FROM THE FICTION OF CONSPIRACY TO THE FICTION OF TECHNICISM

A Rejoinder

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A conspiracy exists when two or more parties with a common interest agree to conspire against those whose interest they oppose. Bernstein and Nell have failed to prove their assertion that I used a conspiratorial analysis. All I pointed to was a conceptual convergence in the stated policy intentions of some of – to use their words – ‘the institutions and interests in establishment South Africa’. This is a perfectly legitimate and methodologically acceptable exercise. The fact that ‘totally different organisations’ articulated these positions is irrelevant for the argument. It is possible for two completely different organisations with totally different interests to arrive at the same policy or conceptual assumption for different reasons. By arguing that the Urban Foundation (UF) and the Development Bank of Southern Africa arrived at the same policy assumptions is not to imply in any way that they conspired to do so.

Yes indeed, it’s enough. Urban policy is a serious business. This is why the research community and social movements have cause to celebrate the Urban Foundation’s 1990 theme of ‘Urban Debate 2010’. No one can honestly deny the enormous and creative contributions to this debate that the UF has made over the years, and the personal roles played by Bernstein and Nell in this process. Unfortunately, they have marred this record by responding to my article with emotional assertions and a technicist elitism that borders on condescension. I am perfectly willing to admit my ‘factual errors’ and ‘wrong analysis’ if these are demonstrated. However, to try to undermine my argument by depicting it as irrational, naive, conspiratorial, farcical and Utopian runs contrary to the ethics of constructive debate – especially if these assertions are unproven. To make matters worse, my approach is contrasted in a highly technicist way with ‘the real world’ which is, we are told, ‘a tough place’ where ‘our practical experience has led the UF to appreciate certain hard realities’.

It is claims of this nature that stifle debate because one side is depicted as experienced, in possession of real expertise, and familiar with all the relevant knowledge needed to resolve our urban problems, whereas the rest of us are
seen as idealistic outsiders splashing around in the baby pool of ideological misapprehensions and small-scale experiments.

As far as the accusation that I have denied my readers 'some critical information' is concerned, I would like to question the UF's commitment to community participation. Two examples will suffice. Firstly, let me refer to the UF's urban policy package and recent public documents. These are backed up by long lists of research papers. If the UF was truly committed to community participation, it would have ensured that its policy formulation process provided the communities with an opportunity to help formulate this policy. Instead, researchers were used to suck information out of the communities and into research reports that were then kept under lock and key for years on the grounds that the UF had 'bought' the information and hence owned the copyright. Those of us who have worked with civics and unions over the past five years will know that policy that accords with community interests cannot be formulated in this technocratic fashion. This is not to suggest that the UF should have been accountable as some us were to the community and workplace organisations. The UF is accountable to big business, who, in turn, pays the bill. All I am suggesting is that the UF cannot be committed to the participation of interests in the formulation of policies that are designed to serve a different set of interests. The UF served the interests of big business well by holding copyright on the largest quantity of the best urban research we have ever seen (or not seen). If knowledge is produced on your own terms, your questions will be answered first. The UF should simply admit this and let others claim to be committed to community participation.

Secondly, the UF's Oakmore Development Plan that proposed ways of developing the Tembisa region recommended a state-business-community alliance that excluded the most widely supported and legitimate civic in the region. Mistakes like this are inevitable when using technocratic methods that impose solutions from the outside. What the UF still needs to learn in practice is that the communities do not want solutions, they want to be involved in the formulation of solutions on terms that their organisations have some control over.

On the question of the UF's commitment to non-racial local government, this is subsumed into my overall argument that the UF is committed to total deracialisation – if this excluded local government, I would have said so.

The technicism in the UF's world view is further highlighted by the remarkable statement that 'South Africans can start to tackle the tough issues of managing our cities'. Who is being referred to here? Surely it is not the countless grassroots organisations and local communities that have, over the decades, struggled valiantly to 'tackle the tough issues' in their own way? They started long ago. Or does this refer to those who will have the power to manage our cities? Once again, at the moment this is the white state and, indirectly, urban business. Civics do not 'manage' our cities. Nor is this likely to change fundamentally when we have a majoritarian state. Instead, we should be