

Marxism and postmodernism: planning theory



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Marxism and Postmodernism

Introduction

Planning as a profession needs some form of theory or thinking to underpin its claim to have specialist knowledge. Planning theory is concerned with the discussion on the different ideas and concepts that has significant connection with planning practice and its relation to society, land-use and government. The context of the different planning theories is important for planners to understand as it brings beneficial knowledge that planners can use and practice in the real world. The aim of this essay is to compare two theories and how it relates to planning, which is Marxism and Postmodernism.

Marxism

Marxism is the political and economic theories of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In Marx's and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto (1998)*, they stated that " The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles". As labour became increasingly more productive with so much advancements as settled agriculture and the domestication of animals and plants, the communities were able to deliver a surplus well beyond the necessities of resources such as food, shelter and clothing. It was no longer fundamental for all to work because some individuals or group (the wealthy or bourgeoisie) could live by the work of others (the proletariat). This political and economic system is known as capitalism. This resulted in human social orders separated into rulers and ruled, exploiters and exploited that is, class

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based societies emerged. Marx recognises the conflict between the distinct social classes as a constant throughout history, bringing about revolutions and changing the structure of society. Overall, Marx is against the internal mechanism of capitalism.

How it relates to planning?

According to Allmendinger's *Planning Theory* (2002), he argues that cities and planning are reflections of capitalism and at the same time it help constitute it. Towns and urban areas work as places for production and consumption of labour and goods. Markets have been conventionally connected with town centres and location was driven by access and markets were regularly found in area that were easily accessible such and near crossroads.

“ Marxism continues to pose key questions about the origins, character and lines of development of economic and social systems of the modern world” (Andrew Gamble, 1999, p. 4). His analysis raises the important issues it has towards planning. You could say capitalism has a relationship with land-use and it requires planning in terms of the services and infrastructure.

Furthermore, Richard Foglesong (1986) recognises various view on how land-use planning can be explained through a Marxist interpretation and it is all based upon voluminous compositions concerning the role of the ‘ state’ under capitalism. The ‘ state’ is a crucial focus of Marxism because it is a key nodal point in the system of power relations that describe contemporary capitalist societies (Hay, 1996). Planning is always the site of class conflict so

far as planners must make decisions on how to allocate the surpluses that are produced among many different classes.

Postmodernism

To know what postmodernism is, we need to understand what modernism theory is. Over the last twenty years “ there has been a sea change in western thought and culture from ‘ modernism’ to ‘ postmodernism’ “ (Taylor, 1998, p. 162). Modernism is linked to an era of enlightenment developed in the eighteenth century where human race noticed the significance of mankind and prompted the ascent of Humanism which managed with not just the undeniable significance of human race but also the critical and rational thinking. Modernity tries to see things in totality. There’s postmodernism as an epoch and postmodernism in the philosophical movement. Postmodernism signals the end of modernist period of art and culture with the beginning of new era. Postmodernism, itself is a skepticism or doubt towards theory or totality, as opposed to the belief in modernity. There are various definition of postmodernism and it can be elusive however a definition that is well known is Lyotard’s (1984) phase ‘ an incredulity towards meta-narratives’ In other words, postmodernism is the tendency of people in advanced industrial societies to turn away from the ‘ grand narratives’ associated with pre modern and modern ways of viewing the world.

How it relates to planning?

The shift from modernism to postmodernism is particularly applicable to town planning as town planning have been one of the main sites where the

move from modern to postmodernism has most clearly occurred. Both postmodernism as an epoch and philosophical movement have direct relevance to planning. Such as how it has become common to characterise land-use planning as modern or part of the project of modernity (Sandercock, 1998) and similarly to characterise the period within which planning now finds itself and operates as postmodern.

Furthermore, postmodern thinkers especially Sandercock argued the modernism is anti-democratic, race and gender-blind and culturally homogeneous (Sandercock, 1998). In order to tackle this, she identifies 5 principles that are important for planning to work in order to achieve a more plural and diverse society. In the postmodern era, structural change in the economy from mass production for a mass society to flexible production for a fragmented society brought about a new interest in the built environment. Planners need to recognize the social aspects, not just in the practice itself but our perception of the world as a whole. The value of postmodernism lies in its evaluation of issues such as power and dominance that goes with any kind of planning.

Comparison between Marxism and Postmodernism

Marxism and postmodernism are more or less incompatible. Postmodernism as a philosophical movement is generally a reaction to the complications of marxism and institution of marxist philosophy which had a stranglehold on French intellectual culture up until 1968. One of the contending ideologies within postmodernism is Marxism as it is somewhat similar to modernism because of its association with the rise of capitalism. With perverse irony,

given postmodern conflict to it, the classical Marxist tradition is ideally positioned to rebuff the philosophical challenge that postmodernism poses to history. (Allmendinger, 2002). Postmodernity are the ambiguous expressions of crises of civilization and of knowledge and it represents an aim to inflict a new cultural regime. They occupy a central position in the present debates in all fields of the social sciences which includes marxism.

Some postmodernist argued that at the moment, planning is based on modern principles and is socially exclusive, gender biased, racially intolerant and unifying the diverse voices of minorities (Sandercock, 1998). However this statement is debatable, the foundations of Sandercock's postmodern thinking are vague and income inequality and ethnic intolerance are best tackled through other more related mechanism such as adjustments to tax regimes, public education and anti-discrimination laws. (Allmendinger, 2002)

Postmodernists Foucault and Lyotard both criticized marxism in different ways. Foucault's idea is mainly based on the idea that power equals to knowledge. Foucault argued that Marxism was on human scientific discourse that worked to constitute the subject in certain ways and that it was overly focused on economic and remained stuck in a repressive understanding of power (Foucault, 1975). The deployment of knowledges and the circulations of truths involve the exercise of power. He emphasise that planning has developed new techniques of exercising power which made it possible to locate people, fix them in specific places and to constrict them to a certain number of gestures and habits and as a whole a technique of management. Lyotard criticised Marxism on the grounds that Marxism was a

metanarrative. He argued that it's unjust for one narrative to dominate other and that it's wrong to infer normative obligations from descriptive narratives.

In terms of planning, the planning authority has the most influence and control on today's urban development as they make the policies such as the National Planning Policy Framework and final decision on what goes.

Comparing this to the general public they can only put in their opinions. In other words, power in relations to policy has a huge role in planning.

Foucault rejects the idea that power is unidirectional such as Marxists view of class and economic power being dominant but instead argues that power is more hidden and found at all levels of society.

Main criticism postmodernity is the central role it attributes to instrumental rationality. The struggle to understand and control of free will, the diminution of human emancipation, individual responsibility and initiative. " Marxist considered this was an even greater threat to mankind than class repression" (Allmendinger, 2002, p159) the problem with modernity and postmodernity lay not in its theory but in its practice.

Marxists have firmly rejected relativism, Marx argued that the question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question and the dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which isolated itself from practice is a purely scholastic question. Planning in terms of practice has a strong relationship with capitalism, planning is necessary to facilitate capital accumulation and maintain social control in the face of class conflict. This includes the development of infrastructure, land aggregation and development and the

maintenance of land value. So planners specialise in managing the contradiction of capitalism manifested in urban form and spatial development.

Another criticism is that the term is poorly defined and vague. The term used to refer to philosophers doing all sorts of different things with all sorts of different agendas such as Lyotard's view on meta narratives and Foucault's view on power.

In relation to planning, postmodernists assume that people's experience of places and its qualities are more diverse and open than was implied in many modern schemes and the main postmodernist value is a celebration of lively urban life because of its diversity and pluralism it promises. One similarity in terms of practice in planning between the two theories is that plans and policies can determine land use that can be used to control weaker groups and minorities in an extremely divided society. It is achieved through containment of minority settlements and allowing the majority group to settle there which alters the cultural homogeneity of the area. This is known as an anti-progressive territorial planning.

Conclusion

Theories of marxism and postmodernity are carried over all aspects of our lives and planning sees these as a societal guidance which can be interpreted in the planning of urban and rural areas. Postmodern social theory has given methods of understanding the role of planning in societal control and power. Postmodernism with its dismissal of rational objectivity and universality, validates a move towards an engagement with diversity and

fragmentation, embodied by the community and the local state. The common feature of capitalism in marxism is that substantial part of the economy is liable to the control and criteria of the market which based on a suspicion that there is a competitive market and that the sector is being referred as appropriate for competition.

Practice of urban planning requires some specialist knowledge or skills, most planning theorists have developed an alternative line of thought that rejects the idea that the town planner is someone who is specially qualified to make better decisions. As Taylor points out in *Urban Planning Theory (1998)* “*What is ‘better’ is a matter of value and planners have no superior expertise in making value-judgements... the view is still taken that the town planner possesses some specialist skill, namely skill in managing the process of arriving at planning decision*” (Taylor, 1998, p. 161)

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