the social mobilization tradition, covert planning is more subtle, nuanced, and incremental than Alinsky-style community organizing (Alinsky 1969, 1971). In its initial stages, it seeks to operate “under the radar” of the state. Covert planning builds on the well-documented response of local people to restrictive social and political environments—“avoidance protest” and “everyday forms of resistance” (Adas 1986, 1992; Douglass 1999; Dove and Kammen 2001; Ong 1987; Scott 1985, 1986, 1990).

Avoidance and Resistance

Suharto’s presidency in Indonesia, often referred to as the New Order, has been characterized by economic growth, a decline in national poverty rates, and political stability; however, it has also been characterized by the marked absence of political reform and the failure to achieve political democracy in either the classic, procedural sense or in terms of associational autonomy (Fox 1994). During the Suharto period, the Indonesian state can be characterized as an authoritarian democracy with the armed forces at its core (Cribb 1999, 34). The 1990s witnessed increasing disillusionment regarding sustained political repression and socioeconomic inequality in Indonesia. The concept of covert planning builds on work that has documented local responses to repressive social and political environments.
Avoidance Protest

The concept of avoidance protest is based on peasant responses to the onerous demands of monarchs and regional lords who competed for agricultural products during the precolonial period on Java (Adas 1992, 93). During this period, the peasant class was afforded some protection from its rulers as a result of underdeveloped communication systems, administrative and military weakness, and the inability of indigenous rulers to penetrate village-level governance structures (ibid., 92). However, when the demands placed on peasants became particularly unbearable, avoidance protest in a variety of forms, including participation in mystical movements, theater and puppetry, and flight and banditry, was used as a defense mechanism (ibid., 105-8). Adas describes the use of mass migrations on the part of agriculturalists as a form of avoidance protest:

Peasant families and whole villages fled to escape corvée labor or military conscription. They migrated to avoid and to protest against what they viewed as harsh treatment or unreasonable exactions by the nobles or officials who were given jurisdiction over them. (Ibid., 104)

This tactic of avoidance protest became more difficult during the colonial period because of the introduction of more sophisticated methods of surveillance and an increase in the population-to-land ratio. While this form of protest continued, albeit less frequently, the colonial period was marked by increased class-consciousness, nationalism, and more direct forms of confrontation (ibid., 110-18). However, in many ways, the rise of the indigenous military state and the centralization of power in the New Order period has sought to undermine this class-consciousness and suppressed more overt forms of protest.

The New Order period was characterized by a stifling of critical feedback from local people. Dove and Kammen (2001) describe how the role of Javanese “clowns” (punakawan), which previously provided critical feedback from local people to the state, was co-opted by the New Order for the purpose of indoctrination:

This reversal in the clowns’ functions, from informing the state to informing the citizenry, indicated the importance to the New Order regime of not acquiring information about its subjects but of holding information from them at bay. If critical clowns were seen as threatening under the New Order, this was even more true of formal demonstrations and protests. (P. 631, emphasis added)

The authors go on to describe how direct communication to higher officials during this period was perceived as intolerable. Even the most modest efforts to initiate social change during this period were susceptible to being perceived as subversive and could warrant punishment. As a result, social transformation, as initiated by the lower classes during the New Order, can largely be characterized by everyday forms of resistance.

Everyday Forms of Resistance

Everyday forms of resistance were first documented by Scott (1985), who observed them in rural Malaysia. He argues that much of what has been previously written about peasant revolutions has ignored the quiet acts of rebellion that take place on a day-to-day basis. He draws our attention to the significance of these subtler and more nuanced forms of resistance:

Resistance of this kind does not throw up manifestos, demonstrations, and pitched battles that normally compel attention, but vital territory is being won and lost here too. For the peasantry scattered across the countryside and facing even more imposing obstacles to organized, collective action, everyday forms of resistance would seem particularly important. (P. 6)

Scott refers to these everyday forms of resistance as “weapons of the weak.” He insists that they are not trivial and that they usually take a number of different forms, such as “passive noncompliance, subtle sabotage, invasion and deception” (p. 7).

He offers a broad definition of what constitutes resistance:

Lower class resistance among peasants is any act(s) by member(s) of the class that is (are) intended either to mitigate or to deny claims (e.g. rents, taxes, deference) made on that class by superordinate classes (e.g. landlords, the state, owners of machinery, moneylenders) or to advance its own claims (e.g. work, land, charity, respect) vis-à-vis the superordinate classes. (P. 22)

The everyday forms of resistance that Scott describes are, for a number of reasons, directly relevant to understanding the concept of covert planning. First, the residents engaged in covert planning occupy a position in the class hierarchy that is comparable to Scott’s peasants. The cultural context, colonial history, and state structures found in Indonesia are also similar to those found in Indonesia (as, indeed, they are to those found in many other countries in Southeast Asia). Finally, the concept of covert planning builds on Scott’s description of silent forms of resistance that intentionally evade direct confrontation. However, covert planning involves more than avoidance protest or everyday forms of resistance. It recognizes agency of subordinate classes, and it is an active, deliberate, and sustained strategy that is instrumental in creating the social and political spaces necessary for radical action in the future.
The Case Study

In what follows, the concept of covert planning is illustrated with an example of a local youth group that planned, established, and maintained a community-operated library. To facilitate an understanding of the particulars of the case study, the local sense of social and physical insecurity and the organizational relationships created by the urban political-administrative structure are explained. Finally, the story of the library is used as a heuristic device to illustrate the concept of covert planning.

Data

This case study is drawn from a longitudinal study of informal settlements. The study was conducted in the city of Yogyakarta and focused on the urban residential communities located along the Code River. The broader purpose of the study was to analyze the capacity of community-based organizations to alleviate self-identified manifestations of poverty. The initial round of field research gathered data on a number of settlements, and in later rounds, the study sought a more in-depth understanding of the planning process in a single community. The study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods and collected data in a series of intervals beginning in 1994 and ending in 2000. In total, approximately twenty-six months were spent in the field. Research methods included direct observation as well as analysis of transcripts based on in-depth interviews, oral histories, and community meetings. A household census was conducted to gather information on household structure, education, employment, economic consumption, land tenure, access to services, and participation in community-level organizations from all households in the case study community, and a panel survey was conducted with a random sample of households from all informal settlements along the Code River. Finally, all of the findings were mapped and spatial analyses were performed.

Social and Physical Insecurity

Generations of poor migrants have settled along the Code River because it provides inexpensive housing and convenient access to the city’s economic center. These communities were built outside of formal planning and regulatory frameworks, and they are characterized by high-density, unregulated housing. Their informal status has created an omnipresent sense of social insecurity. Residents of the community are keenly aware both of their lack of land tenure status and the desirability of the land they occupy (which is valuable because it is located just outside the city’s central business district). The community where the library was established is located in close proximity to another informal settlement, the residents of which refused the state’s mandate to relocate. These people were defended by a prominent priest and social advocate, Romo Mangung, who has since died. This defiant community is now referred to as Kampung Romo Mangung (or Romo Mangung’s community), and its story is well-known throughout the informal settlements along the river’s edge. Proximity to Kampung Romo Mangung has made residents of the community where the library was established particularly cautious with regard to their interaction with the local bureaucracy for fear that they too will be pressured to relocate.

Natural as well as human changes to the physical environment have resulted in high flood tides that threaten the safety of the residential communities along the Code River. Residents of these communities have actively resisted state initiated relocation efforts because this would require sacrificing their access to inexpensive housing and the employment opportunities available in the city’s central business district. In addition, where the study was conducted, residents had lived in the community for an average of twenty-seven years, and the sense of community and related social networks was strong. Eventually, the planning department decided to engage residents in a dialogue and invest in improving the majority of river communities. This tacit acknowledgement by the planning department that residents without formal land tenure status had a right to exist along the edge of the river created a minimal level of security necessary to make residents feel that community-initiated projects, such as the library, were worthwhile.

Planning at the Community Level

In Indonesia, the urban political-administrative structure creates a distinct set of organizational relationships that define how local residents engage in planning at the community level. For administrative purposes, the city is subdivided into districts and smaller subdistricts. The district and subdistrict leaders are civil servants. Each subdistrict is further subdivided into smaller groups of households; the larger of the two units is referred to as Rukun Warga (RW) and the smaller unit as Rukun Tetangga (RT); both units are lead by local residents. The RW and RT leaders are elected every three years through a community consensus-building process, and unlike the district and subdistrict leaders, they are unpaid volunteers. This use of local residents as leaders at the RW and RT levels of the political-administrative structure obscures the conventional “state” and “community” dichotomy (see Figure 1).
The following example is taken from a single community, which is an RW that is further subdivided into seven smaller RTs. In this RW, as in many RWs in Yogyakarta, men and women conduct separate monthly meetings. The community’s youth also conduct their own monthly meetings in which youth from the entire RW participate. Within these forums, local residents elect their leaders, engage in routine public dialogue, and identify community-level problems as well as strategies for action.

However, the vertical nature of the political-administrative structure (e.g., each smaller unit reports to a larger unit, and each larger unit is held accountable for the performance of a smaller unit), combined with the complete absence of any horizontal linkages, limits the ability of communities to join forces with one another to place collective demands on the state. This administrative structure effectively eliminates spaces where local residents across neighboring communities (e.g., adjacent RWs) could engage in dialogue regarding issues of broader social and political concern.

Covert Planning

The story of the library is used as a heuristic device to illustrate how the first initial steps in planning for social transformation begin in a highly restrictive social and political context in which there exists a threat of violent repercussions for overt political activism. In 1994, the youth group planned and established a library that has since served the community on a continual basis. The library was started in 1994 by the leader of the youth group—Mas Sigit. Mas Sigit informally rallying support for his idea before presenting it to the youth group. He first approached Mas Yunus, another youth group activist. Mas Sigit describes how he went to Mas Yunus’s house to informally lobby for his support:

Well, in 1994, I already had a plan about how the program for the library could be accomplished. Then, I approached Yunus. At that time Yunus was in charge of supplies for the Youth Group. I said to Yunus, “What do you think of this suggestion?... I was only in front of his house, not in a formal Youth Group meeting.... When I lobbied Yunus, he agreed with my idea and he was supportive. Finally, when we had a meeting of the education committee from the Youth Group we communicated our idea within that forum.

It is significant that Mas Sigit says “we communicated our idea,” as this indicates that he had gained Mas Yunus’s active support prior to making the plan for the library public. Most decisions made by community groups are reached through a consensus-building process (musyawarah) based on open public deliberation. Ideally, issues are debated until everyone in the group comes to unanimous agreement (mufakat). Mas Sigit approached Mas Yunus outside the forum to gauge his response to the idea of a library and to secure support from at least one well-respected member of the youth group. This “behind-the-scenes” lobbying tactic is commonly used to mobilize support for covert planning efforts.

After Mas Sigit successfully enlisted Mas Yunus’s support, the two of them brought their plan to a meeting of a youth group subcommittee that specializes in education. Mas Sigit describes this meeting:

The leaders of the education section and others were there at the meeting. Plus those that wanted to participate in the planning of the library; we made them managers. That was a special meeting to evaluate the work of the education committee, specifically the study group program. Every few months we have an evaluation with a discussion. It was in this discussion that we brought forward our suggestion about establishing the library. And the forum agreed. After this agreement, in the next meeting it was decided: in the future special meetings for the library would be conducted separately. After the forum reached an agreement, Yunus was immediately appointed the leader of the new library forum.

Mas Sigit strategically decided to approach the education subcommittee because this is where he believed that the idea for the library would receive the most support. He also displayed political savvy in engaging Mas Yunus as an ally in establishing
the library—an action that was formally validated when the subcommittee appointed Mas Yunus as the leader of the library. However, the youth group’s adoption of the plan was not entirely the result of Mas Sigit’s maneuvering. In fact, the group had already had a number of experiences with implementing grassroots educational development efforts.

Prior to the establishment of the library, the youth group implemented a number of activities designed to provide tutoring and reading materials for local children. One such activity involved the formation of study groups within which older youth group members tutored younger children with their homework. Mas Sigit explains that this activity was common when he was in elementary school, even before the implementation of the RW political-administrative system. When he was appointed leader of the youth group in 1992, he rejuvenated the program throughout the RW and added his own innovations, which included working with the RW leader to introduce an experimental study hour program that required school-age children to spend a number of hours studying each afternoon. Residents were asked to observe community-wide quiet hours during designated study periods; this meant not operating televisions, radios, or other equipment at high volumes. In the year 2000, this program was still widely respected throughout the community.

The other educational activity that preceded the establishment of the library involved the opening of a reading room, where youth group activists lent their own books to the children in the community. The knowledge and experience gained from organizing the study groups, the community-wide study hour, and the reading room prepared youth group activists for establishing the library. In addition to these indigenous planning experiences, Mas Sigit’s knowledge of how to navigate the political-administrative structure proved to be a valuable asset when it came to obtaining the necessary community and local government support.

First the youth group brought its idea for the library to the adult RW meetings, which were attended by RT leaders. Like most community efforts, the library first attempted to achieve community-wide support through the RT and RW meetings. Like the youth group meetings, the RT and RW meetings provide a forum within which to communicate ideas, mobilize community support, and transform local ideas into action. The youth group was careful to garner support from RW and RT leaders prior to publicly announcing the establishment of the library because it knew that the community’s strict social hierarchy would prohibit support of an idea that was not first sanctioned by the community’s leadership. As a result of the youth group’s adherence to the rules of this hierarchy, the plan for the library was never perceived as insurgent or as a threat to power relations internal to the community. Instead, adherence to the hierarchy and the subsequent community support in which it resulted were empowering to the youth group.

The next step in getting the library established involved the community leadership’s officially notifying the subdistrict and district offices. Mas Sigit’s approach to amassing community and state support exemplifies the concept of covert planning: he was assertive with regard to achieving the means necessary to establish the library at the community level, yet he was prudent and savvy in interactions with the state hierarchy. On the surface, the library appears compatible with the state’s development agenda and the eradication of illiteracy. What was not detected by the state was the process of social learning and political consciousness-raising that resulted from planning, organizing, and maintaining the library. It was extremely important to the success of the covert planning effort that state officials never perceived the library as a space for collective radical action. The point to be noted here is that action of Mas Sigit and other youth activists reveals deliberate behavior. Despite the socially transformative (and therefore provocative) dimensions of organizing the library, Mas Sigit was able to fashion grassroots support as well as the allegiance of numerous bureaucratic and administrative actors. This amounts to a conscious and sophisticated strategy maintained over an extended period of time. This is covert planning.

As a result of its covert planning, the youth group experienced no opposition from the political-administrative authorities. On the contrary, Mas Sigit describes the assistance the library received from the district and subdistrict offices:

At the subdistrict office, we were told we could ask for assistance from the district office. Finally, we drafted a formal letter to the district office requesting support from Department of Public Education, and in the end we received assistance. We were given many books, but the majority of these books were thin—booklets, like those for the Adult Literacy Program, practical books. For example these books taught about how to obtain a skill, or make crafts, how to garden, handicrafts or something similar. That was the first time we obtained books. That was the beginning, when we first established the library.

The subdistrict and district offices supported the library, but they would not have done so without Mas Sigit’s knowledge of how to navigate the political-administrative structure. The youth group received booklets printed by the government, and although these materials were primarily instructional, this empowered youth group activists to pursue a wider variety of reading materials from sources independent of conventional political-administrative channels. Eventually, the library suc-
cessfully solicited book donations from German and Japanese radio stations, the United States Information Service, and the Asia Foundation. These donations were used to purchase reading materials pertaining to a wide array of topics selected by the youth group in consultation with other community members. After registering the library with the subdistrict and district offices, Mas Sigit and Mas Yunus wrote a formal letter to the Yogyakarta municipal government, informing officials about the establishment of the library. Mas Sigit describes how he and Mas Yunus, in the process of registering the library (a state requirement), became involved in a library management training program. Mas Sigit and Mas Yunus both attended the training program, which was conducted at a local teachers training college. Through their involvement with the training program, they gained access to other programs, which donated magazines and newspapers to the library. Yet despite state and community support, the youth group still faced problems.

The first problem was lack of space. The library was housed in the RW office, which is shared by all of the RW-level organizations (e.g., the Women’s Family Welfare Organization, the Mother and Child Health Care Clinic, and the local credit cooperative). Because this office is used for a variety of community needs, the library is only open for two hours three evenings a week. Lack of space means that most members of the library must quickly borrow and return books because there is so little room for standing or sitting in the RW office. According to Mas Sigit, this limits opportunities for social interaction and informal tutoring. The second problem was lack of funds. Mas Sigit explains that the municipal government, although supportive, was unable to provide regular financial contributions. The government provided assistance in the form of training, books, and small grants; however, the library could not depend on this funding to defray routine operating costs. Despite these obstacles, in the year 2000, after more than five years of operation, the library was still serving the community. Each year, the library has a party to celebrate its birthday. It is significant to note that this party not only celebrates the accomplishment of the youth group but also reinvigorates local support.

Although planning the library was empowering, the act of establishing it was considered to be neither radical nor insur- gent because it was perceived as being compatible with the Indonesian government’s campaign to eradicate illiteracy. Herein lies a key element of this story: a grassroots community plan that had local empowerment as its core objective was conceived and executed via a discursive strategy that emphasized (and even embellished) its compatibility with the national development agenda. Yet in 1997, amid a period of great political upheaval and uncertainty, a banner was observed hanging proudly from the community’s front gate (gapura), proclaiming, “Pemuda Mendukung Reformasi ‘The Youth Group Supports the Reform Movement.’” The youth group had used its new community organizing skills and political consciousness for more radical action.

Some might argue that this small-scale, essentially modest form of community mobilization is not particularly significant given the great drama of social, economic, and political change that has swept over Indonesia in the recent past. However, to put forth this argument is to miss the lesson of the case study. One needs to imagine hundreds of thousands of similar community mobilization efforts happening throughout Indonesia for decades, some state sanctioned, others indigenous and covert, to understand how a citizenry learns the skills and gains the confidence necessary to mobilize en masse against a punitive and authoritarian regime when a window of opportunity, such as the economic crisis, emerges. In Indonesia, there is an expression to capture this phenomenon: kesempatan dalam kesempitan, “an opportunity in a tight space.”

Transformative social and political action, as Sandercock (1998) has shown, begins with a “thousand tiny empowerments,” not with grand gestures. Indeed, there is a significant literature that argues that an important dimension of political participation has to do with local actors learning political skills (Abers 2000; Nowak et al. 1982). In the context of an authoritarian state where extreme measures of social and political control are used, we must look beyond “tiny empowerments” to even more modest and covert efforts at the community level. Covert planning is one point on a continuum whose ultimate goal is social transformation. It is a beginning, a spark. It is the first step in a long process, not an end in itself.

**Conclusion**

Planning theory and practice continues to grapple with how local people engage in the planning process. Over the past fifty years, the field has moved toward including local people because this is thought to be both more democratic and more efficient in terms of achieving stated goals. Underlying this move is the increased acceptance of planning as social transformation. This article looked at citizen participation in synoptic planning, collaborative planning, and radical planning and, in so doing, shows that planning exists along a continuum that ranges from societal guidance to social transformation. Each of these modes of planning presupposes that (1) formal planning processes and institutions are in place and
(2) democratic structures and political expectations are present. As a result, they have minimal explanatory power within the context of those developing countries that lack these conditions.

There is a gap between our understanding of planning as societal guidance and planning as social transformation, and this results in our being unable to account for how local people within restrictive political environments engage in planning for the purpose of social transformation. The concept of covert planning bridges this gap. It describes a form of planning that does not overtly challenge current power relations yet is a first step leading toward more ambitious social change. The concept of covert planning draws from and extends descriptions of avoidance protest during the precolonial and colonial periods in Indonesia as well as contemporary descriptions of everyday forms of resistance (Adas 1986, 1992; Douglass 1999; Dove and Kamm 2001; Ong 1987; Scott 1985, 1986, 1990).

To illustrate the concept of covert planning, a case study of a local youth group that planned and maintained a library was used as a heuristic device. The library was never perceived as overtly radical or as threatening to those in power because it paralleled the state’s agenda of eradicating illiteracy. Unlike avoidance protest and everyday forms of resistance, covert planning provides local residents with a means of establishing broad community support without alerting the state to the social learning process taking place. This form of planning is active rather than passive, and it is also both sophisticated and deliberate. Of course, because covert planning is modest and incremental, outcomes must be measured and evaluated over a long period of time. Nonetheless, within highly restrictive political environments, covert planning represents the first empowering step in a long journey toward social transformation.

This article examined an example of covert planning in an environment where residents live in fear that they will be harmed if their actions are perceived as even remotely challenging to power holders. These findings lead the author to question whether the concept of covert planning may have broader explanatory power for highly disadvantaged communities that exist in liberal democratic settings. For example, would empirical work with disadvantaged communities in these contexts reveal that local actors also perceive the social and political spaces available to them as highly repressive, and as a result, do they opt to engage in covert planning as opposed to overt radical action as a means of achieving social transformation? The concept of covert planning developed in this article would be enhanced by further empirical work in a range of different political and cultural settings.

**Notes**

1. In specific social circles, this fear has recently diminished in Indonesia; this is evident by the increase in public demonstrations since the 1997 crisis. This is particularly true for university students and seasoned social activists; however, for the average rural resident or urban kampung dweller, this fear is still a reality.

2. Friedmann’s (1973) description of transactive planning also represents work that bridges the gap between planning as societal guidance and planning as social transformation.

3. Clavel’s (1983) description of oppositional planning could serve as another example of planning at this end of this continuum.

4. For additional documentation of resistance in Southeast Asia, see Ong’s (1987) study of female factory workers in Malaysia.

5. Subaltern theorists have also pointed to the need to move away from an elitist study of social transformation, the limitations of conceptualizing power relations in simple binary terms (i.e., subordination and domination), and the need to balance our representation of highly nuanced processes of social change (Chatterjee 2000; Guha 1997; Spivak 1988).

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7. *Rukun Warga* is the political administrative unit at the next-to-lowest level in urban areas. It usually comprises between 100 and 300 households. *Rukun Tetangga* is the lowest level of administration, consisting of 30 to 50 households.

8. *Mio* is a Javanese term of respect used when referring to young men. All names used in the article are aliases.

**References**


