



# Planning and Social Justice: A Theoretical Analysis

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The role of planning in furthering social justice is thoroughly researched (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2015; Cardoso & Breda-Vazquez, 2007). This should not be surprising when one considers planning arose from the desire to improve people's lives. In particular, the Marxist tradition heavily emphasises the role of planning in furthering social justice. A similar argument could also be made for more recent intellectual movements such as the 'sustainable cities' paradigm.

Despite this, there is minimal discussion regarding links between political philosophies or the work of political philosophers and planning theory. This is surprising when one considers how easily philosophical notions of justice can be linked into planning theories. This article provides such a link between planning theory and political philosophy, examining two key modern ideas of justice and how they align with prominent schools of planning thought. Here, the work of John Rawls (justice as equality) is shown to align with modernist planning theory, while the work of Robert Nozick (justice as liberty) is shown to align with neoliberalism. Awareness of such alignment is valuable, as it helps illuminate what might be called the 'end goal' of each planning approach, articulating the kind of society each seeks to create.

## 2. PLANNING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

There are two especially prominent paradigms that focus on how planning can further social justice. These are Marxism and

the sustainable cities tradition, both of which have social justice at their cores.

It should surprise no-one that Marxism, a school of thought that originated from a desire to create a more just society, has been used as a lens through which to imagine an ideal planning theory and practice. The key idea inherent in Marxist planning is that planning cannot be separated from society; planning is determined by the economic structure of a society and works to further the dominant economic paradigm, which in the vast majority of cases, is capitalism (Allemendinger, 2002, p. 81). As Marxism views capitalist economies as unjust, then the same would also hold true of planning systems that are produced through the operation of a capitalist economy. Thus, for a Marxist, planning almost certainly could not be just without a capitalist economy being replaced by a socialist or communist economy. Because Marxists tend to view economic structure as inherently linked with social structure, the adoption of such an economic structure would then result in a more just social structure, and in the process, a more just planning framework.

Even some schools of thought that appear to be more focused on environmental justice nonetheless have a strong social justice ethos built into them. The sustainable cities movement is a prime example of this. Campbell (1996, p. 297) frames this movement as being about balancing the three conflicting priorities planners face: economy, environment and equity. He argues that, generally, a planner focussing on one aspect would ignore the others or see them as competition; for instance, an environmental

planner would see economic development as damaging to the environment and would likely focus on environmental preservation at the expense of social equity and economic development (Campbell, 1996, p. 298). Sustainable development eschews focussing on a single aspect of development; instead emphasising the balancing of the three competing aspects. This sustainable development paradigm is thus inherently interested in furthering social justice. The argument that sustainability cannot exist without equity and social considerations means that for a city or community to be sustainable it must emphasise social justice.

### **3. JUSTICE AS EQUALITY**

One of the most prominent advocates of justice as equality was American liberal philosopher John Rawls. Rawls sought to prove that an equal society is most just and is what most people would choose to live in. He attempted to prove this using the notion of the 'veil of ignorance'. This principle argues that if an individual were to be presented with a theoretical society but be ignorant as to both his/her status in that society and the degree of inequality in that society, then rational individuals would prefer a society where all individuals are equal and receive equal treatment (Rawls, 1971, p. 136-141). In Rawls' example, all individuals presented with a hypothetical society have no information about the structure and wealth of the society they are being presented with. Individuals thus cannot take a chance on being in a wealthy or tolerant society; the hypothetical society could be extremely poor or riven with political conflict.

Furthermore, in Rawls' view, individuals do not know which generation they belong to; this is important to account for intergenerational justice such as resource consumption and environmental conservation (Rawls, 1971, p. 137). This uncertainty about a society's economic and political status is important; if an individual was presented with two societies, one poor but equal and one wealthy but unequal, that individual may gamble and choose the wealthy but unequal society on the chance that they end up as one of the wealthy

members of the society. Presented with such uncertainty, Rawls judges it irrational for individuals to gamble to get a 'good' society and rational to select a society with laws and services that emphasise equality. Based on this, Rawls determined that justice is about equality, as he believed he had proved most individuals would select such a society that is equal over one that is unequal.

### **4. JUSTICE AS LIBERTY**

However, a contemporary of Rawls, Robert Nozick, disagreed with this notion of justice. He argued that justice is freedom, not equality. This stance argues that the state and its services are incompatible with individual freedom and thus with justice. One of Nozick's defining arguments is his stance on the size and role of the state in modern society. Nozick argues that the state's functions should be limited to basic law and order services and enforcing contracts between individuals or corporations and that anything more would inevitably violate the rights of individuals (Nozick, 1974, p. 113-118). Nozick's vision is in many ways utopic; individuals make agreements with one another via contracts and coexist in voluntarily created communities, with the role of state being only to ensure peace exists within these communities.

When individuals voluntarily enter such communities, it is with the understanding the state may enforce peace and contracts, but may do no more (Nozick, 1974, p. 297-307). Contracts here are explicit and only between individuals that willingly enter into them; there is no place for the kind of involuntary social contracts envisioned by Rawls. This is because individuals do not have the right to opt in or out of such social contracts, meaning they inherently violate an individual's liberty (Nozick, 1974, 297-307). Such a society would rely almost exclusively on the magic of the market to produce wealth and innovation, and Nozick argues that social inequalities that result from freely given payments are entirely just.

## 5. MODERNIST PLANNING THEORY

One of the oldest schools of thought in planning is modernism which traces its roots to planning's infancy. The earliest planning theorists such as Ebenezer Howard were motivated by appalling sanitation and crowded housing in industrial cities in Europe to design idealised cities that addressed these problems (Levy, 2013, p. 31-34). These cities would be lower density, with plenty of green space and robust infrastructure. The idea here was evidently to design cities in a way that provided some degree of equality for all, by giving all members of society (regardless of class) access to basic public goods such as adequate housing and sanitation.

Housing provision, in particular, reflected this ethos of equality. Modernist theorists and practitioners emphasised the need to provide social housing for those people unable to afford the private market. In the United States modernists introduced minimum housing standards, requiring courtyards to allow in light, adequate fire escapes, and separate bathrooms for each apartment unit (Levy, 2013, p. 34). This insistence on minimum standards of housing for all demonstrates a desire to reduce inequality, if not to totally eradicate it. Certainly, it reflects a desire to better the lot of all members of a society, and sees society as an inherently interconnected community rather than a sea of individuals.

The underlying belief here is clearly that planning should be used as an assertive tool to change the world for the better, and that there is one right way forwards into the future, based on science and rationality.

## 6. NEOLIBERAL PLANNING THEORY

Neoliberalism is a more recent paradigm than modernism, reaching its zenith in the 1980's. One of the distinguishing features of neoliberalism is its absolute prioritisation of the economy and economic development. As noted by Peck and Tickell (2002, p.394), neoliberalism promotes the notion that economic growth is all-important, and that economic growth must be achieved before any social welfare concerns can be addressed and jobs and growth are dealt with. Even then, health and education are not provided for the

betterment of society's wellbeing or for their own sake; instead they are provided solely to assist further economic growth via skills training or ensuring workers are healthy (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 394). Neoliberalism is thus incompatible with ideologies or models of political economy that do not prioritise economic growth and place emphasis on social services. Marxist-based or egalitarian ideologies in particular are treated with considerable hostility, as their emphasis on social improvement is considered antithetical to neoliberalism's approach (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 394).

The other key aspect neoliberalism is notable for, is its embrace of the market as the best means of achieving this growth; there is no place for the state outside of limited law enforcement duties. Indeed, this devotion to the market is perhaps what neoliberalism is best known for and most commonly associated with. This emphasis on the market is justified in that it is more efficient and fair than a state-controlled economy. The rationale behind the efficiency argument is that the profit motive encourages cost saving where possible (Peck & Tickell, 2002, p. 394). In terms of fairness, the fact that winners and losers are not picked by the state but by consumers and other businesses is argued to be a more just approach.

## 7. LINKING RAWLS AND MODERNISM

Underlying both Rawls' work and modernist planning theory is a strongly egalitarian ethos. Rawls was a great believer in the idea that all people should have the same rights under the law and the same access to a basic minimum standard of living. Certainly, he believed that a rational person would choose to live in an egalitarian society as possible if presented with the choice. This egalitarian belief is also strong in modernism. The early modernists proposed cities that had basic amenities such as housing and sanitation for all, believing absolutely that all people should have access to such services.

Additionally, both see communities as just that; inherently interlinked and interdependent groups of people, rather than a multitude of individuals whose paths may happen to cross. This is expressed most clearly

in modernism's focus on improving housing and sanitation for the benefit of all. Likewise, Rawls believed that rational individuals would choose to live in societies that offered the greatest benefit and protection to all members through greater equality.

Finally, there is a strong link between Rawls' veil of ignorance and what modernism seeks to provide. Rawls argued that if an individual was unaware of what kind of society he or she would be born into and what their position in society would be, all rational people would prefer one as equal as possible. A modernist society, in which all people (regardless of income) ought to have access to adequate housing and sanitation is clearly aligned here. A rational individual, according to Rawls, would likely select a society something like what modernists advocate, in which all members are provided with the same basic standard of living.

## **8. LINKING NOZICK AND NEOLIBERALISM**

As Nozick's work was a significant inspiration for neoliberalism, it should not be surprising that the two are closely aligned.

Both, for instance, embrace and accept social and economic inequality, provided the inequality is the result of free actions. Neoliberalism accepts inequality as a natural result of a market-based economy; if an individual has a brilliant idea or works hard, they will be rewarded financially, and that is not only acceptable but proper and just. The commonality here is the notion that inequality is not necessarily bad, and is inevitable when people are allowed to innovate and exercise their free will.

Additionally, both Nozick and neoliberalism see a similar limited role for the state in modern society. Nozick made it clear he believed the state should exist only to provide law and order functions. Neoliberalism likewise advocates minimal government and minimal intervention in the market. While neoliberalism does not argue that the state should not be involved in healthcare and education and should restrict itself to law enforcement as Nozick does, the ideology does advocate a minimal role for the state, with its

priority being ensuring economic growth. This does not mean that Nozick or neoliberalism are anti-planning by any means; rather, advocates of neoliberalism would prefer a planning system that emphasises preserving private property rights.

Finally, both emphasise the primacy of the individual over the group. A key aspect of Nozick's work was his emphasis that individuals should not be forced to be part of a community. Instead, they should have the freedom to join communities or groups they want to associate with. Likewise, an individual should not be required to pay for services they do not make use of. While not stated so explicitly, this theme is also present in neoliberal thought. Neoliberalism values the market partially because it does reward individuals and does not force them to associate with others if they do not wish to.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

There is a rich body of literature examining the role of justice in planning, notably the Marxist and sustainable cities schools of thought. However, there has been minimal engagement with philosophical notions of justice. This article has demonstrated that there are several ways in which political philosophy aligns with planning theory. Rawls' ideas of justice as fairness or equality clearly align with the modernist planning tradition. Likewise, Nozick and his idea of justice and liberty clearly aligns with neoliberalism.

From this research, we can conclude that there are indeed links between the theories of planning and political philosophies of justice. This raises questions for practicing planners about whether the plans they create are furthering social justice, and if so, what kind? Do we want to live in an equal world? If so, should planners be pursuing a modernist approach to create such a world? Likewise, when planners work under neoliberalism, is the society they envision the same as that envisioned by Nozick? If not, why is neoliberalism so dominant in planning? These are questions this paper cannot answer, but should be kept in mind by professional planners.

## 10. REFERENCES

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