

THIRD OAKLAND TABLE, 1st of September to 6th of October 2001

From "making up one's mind" to "decision-making"

Career decisions, investment options, health care provisions, life style choices, family planning, dietary options – at every turn one is challenged to make decisions. Counselors offer to help in decision-making on vacation plans or the hair color fitting your skin, running versus jogging, or on tolerable ways to end a marriage. Even the Church goes after its lost sheep with slogans to make the ultimate decision that counts.

Decades ago, food, clothes and shelter had become commodities and thereby objects of consumer choice: In the supermarket, the mix of nutritional inputs spoils the appetite; the choice between NIKE and ADIDAS obviates old-time shopping; and resale value looms larger than commitment to neighbors. Now, intangibles increasingly require decision-making also. While just twenty years ago doctors urged clients to follow their orders, now they have become counselors who offer a menu of options from which they expect the informed client to make a selection. They no longer dare recommend a therapy, but rather confront their patient with test parameters, therapeutical options and the risk corresponding to each. The patient himself might be burdened with the choice between an experimental drug, a dangerous operation, or a course of radiation treatments.

The devolution of decisions to the client or consumer is generally praised as liberation from expert control. Instead of being at the mercy of the physician's judgment, the patient is cast into a decision-maker on his own behalf. But choosing among preestablished options on the basis of statistical probabilities has nothing to do with what *decision* meant only half a century ago. Well into the seventeenth century, a creek could "decide", separate the traveler from the others. A judge decides a case by settling a dispute. In contrast to modern usage, choice was not a synonym for decision. Decision-making as a term and practice was unknown before World War II. It came up as a technical term in strategical planning by both the military and transnational corporations. Only towards the end of the twentieth century did it overshadow the ways people make up their minds: The richness of memories, tastes, phantasies, and metaphors, all embedded in customs and traditions, that led to picking out this goose and serving it to the guest Sunday night dissolved into a technical model. Since statisticians and cyberneticists adopted "decision" as a technical

term for the algorithmic determination of a defined option, the common sense notion has been fundamentally changed. “Decision” is now understood as the selection of an option that follows a formalized procedure. Having lost its power to denote a concrete human action, “decision” might refer to Sarah who wishes to marry her long term boyfriend, to little Hassan going for vanilla ice cream, to a fly reacting to an approaching shadow, or to the series of zeros and ones that was calculated by a digital algorithm.

During the Third Oakland Table, we want to explore this shift from making up one’s mind to decision-making. Our disciplined skepticism toward decision-making emerges from the previous discussions at Jerry Brown’s Table: During the First Oakland Table, we contrasted global, homogeneous “space”, where people only appear as variables for planners and designers, with places that emerge when people dwell in mutual commitment. Since then, the terms “space” and “place” have served us to contrast these two incomparable spheres: On the one hand, Mayor Brown oversees in City Hall the management of administrative constructs such as crime rate, drop-out rates and traffic flows. On the other hand, Brown shares his house with guests; presides a table, and fosters conversations in a unique atmosphere.

The distinction between "place" and "space" led us to focus our conversations at the second Oakland Table on the most fundamental arts of creating a place: We asked ourselves how to celebrate hospitality in the space age. "Space" is designed for different manageable functions such as traffic, consumption, labor and recreation. In "space", there is no place for the loose such as the crippled, sick, kids or dying. They have all been put on a leash: Each category has been put into a spatial domain where they are transformed into consumers with needs that can only be satisfied by professional service agents.

When the traditions of leading a stranger over a host’s threshold have been destroyed by the professional service industry, the practice of hospitality is no longer a cultural given. Sometimes, however, it emerges unexpectedly: Even in row houses, apartments, workshops, or at street corners and alleyways, which are designed as inhospitable space, some people succeed in making them hospitable, and thereby allow places to emerge within city space. When local guests brought flowers from their communal gardens and offered homemade cookies at our Saturday night’s gathering, they introduced a whiff of the hospitality of Oakland’s dwellers.

Decision-making calls for making "space" the basis for personal and political deliberation. In innumerable forms, incentives, generally offered in form of "counseling", turn people into clients. They are urged to understand themselves as individual cases of statistical populations: as a case of the unemployed, retarded, single mothers, bisexuals or pregnant women at risk. In order to enable them to make so-called informed decisions, they are seduced to act upon statistical probabilities that characterize the cohort they are assigned to, but per definition convey nothing about a single person.

In September 2001, we want to lay the foundations for a critical stance toward the enticement of decision-making. We want to pay attention to the increase of counselors and facilitators who persuade citizens to observe and optimize themselves like managers administer their stocks? How did it happen that thinking of oneself as an individual case of a statistical population is now taken for granted? Why did a bureaucratic logic – goal setting, fact finding, and deciding on the basis of statistical calculations - become the most promoted way of reasoning? And, finally, how to open room for people whose choices are phantastic, foolish, principled, anarchic, primitive, erratic, out of season?