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**Title** The Challenges of Power for Planning Theory

**Keywords** Power, Foucault, ethics, rural policies, case studies, the Netherlands

**Abstract** In recent years planning scholars debate on how power influences the outcome of planning practices. Collaborative Planning Theory (CPT) is criticised for having an idealistic belief in the possibility of constructing consensus between stakeholders within planning practices. Critics of CPT argue that the focus on consensus building neglects power, conflicts and the contexts of planning practices. Instead, they propose to explicate conflicts. In doing so, they aim to emancipate actors by a stimulation of their 'desire to gain some sort of control over the self, others and their environment' (Hillier, 2003: 50). Users of CPT respond that CPT should never be regarded as a practical planning guide. Whether consensus in planning practices can be reached is highly dependent of specific contexts and power relations (Innes 2004). CPT is useful as a normative tool to criticise unequal power relations (Healey, 2003). Used in this way, consensus building and collaboration between stakeholders can equalise power relations and build societal and institutional capacity through which participants can control their own processes (Innes, 2004). Despite their different theoretical approaches, users of CPT and their critics have two things in common. Both consider power to be a social relation determining outcomes of planning practices and both want to emancipate actors through a transformation of institutional design. However, that users of CPT and their critics seem to be in accordance concerning the definition of power and the objective of planning theory does not mean that this debate is worn out. Instead it discloses an analytical question concerning the identification of power and normative question concerning the critique of the exercise of power. We take up these questions because we believe that an investigation on the use of power in concrete planning contexts contributes to the development of planning theory and ethics. In the first part of this article we outline the debate between users of CPT and their critics concerning the possibilities for consensus building in planning practices and we redefine power as a theoretical concept. In doing so we use Foucault's ubiquitous definition of power, because this definition poses significant challenges for a critical planning theory. In the second part we apply our definition of power to analyse the functioning of modern power in a liberal planning system – Dutch rural planning. During the last 40 years Dutch rural planning has combined deregulation with a legislative complexification of planning. We label this process as a controlled decontrolling of Dutch rural planning. Controlled decontrolling depends for its functioning on planning policies. They mediate power relations between people and in this way structure their possible field of action. To avoid the deterministic view of controlled decontrolling as a process without actors, we present two case studies in the third part of this article about conflicts over rural land use in a Dutch region in 1959 and 1999. In the fourth part, we present our conclusions and consider the consequences for planning theory and ethics if our analysis is accepted.

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