

# Planning theory and politics: pragmatism and marxism



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## Section 1: Explanation of Pragmatism and its Key Theorists

### *Pragmatism*

Pragmatism is the incremental and practical understanding of an individual's environment, a conception that moves away from ' priori' thinking and more towards using experience to determine what is truth and knowledge (Allmendinger 2017, Ray 2004). The essence of this theory is what works most effectively in a given scenario. We choose our beliefs based on information that is logical and helpful to us in resolving inconsistencies, rather than believing information that relates to the representativeness of the world (Allmendinger, 2017).

### *Influential Theorists in Pragmatism*

Charles Sanders Peirce is the original thinker of the pragmatism theory (Burch, 2001). Peirce provided a philosophy that enabled an understanding of what constitutes knowledge and truth, suggesting that if individuals were given time to explore and argue ideas then they would subsequently conclude to ' truth' (James 1992, Peirce 1903). He debated that current truth is only based on the best reasoning relating to the current information presented, and that unlimited practical enquiry is the most efficient solution for both knowledge and truth to be gained. The ideal is focused on results, using dialog and reason to see what principles offer practicality – if there is no practical value then ideas are deemed useless (James 1992, Peirce 1903).

William James became an associate of Peirce following his admiration of the pragmatism theory. James distinguished between rationalistic and

imperialistic minds, suggesting that pragmatism could be a way of combining these perspectives to create a philosophy that suits both (Allmendinger 2017, James 1992, Putnam 2017). Specifically, James focused on pragmatism in religion, arguing that decisions must be made even when individuals may not have enough evidence on the subject in question (James, 1922). Although, both James and Peirce were both metaphysical thinkers, James had a much more individualist outlook on how pragmatism works most effectively. He thought that communities were voluntary and that the most important aspect of the philosophy was the mind-set of an individual (James 1992).

James Dewey agreed that enquiry is the most effective practice when finding the truth. Labelled a 'naturalist', Dewey thought that other philosophers of the past neglected the impact of 'relations', when in fact they are just as important as our ideas (Dewey 1909, Shook 2000). He suggested that our intellectual thoughts are interconnected with non-intellectual interactions with physical objects. He named this philosophy naturalistic imperialism (Dewey 1909, Shook 2000, Allmendinger 2017). James and Dewey collaborated to apply pragmatism to a series of social foundations, including science and religion in order for the theory to be regarded as a complete philosophy.

## Section 2: Explanation of Marxism and its Key Theorists

### Marxism

Marxism explores economic and social systems with particular focus on distinguishing between the employers (bourgeoisie) and workers  
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(proletariats). This theory offers insight into capitalism in society and the variables that allow for this system to be maintained. Specifically, the theory argues that societies are influenced by an ideology that capitalism is a fair structure to work in. Additionally, Marxists suggest that the state helps to project capitalism by providing infrastructure that supports the system (Allmendinger 2017, Marx and Engles 1985, Burns and Marx 1939).

### *Influential Theorists in Marxism*

Karl Marx is the original thinker behind the Marxist theory (Woofin, 2014). Marx's work began in the broadest of terms, stating that people can only survive if they can produce the basic necessities in life. Marx suggested that in history, workers produced enough for the economy to survive. However, societies have now taken a capitalistic shift, whereby workers are producing excess output purely for financial gain, rather than the actual need for it. This change in economic behaviour resulted in a distinguishable gap between the worker and the employer (Allmendinger, 2017). The worker (proletariat) provides excess labour, whilst the employer (bourgeoisie) exploits the additional material for capital gain. Marx saw capital as a 'means of production and thereby part of a process' (Allmendinger, 2017, p. 83).

Marx argued capitalism as a recurring cycle, employers would invest capital into more materials and labour, which therefore creates a larger profit and production of goods. Once this has been completed, the cycle begins again on a grander scale. However, as production grows, the need for higher levels of consumption is paramount (Fromm, 2014). This is where we see an excess

of goods as the consumption doesn't equal the supply, Marx described this as a 'crises'. The capitalist instinct is to increase profit by a reduction of wages and longer hours of labour (Fromm, 2014). This leads to workers having less disposable income to spend on the goods that employers produce, and therefore profits reduce – this is when crises occurs (Allmendinger 2017, Fromm 2014).

Marx argued that capitalist ideas have a tendency to make us competitive and conformist, whilst individual's political views become lethargic. To move away from this, Marx suggested that socialism could displace capitalism and empower a movement towards communist societies (Allmendinger 2017, Woffin 2014). In this ideal, there would be 'centralisation of the means of communication and transportation and the common ownership of the means of production' (Marx and Engles, 1985, p. 133). Marx believed that if the proletariats contested with the bourgeoisie then we would see a revolution whereby proletariats would 'make themselves the ruling class' (Woffin, 2014, p. 2). However, Marx questioned why this wasn't already happening, believing that individuals are manipulated into a false consciousness whereby they see capitalism as equitable (Marx and Engles, 1985). Antonio Gramsci furthered this claim with his idea of hegemony, helping to understand how the bourgeoisie maintain dominance over proletariats. In hegemony it is crucial that the dominant class 'succeed in presenting its own moral, political and cultural values as society norms, thereby constructing an ideologically engendered common sense' (Hay, 1999, p. 163). It could be argued that this is a form of propaganda, and Marxists argue that it contributes to what they call a legal and political '

superstructure’ (Marx, 2010). Marx suggests this structure pushes capitalist ideologies into society, which subsequently shape how individuals perceive and understand their environment (Allmendinger 2017, Marx 2010).

### Section 3: Pragmatism and Marxism in Planning

#### *Pragmatism in Planning*

Charles Lindblom argues for an incremental outlook towards policy analysis (Lindblom 1979). According to Lindblom, ‘incremental planning’ should not invest in grand schemes or ideas, but instead look to accumulate policy through trial and error. Lindblom is against lone policy makers, and suggests the need for a neopragmatic way of planning that uses liberal democracy in order to gain insight into additional perspectives around policy (Lindblom 1979, Healey 2009). If more opinions are shared, then policy becomes easier to implement because more people are satisfied with the outcome (Allmendinger, 2017). Lindblom’s outlook is similar to that of a pragmatist, using a ‘nonrelativistic approach’ (Healey, 2009) that identifies commensurables and incorporates all opinions and liberal values in order to concentrate and simplify intricate issues (Healey 2009). Lindblom has been criticised by John Forester, who argues that Lindblom acknowledges but doesn’t examine the individuals that will be included in his pluralistic ideal of planning. If planning followed Lindblom’s theory then we would see technocracy dominating all other opinions because Lindblom hasn’t provided a solution (Allmendinger 2017, Forester 1987, Fainstein 2015).

Charles Hoch has a similar approach as Lindblom. He suggests that individuals have minimal input into the outcome of planning decisions,  
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arguing that ‘ the central dilemma planner’s face is mediating between public needs and planners desires’ (Hoch, 2007, p. 337). Hoch believes the pragmatist approach is the most effective way of dealing with this is through sharing experience and developing a rapport between communities and planners (Fainstein 2015, Hoch 1996). John Forester has a more unforgiving attitude, suggesting the need for critical pragmatism in planning (Allmendinger, 2017). Forester sees planners as ‘ active agents’ that must be willing to challenge power through encouraging new voices and conveying different opinions effectively. Forester understands that this approach may negatively impact a planners career, however if planners continue to sit back then they will only be promoting spatial inequality (Allmendinger, 2017). Foresters ‘ progressive planner’ shares similarities between that of Richard Rortys (pragmatist) ‘ ironist’ theory. The ideal of reflection and facilitation of conversation is pivotal for better conversation and discussion of differences, moving away from relativism in practice (Allmendinger 2017, Putnam 2017, Gascoigne 2008).

### *Marxism in Planning*

Marxists take a different outlook to that of a pragmatist with regards to planning. Both philosophies understand the power relations involved within planning, and the lack of input that individuals within a society may have. However, Marxists don’t agree that increased public participation is a solution, arguing that planners work in the interest of the state, and that public participation is a mere façade to protect and disguise capitalism (Hay, 1999). David Harvey furthers this perspective by stating that competition puts stress on markets to increase efficiency. From here, planning seeks to <https://assignbuster.com/planning-theory-and-politics-pragmatism-and-marxism/>

minimise spatial dimensions in order to facilitate more profit (Harvey 1973, 1989). He argues that this is achieved by creating societies that integrate all aspects of our lives in one place, such as your house and workplace. However, Harvey also states that planning incorporates healthcare, education and reasonable living conditions in order to maintain a fit workforce that appeases to a capitalist society (Harvey 1973, 1981). Dear and Scott develop this ideal by stating that we now have ‘concentrated clusters’ in the form of high street and areas for commercial shopping. These ‘clusters’ are typically found within areas of high accessibility because capitalism cannot afford infrastructure it needs around it to survive. This is where capitalism relies on the state to provide the conditions and necessary infrastructure to maintain capital accumulation (Allmendinger 2017, Dear and Scott 1981).

According to Dear and Scott (1981), planning uses public participation as a way of masking its true role within the state, which is the support of capitalism. This gives the public the impression that planning is working with them against the inequalities that we find within modern society, when in reality planning is doing minimal to dowse these issues (Allmendinger 2017, Dear and Scott 1981, Hay 1999). From here ‘manifestations of capitalism such as urban deprivation and poverty are thereby seen as bureaucratic problems rather than treated as a direct outcome of capitalism (Allmendinger, 2017, p. 94/95). In order for this to work, Harvey (1985) states that planners gain authority through being ‘professionals’ that are working in the interest of the public. This means, according to a Marxist, that a harmonious society can be upheld and a false impression of planner’s



intentions can be given to the community. Interestingly, Harvey (1985) suggests that planning is purely orientated around capital because that is what the state is adhering towards, this means that the role of planning is focused around supporting the market and therefore the profession has insignificant intervention elsewhere (Allmendinger, 2017).

#### Section 4: Comparing Pragmatism and Marxism Using Planning Examples

Pragmatism and Marxism have both differences and similarities as a philosophy, and perhaps the implementation of pragmatism within Marxist theory is the most effective solution. Pragmatism specifically focuses on solutions to gaining 'truth', using both experience and enquiry to find knowledge (Allmendinger 2017, James 1992, Pierce 1903). On the other hand, Marxism looks at the issues of social structures within a capitalist society, without much regard towards potentially solutions towards these problems (Allmendinger 2017, Burns and Marx 1939).

*The Localism Act 2011: 'from bureaucrats to communities and individuals'*  
(Clark G, 2011)

The Marxist perspective is against the pragmatic idea of public participation, believing that capitalist development will still go ahead even if the time is taken to hear public opinions. However, Marx briefly suggested the idea of proletariats challenging authority in order to start a 'revolution' (Woffin, 2014). Perhaps 'the localism act, 2011' is where we see an overlap of both opinions. The act itself was brought in to help populations and their elected representatives fulfil their visions of their community. The way this is achieved is through 'a substantial and lasting shift in power away from

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central government and towards local people' (Clark G, 2011, p. 4). An important feature of the localism act is its emphasis on elected councillors facilitating and actively engaging in local discussions (Clark G, 2011), which in turn gives a platform for the public to share experiences. From here, the local council has more knowledge and therefore power when meeting community needs. This act brings the element of public participation (pragmatism), as well as centralisation of planning decisions (Marxism) (Marx and Engels, 1985). It could be argued that this shows both philosophies to be incomplete, and in fact a hybrid between the two offers the most effective solution when hearing new voices and challenging existing authority.

### *Planning Aid England*

Planning Aid was introduced to 'provide planning advice and support to help individuals and communities engage with the planning system and get involved in planning their local area' (RTPI, 2018). A pragmatist would support Planning Aid and argue that this organization offers an incremental outlook (Lindblom, 1979) on planning, giving everyone the opportunity to participate in planning decisions that may affect their local community. However, the Marxist view of this system is entirely different, with the suggestion that Planning Aid 'exists to cover up biases within planning' (Allmendinger, 2017, p. 102). Additionally, a Marxist would claim that Planning Aid only serves to postpone Marx's idea of a 'crisis' by allowing those who are excluded from a decision to have their voice heard (Allmendinger 2017, Fromm 2014). Marxists also see Planning Aid as a facility that transfers attention away from the connection that planning has with capital (Allmendinger, 2017). Although, there are not large differences <https://assignbuster.com/planning-theory-and-politics-pragmatism-and-marxism/>

between The Localism Act and Planning Aid, it is interesting to understand how the Marxist position may differ when the exchange of power from bureaucrats to the public isn't considered.

### *Development Control: Protecting Green Belt Land*

Development control allows local authorities to manage the growth that we see in local areas, this means that landowners will have to seek permission from local authority when planning to build (Town Planning, 2018). The government has provided numerous policies that act to prevent the destruction of green belt land in order to maintain open and free land (NPPF, 2018). Although there is protection of green belt, we still see developments happening regularly through the UK that have been approved by municipalities without much consideration of other perspectives. A pragmatist would argue for planners to be more proactive and seek debate amongst developers, stakeholder and the public to draw to a fair conclusion as to whether the development should go ahead (Lindblom 1979, Healey 2009). However, the Marxist view is harsher, once again suggesting that it is a waste of energy getting insight from multiple sources as the development will still go ahead to facilitate capital accumulation (Dear and Scott 1981). Perhaps, this is the most significant example that explores the Marxist viewpoint most closely. If regular development on greenbelt land occurs, then it would point towards the Marxist idea that our societies are purely based around capitalism and using greenbelt regulation is another way of 'hiding' the true nature of planning.

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