INTRODUCTION

This chapter considers historical and contemporary understandings of the Marxian interpretation of power. This is an understanding which highlights the structural relations that govern how power is distributed in society. For Marx, power is a resource largely concentrated within the ruling class and the state; it has its origins primarily in the economic sphere and this, in turn, wields influence in the political sphere. Thus, Marxist scholarship is particularly interested in analysing the political economy changes within the economic sphere of society as well as within the state (as the enabling arm of power) and its associated institutions. It is from this critical vantage point that Marxist political economy analysis can demonstrate its powerful analytical and explanatory power in and for understanding changes in the planning process and wider planning practice.

Under the capitalist mode of production power is wielded over the working-class population via the capital accumulation process and the materialisation of ideas that shape social reality – everyday life – to preserve dominant class interests. Central to the accumulation process is the illusion of fair exchange of wages for workers’ ‘labour power’ in the production process. However, from a Marxian perspective, the surplus value that workers generate via this process is exploited by the ruling class (who control the means and instruments of production) enabling a circular process of capitalist accumulation. The role of the state in preserving these exploitative class relations is central to Marxian conceptions of power. This is because Marxist scholars trace the material origins of class relations to the emergence of the state whose function was (and continues to be) centred on serving dominant class interests.

This chapter examines how Marxian conceptions of power and the state have been drawn upon in more or less explicit ways by a range of critical planning theorists. In doing so, emphasis is placed on Marxist interpretations of planning as an activity of the capitalist state that necessarily serves powerful interests while the inherent power disparities that are reproduced and exacerbated by the planning system itself is also outlined. Finally, the chapter reflects more broadly on why this theoretical perspective appears to have lost momentum in recent decades and explores its relevance to more contemporary debates in planning.

POWER RELATIONS UNDER THE CAPITALIST MODE OF PRODUCTION

Although Marxism does not explicitly theorise about power per se, Marxist theory is predominantly concerned with issues of power in society. Indeed, Hearn (2012: 49) points out that while Marx offers one of the most ‘strenuous critiques’ of exploitative power relations that exist in capitalist society, he never systematically defines what he means by power. Nevertheless, power remains the central tenet for Marx’s core ideas on social labour, the
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mode of production, class conflict and alienation (Hearn, 2012), all of which will be explored throughout this chapter.

Drawing on classic enlightenment ideas, Marx considered the essence of human nature to be rooted in a person’s desire to be a ‘free and conscious producer’ (Marx, 1844 in Tucker, 1978: xxv). Building on this basic principle, Marxist theory draws attention to the fact that under capitalism, people are driven to produce by engaging in paid labour (which they have no control over) for their own subsistence. More specifically, the capitalist mode of production is underpinned by exploitative class relations between capitalists (the bourgeoisie) and wage workers (the proletariat) on the basis of the former’s ownership and control over the means of production. This enables capitalists to generate profits by extracting surplus value (the value generated by labour in the productive process over and above their wages) from workers, who are forced to sell their labour power into the labour market for survival (Murphy and Mercille, 2019). Through this capital accumulation process, the capitalist class can preserve and reinvent itself as well as reinforce ‘its domination over labour’ (Harvey, 1989: 59).

Because the social relations of production that exist under capitalism prevent wage workers from engaging in spontaneous action and free enquiry, Marx considers their labour to be involuntary and thereby ‘estranged’ or ‘alienated’ from human nature (Tucker, 1978: xxv). In this regard, Marxism can be aligned to classical liberal assumptions about the innate ‘human need for liberty, diversity and free association’ unbound by external force or coercion (Chomsky, 2005: 123). While several analysts associate Marx’s humanist concerns about the alienation of man under the capitalist economic system with his earlier works (such as his Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844), Tucker (1978) rightly points out that there is evidence of these elements throughout Marx’s work as a whole. For instance, concerns about man’s alienation from his labour are inherent within the concept of the ‘division of labour’ which describes how technological advances adopted by capitalists (in order to increase the relative surplus value generated), leads to increasingly routinised operations for workers. Marx’s later works can thus be considered as remaining power focused by elucidating (albeit implicitly) the power relations that emerge between a dominant capitalist class and a subordinate class of labourers under the capitalist mode of production. Marx’s contribution in this regard is important as the exploitative relationship between capitalists and workers is not always obvious as ‘workers are not tied to any particular capital owner but must be employed’ (Tucker, 1978: 207). Power relations under capitalism are therefore less visible when compared to other historical forms of domination (for example landlord and serf) (Dunleavy and O’Leary, 1987) but exist, nevertheless.

There are several contradictions within the capitalist system which threaten its survival. These revolve around two central issues, namely the class struggle between the capitalist class and wage workers, and the inherent crisis tendencies within the capital accumulation process itself. With regard to the former, Marxism posits that relations of exploitation create class struggles, which under capitalism are rooted in the capitalist’s generation of profit from the exploitation of labour (Scott and Roweis, 1977). In the continuous drive for accumulation, capitalists are ‘forced into inflicting greater and greater violence upon those whom they employ’, yet labourers are relatively ‘powerless to resist this onslaught’ as they are forced to compete with each other in the labour market for employment (Harvey, 1978: 103).

The second threat confronting the capital accumulation process is rooted within capitalism’s own inherent crisis tendencies. This is because the continuous drive for expansion and accumulation requires capitalists to maximise profits primarily by reducing the wages of the
working class in order to extract more surplus value from workers. However, in doing so, the purchasing power of the masses is diminished, which in turn reduces the market to which capitalists supply creating a problem of effective demand (Fraser et al., 2013). The shrinking of the market (a key precondition to capital accumulation), inevitably results in over-production and crisis of accumulation occurs. As put by Harvey (2001: 239), ‘as capitalism creates the conditions necessary for its own existence, it too creates the barriers and as such, crises are considered endemic to the capital accumulation process’. For Marx, these challenges mean that capitalist society is unable to ensure the conditions for it owns existence without some form of intervention. It is here where Marxists look towards the role of the state as playing a fundamental role in preserving the power imbalances that underpin capitalist society. This is where our attention now turns.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

Contrary to conventional views of the state as a neutral institution that guards the ‘public interest’, Marxist political economy perceptions view the state’s role as being necessarily supportive of capitalist class interests based on its historical origins and the social conditions ‘that gave it birth’ (Paul, 1917: 1). The more conventional view is typically associated with classical democratic theory which assumes that the state arose out of individuals wishing to establish a sovereign power that would safeguard their common interests. Marxist materialist interpretations of the state, on the other hand, focus on the class relations that emerged with the rise of private property, contending that the state emerged as a direct result of such class divisions (see Paul, 1917; Held, 1989). To illustrate this point, Marxists look backwards to the earliest forms of social organisation such as the clan/tribal system where lands were held in communal ownership in a system of economic equality, rather than the current system of private ownership (see Paul, 1917). However, as annual land divisions were extended from three- to five-year periods in order to facilitate the adoption of more modern agricultural practices, ‘users began to look upon the land as their own property’, and inequalities gradually arose as some families were allocated slightly larger or more fertile plots than others (Paul, 1917: 23). Stressing a similar point, Held (1989: 35) outlines that class divisions only arise when surpluses are generated ‘such that it becomes possible for a class of non-producers to live off the productive activity of others’. The emergence of such inequalities naturally generated conflicting class interests as those with greater resources sought to safeguard their material welfare, while those with fewer resources sought a more just redistribution. In the absence of any means for settling class disputes under tribal systems ‘a new method had to be devised’ (Paul, 1917: 41). The wealthy class thus created a new social institution of government – the political state – in order to maintain order and crush revolts or any challenges which may be raised against it. It is on this basis that Marxist materialist interpretations of the state maintain that the state arose organically out of competing individual and community interests in order to ‘preserve the privileges of property and to suppress the clamorous demands of the propertyless’ (Paul, 1917: 41).

From this vantage point, the state cannot be considered a neutral arbitrator standing above class struggles; rather, it is ‘deeply engaged in them’ (Carnoy, 1984: 47) and is considered the ‘weapon of class rule’ (Paul, 1917: 41) and the repressive apparatus of the bourgeoisie (Carnoy, 1984). This view is summarised in an infamous statement within The Communist
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Manifesto: ‘the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie’ (Marx and Engels, 2010: 11). However, as rightly pointed out by Carnoy (1984: 48) ‘it should not be inferred from this that the state is a class plot’. Rather, it evolves in order to ‘mediate contradictions between individuals and community, and since community is dominated by the bourgeoisie, so is the mediation by the state’ (Carnoy, 1984: 48). It is on this basis that Marxist political economy perspectives of the state consider the economic and political spheres to be inextricably linked as ‘those who are able to gain control of the means of production form a dominant or ruling class both economically and politically’ (Held, 1989: 32). Power, from a Marxist perspective, is thus structurally determined. In contrast to other theorists who consider power to be multi-dimensional and widely distributed throughout society, Marxists emphasise the importance of class (i.e. one’s relationship to the means of production) as a key determinant of relative economic and political power.

Although the state has taken various forms throughout history, Marxists argue that its inherent function remains the same from its origins through ancient state systems, feudal society and right up to industrial capitalism. As put by Engels (1968: 155–157 in Carnoy, 1984: 49) ‘the ancient state was, above all, the state of slave owners for holding down the slaves, just as the feudal state was the organ of the nobility for holding down the peasant serfs and bondsmen, and the modern representative state is the instrument for exploiting wage labour by capital’. From this perspective, the state ultimately exists to ‘perpetuate the mode of exploitation which is in the best interests of the economically dominant class during any period’ (Paul, 1917: 55).

As capitalist society is unable to ensure the successful conditions for its own survival, the state must out of necessity perform ‘certain basic minimum tasks in support of a capitalist mode of production’ (Harvey, 2001: 269). Indeed, Scott and Roweis (1977: 1102) warn that ‘without the presence of an agency capable of maintaining social balance, capitalist society would rapidly disintegrate’. The state must therefore guarantee and legitimise existing capitalist social and property relations in order to mediate class conflict and facilitate the continued social and economic domination by capital (MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003). As put by Edel (1981: 28), ‘the state must provide a framework for exchange, a guarantee of capitalist’s property rights and some degree of control to keep workers in their subordinate class positions’.

However, Harvey (2001: 277) warns that ‘bourgeois democracy can survive only with the consent of the majority of the governed while it must at the same time express a distinctive ruling interest’. He identifies two strategies whereby allegiance of the working class can be achieved. The first is to represent dominant interests as the illusory general interest ‘by universalising ruling class ideas as the only universally valid ones’. As put by Milliband (1977: 66), the idea that the state can serve the common good ‘is part of the ideological veil which a dominant class draws upon the reality of class rule, so as to legitimate that rule in its own eyes as well as in the eyes of subordinate classes’. The second way in which the capitalist state gains popular consent is by providing the appearance of neutrality in its operations through the provision of certain social goods such as social housing, education, transport or welfare payments. The fact that such goods are prerequisites to facilitate the continued survival of the capitalist mode of production, but lie beyond the logic of individual capitalists to provide, is not made explicit (Sandercock, 1998; Harvey 2001; MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003). In return for such concessions, the state receives ‘an allegiance of the subordinate class’ and an ideology of the ‘common good’ is established which disguises the inherent interests of the capitalist state as a facilitator of the capitalist system (Harvey, 2001: 277). For Marxists, these strategies
negate class conflict and prevent challenges being brought to bear on the power structure governing capitalist society.

It is important at this juncture to highlight that the mainstream Marxist position as set out above has been subject to a series of variations and revisions throughout the twentieth century, many of which have attempted to address the pitfalls of classical Marxism. In this regard, many have questioned why the working class remains ‘unrevolutionary’ in the face of economic crises, and why communist states developed in the way they did (Carnoy, 1984: 45). Such critiques are commonly levelled at Marx’s theory of the state but should instead be considered more of a critique of socialism as it developed in the Soviet Union (Chomsky, 2005). Indeed, it seems that the experiences of Bolshevism or what some believe to be Marxism in practice (Chomsky, 2005), have led to the adoption of more conservative positions which advocate a transition to socialism via political reform and reorganisation while others advocate more radical forms of libertarian Marxism. The debate essentially stems from the ambiguities that exist within Marxism on the issue of state autonomy, an issue which underpins many of the conflicting opinions about the role of the state in the transition from capitalism to socialism.

MARXIST POLITICAL ECONOMY PERSPECTIVES OF PLANNING

Marx wrote very little specifically about the planning system or the wider state-planning nexus. Indeed, despite the very important implications of his scholarship for urban processes, he also had little comment to make on urbanisation. But, as highlighted by Holgersen (2020), he did write on many issues of crucial relevance to understanding urban planning and related processes such as capital accumulation, exploitation, different forms of rents, (labour) alienation, relations with nature and social reproduction. In addition, Marx’s key collaborator – Frederick Engels – did write specifically about urban issues in publications such as the *The Housing Question* (1942) and *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* (2013). Teasing out the implications of Marx’s work for contemporary planning was undertaken by a rage of scholars who applied Marx’s theories to urban and regional planning questions. Most of this work emerged in the 1970s and 1980s via key scholars such as Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey and Manuel Castells, among others.

Perhaps the most important implication of Marx’s work for planning lies in its critique of the nature and origins of the state and the implication of the state-planning relationship for planning practice and the urbanisation process more widely. Just as the state intervenes to facilitate the continuation of the capital accumulation process at the general level, planning (as an arm of the state) is considered a form of state intervention which necessarily functions to serve dominant class interests. In this regard, power lies at the heart of Marxist political economy perceptions of planning, although this is often rather implicit within the broad body of Marxist-inspired planning literature. From a Marxist perspective, planning is an institution of the capitalist state which is compelled to intervene to manage the contradictions of capitalism that become manifested spatially (Fainstein and Fainstein, 1982) (e.g. land-use conflicts, underinvestment in collective goods and services, etc.). In doing so, the planning system takes on the dual facilitatory and ideological role of the state, whereby it functions to facilitate the accumulation of capital, whilst also legitimising the capitalist economic system (McDougall, 1982; Yiftachel, 1989).
With regard to the former, Marxist perceptions of planning contend that planning must intervene in the production of the built environment to ensure that it remains useful for capitalist production, circulation, exchange and consumption (Harvey, 1985). The central ways in which it facilitates the capital accumulation process is through the ‘development of physical infrastructure, land aggregation and development, containment of negative environmental externalities, and the maintenance of land values’ (Fainstein and Fainstein, 1982: 148). Marxist scholars point towards the post-war public housing programmes, the construction of underground railway systems in major cities, and land-use zoning matrices as examples of the state providing social goods that capital requires, yet fails to deliver privately (see Scott and Roweis, 1977; Kirk, 1980; Fainstein and Fainstein, 1982). In this sense, the state (and by implication the planning system) is viewed as a ‘direct active agent in creating urban form and socialising many of the expenses of production’ (Fainstein and Fainstein, 1982: 161). In terms of ameliorating the negative externalities accruing from the emergence of conflicting land uses (including declining land values, nuisance, congestion, etc.), planning, through the implementation of development plans and zoning objectives and policies, facilitates the interests of private capital as it not only protects (and indeed enhances) land values, but also reduces the emergence of conflicts from adversely affected members of society which may subsequently threaten the status quo.

This latter point leads us to the second aspect of planning’s ‘dual role’, which is the argument that the ideology of planning supports capital by depoliticising the state’s intervention in the urbanisation process. Gramscian interpretations of planning argue that planning ideology legitimises planning as a form of state intervention that essentially works to safeguard the continuation of the capitalist economic order, thereby preserving the existing power base in society. As explained by Mäntysalo and Saglie (2010: 327) ‘power in public planning relies on legitimacy’. For Chomsky (2002: 11), the standard way that power protects itself is by instituting ideological filters and terms of political discourse which mask and obscure the true manner in which power operates (by, for example, the use of terms such as the ‘common good’, ‘national interest’, democratic decision making, etc.). Chomsky (2003: 147) also outlines that what constitutes the common good ‘will be articulated by those who control the central economic and political institutions’. Such ideas are inherent within Marxist political economy perceptions of planning whereby planning is considered to be one such filter that disguises and legitimises the role of the state ‘by providing a semblance of intervention and public interest while in reality making little, if any, difference’ (Allmendinger, 2002: 81). This is achieved through the rhetoric of technical, rational, and professional planning that purportedly operates in a neutral capacity to serve the ‘common good’ and ‘public interest’, as well as the casting of planners in purely technical terms (as opposed to political agents) thereby legitimising the planning activities of the state. In doing so, planners themselves play a key part in fulfilling the ideological role of planning, and further universalise the legitimising ideology by ‘bolstering justification in the name of the public interest with arguments ostensibly based on scientific rationality’ (Fainstein and Fainstein, 1982: 149; see also Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015). In a similar vein, scholars have highlighted that the rhetoric of participatory planning approaches legitimise the status quo and diffuse attention towards the process of planning rather than the outcomes being arrived at and in doing so, ‘capital gets what it needs’ (Purcell, 2009: 147).

Furthermore, scholars such as Scott and Roweis (1977) and Harvey (1985) highlight that planning theories and ideologies arise and evolve in response to the changing needs of capital. More specifically it seems that periodic crises can be ameliorated through shifting the imper-
atives (goals, emphases and theories, etc.) of planning in a manner that serves the needs of private capital (Allmendinger, 2002: 78). In this regard, the planner’s world view can alter with changing circumstances in such a way that it continues to support the existing capitalist power structure. For instance, Harvey (1985) explains that policies of dispersal in the 1960s developed in response to the urban riots of that period, whilst the rhetoric of ‘community improvement’ was adopted by planners to control civil strife in urban areas, a phenomenon now referred to as ‘guilding the ghetto’. Others have pointed towards the adoption of Enterprise Zones in the UK and Strategic Development Zones in Ireland (Fox-Rogers et al., 2011) as means of creating the conditions for private capital accumulation in response to market conditions through the rhetoric of ‘efficiency’ and ‘streamlined approaches’ to planning. Whatever the rhetoric used, the planner as an agent of the state must contribute to the requirements for the reproduction of the capitalist social order. As argued by Harvey (1985: 184), the ‘commitment to the ideology of harmony within the capitalist social order remains the still point upon which gyrations of planning ideology turn’.

The ideological role fulfilled by planning has meant that the regressive outcomes brought about through the urbanisation process are typically not viewed as manifestations of the capitalist social order, but instead are interpreted as bad planning decisions. In doing so, planning has been charged with depoliticising the capitalist mode of production, while politicising planning and the failures of the state (Allmendinger, 2002). This explains why planning and particularly planners are so often blamed for the inequities brought about by capitalism at the urban level, thereby ‘distracting attention from the “problem” itself’ (Allmendinger, 2002: 81–82). While giving the impression that ‘the impacts and injustices of the market are being treated … planning is actually helping to perpetuate those symptoms’ (Allmendinger, 2002: 79). In this sense planning can be viewed as a smokescreen for powerful interests, rather than a neutral institution working to serve the public interest.

Planning theorists of a Marxian persuasion thus highlight that the role of planning is to support capital by facilitating accumulation and legitimising planning interventions as rational and non-political. The overarching result is that the planning outcomes arrived at reflect dominant class interests and not only lead to the ‘perpetuation of inequality, but in many cases to the enhancement of inequality’ (McDougall, 1982: 259). Marxist political economy approaches to planning have been widely regarded as a vital development in revealing the structural drivers shaping planning practice. These approaches have demystified the idea that planning can operate as a politically neutral institution which serves some notion of the ‘common good’, instead emphasising the capitalist nature of the state and the planning system (see Scott and Roweis, 1977; Kirk, 1980). As Harvey (1985: 184) has noted, drawing on this theoretical framework helps us understand why ‘the high-sounding ideals of planning theory are so frequently translated to grubby practices on the ground’.

THE RELEVANCE OF MARXIST THEORY TO CONTEMPORARY PLANNING DEBATES

Despite its strengths as a theoretical perspective, Marxism has fallen out of favour with planning theorists over the past three decades relative to its height in the 1970s and 1980s. This is somewhat curious given its recent rise to prominence in other disciplinary settings across the social sciences and humanities, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis when
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Marxist political economy critiques became a powerful lens for understanding global political economic upheaval (Holgersen, 2020). In this sense, recent planning research and related theory deserves some focused attention and critique, particularly with regard to the relative absence of more radical critical discourse and related suggestions for planning practice. While the reasons for this change are undoubtedly complex, it seems clear that planning research and theory has been heavily influenced by alterations in global political economy over the last three decades. These changes have coincided with the rise of neoliberalism and related experimental projects and frameworks which have had wide-ranging impacts on social, economic and political life (Mercille and Murphy, 2019). Planning, in particular, has been moulded and shaped considerably by neoliberalism and neoliberalisation to the point that the fundamental principles underpinning planning theory are barely recognised in planning practice (Murphy and Fox-Rogers, 2015). Indeed, many of the most important critiques of neoliberalism, its rise and prevalence are underpinned by Marxist scholarship (see Jessop, 2002; Harvey, 2007) and this body of literature has been important for understanding transformations in state-planning relationships, urban governance and planning practice.

Within the context of these wider political economy shifts, one might have expected more significant engagement and discourse on these issues within planning theory. However, as Holgersen (2020: 808) has noted ‘rather than engaging in the political economy, the opposite happened’ with planning theory turning inwards ‘… focusing more on process and the procedural, and advocating for communicative theory’. The communicative turn in planning theory has had a significant impact on the evolution of consensus-based participatory collaborative planning approaches to planning theory and practice. Despite being the dominant theoretical position within the discipline, it has failed to advocate appropriately for altering the power imbalances inherent in the urban planning process; rather, (economic) power has found ways to by-pass process-driven participatory planning measures. Indeed, Holgersen (2020: 809) has pointed out that ‘the communicative turn has removed planning theory even further from the messy world of political economy’. The result has meant that redistribution in the planning process has been only marginal and the pursuit of better outcomes for local communities has been circumvented to the detriment of less powerful interests (see Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2015).

Another part of the explanation surely relates to perceived shortcoming of classical Marxist approaches and related critiques that have been levelled at its nihilistic tendencies. In this regard, Sorenson (1982: 184) outlines that whilst Marxist perspectives provide valuable insights into the underlying processes which create urban problems, they fail to specify alternatives and provide ‘no signpost to the future’. Fainstein and Fainstein (1982: 168) echo similar concerns arguing that because Marxist approaches lead ‘intellectually alive radical planners to conclude that system change lies in the mode of production’, the theory leaves ‘little room for progressive action by planners’. Despite this charge, Marxist perspectives on power and planning have continued relevance to contemporary debates in planning and critical urban theory such as those surrounding the ‘right to the city’ (see McCann, 2002; Harvey, 2003; Marcuse, 2009; see also Chapter 2 by Olsson and Besussi), the financialisation of the economy and housing (Aalbers, 2016; Bryan et al., 2009; Fine, 2013; Lapavitsas, 2013; Van der Zwan, 2014), the neoliberalisation of the state and planning (Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2014), and accumulation by dispossession amongst others.

To elaborate, Marxist perspectives of the state and planning can be applied within the broad body of literature surrounding the ‘right to the city’ in ways which largely address the
perceived nihilistic tendencies traditionally associated with Marxist scholarship. The ‘right to the city’ is a phrase first popularised by Henri Lefebvre in the late 1960s but has since been widely used to expresses much wider ‘concerns with the alienation of modern urban life and the ability to live life fully’ (McCann, 2002: 77). Here we see an immediate connection with the ideas associated with the ‘right to the city’ and Marx’s own preoccupation with the alienation of man under the capitalist economic system. The right to the city is about active urban citizenship and the right to be included in decision making, as well as the transition to an ideal city where there is broad participation, enfranchisement, unalienated labour and a ‘triumph of use value over exchange value’ (McCann, 2002: 78). As Harvey (2003: 939) notes, more than thirty years of neoliberalism has taught us that freer markets result in greater inequalities and so the right to the city ‘is not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart’s desire’. Indeed, there are some who already claim their right to the city including powerful financiers, real estate owners, politicians, and the owners of large business enterprises (namely capitalists). However, there are many more who do not include those who are directly oppressed or alienated under existing conditions. It is within this context then that the right to the city must be understood as ‘both a cry and a demand, a cry out of necessity and a demand for something more’ (Marcuse, 2009: 190).

Moving beyond traditional Marxist views which identify the proletariat as the key driver of change, Marcuse (2009: 192) argues that the push for the right to the city will be led by the deprived and the discontented involving ‘a convergence of all groups, coalitions, alliances, movements, assemblies around a common set of objectives, which see capitalism as the common enemy and the right to the city as their common cause’. In this regard, Marxist perspectives of power, the state and planning can lend support to contemporary critical urban theory in terms of exposing and revealing the root causes of inequality, injustice, alienation and deprivation which is central to developing useful responses to address those issues. Marcuse (2009) argues that what is required is a fundamental rejection of the prevailing capitalist system which relies on power disparities, deprivation and alienation in order to survive. Others advocate less radical and deterministic approaches. For instance, McCann (2002: 78) offers an alternative strategy that involves capitalising on the contemporary rise of participatory decision-making processes which can offer opportunities for making claims for new rights to the city which ‘may occasionally provide opportunities for the articulation and realization of new visions of urban life’. There are avenues, therefore, for the identification of advocacy and change in planning.

In a similar vein, Marxian understandings of the state and power can also be contemporaneously applied to the proliferation of literature on the financialisation of the economy which centres on analysing the growing influence of financial services and markets within the overall economy and across virtually all sectors (Bryan et al., 2009; Fine, 2013; Lapavitsas, 2013; Van der Zwan, 2014). In essence, this body of scholarship highlights how capitalist economies have become increasingly financialised over the past thirty years (Lapavitsas, 2013). Specifically, scholars make the distinction between classical nineteenth-century capitalism (to which Marxist theory specifically relates) and contemporary financialised capitalism, the latter being much more complex due to a diverse range of factors including the growth of transnational enterprises, the deregulation of labour and financial markets, but most notably the general rise of finance that has taken place since the late 1970s. During this time the dramatic development of the financial sector has brought with it a rapid expansion of financial profits, whilst growth in the productive sector has remained relatively modest resulting in rising unemployment and
wealth inequality, as well as broader asymmetries between ‘the sphere of production and the ballooning sphere of circulation’ (Lapavitsas, 2013: 793). From a Marxian perspective, the shift from production to the sphere of finance circulation emerged in direct response to the crisis tendencies that Marx identified as being inherent within the capitalist system. In this regard, Marxist political economy has cast ‘considerable light on financialization’ (Lapavitsas, 2013: 798) by explaining how the growth of finance has emerged to facilitate the absorption of surplus value from the productive sphere in new and alternative ways that continue to generate profit, namely through the realm of finance (Baran and Sweezy, 1966; Lapavitsas, 2013). This is the general view held by regulationists who contend that a new regime of accumulation centred on finance has replaced more traditional forms of accumulation that emerged during the Fordist crisis. In recent years, scholarship has increasingly focused on the relationship between financialisation practices and urbanisation processes, with some focusing particular attention on the financialisation of housing as ‘new financial instruments and regulatory experimentation are used to transform spatially fixed housing into highly liquid investment products’ (Waldron, 2019: 687; see also Aalbers, 2016; 2017). In essence, these debates demonstrate how the exchange value rather than use value of housing has increased under contemporary financialised capitalism and critically analyses the financialisation of the urban development process, specifically the interactions between the ‘real estate–financial complex’ (Aalbers, 2012).

Another broad area of Marxist-inspired scholarship in the planning field relates to the concept of accumulation by dispossession, a term coined by Harvey (2003, 2007) to update Marx’s original concept of ‘primitive accumulation’. In its original form (Marx’s primitive accumulation), the concept denotes the absorption and conversion of non-capitalist spaces, places, and practices into the capitalist system. The concept therefore refers to the range of processes that contribute to this transformation including marketisation, liberalisation, and privatisation (see Mercille and Murphy, 2017). The classic example of primitive accumulation is when peasants living outside the capitalist system are dispossessed and their land expropriated, thereby turning them into wage labourers. On the empirical side, the range of studies assessing the process of accumulation by dispossession is relatively narrow with most studies focused on the developing world and concerned primarily with land grabs or water (Adnan, 2013; Arrighi et al., 2010). Nevertheless, there are a number of studies with an explicitly urban focus which relates either directly or indirectly to the role of the planning system. These include studies on urban gentrification (Ortega, 2016), urban space (Gillespie, 2016), housing (Kappeler and Bigger, 2011), public services (Huws, 2012), and urban resistance to dispossession (Latorre et al., 2015). The concept and related studies have made Marx’s work useful for analysis of contemporary capitalism and its relationship with urban and rural planning processes.

THE FUTURE FOR MARXISM AND PLANNING

The Marxist political economy perspective goes beyond other theories by emphasising the structural constraints and power imbalances that are inherent within capitalist society. Rejecting any notion of the state being a neutral arbitrator or a vehicle for reform, the Marxist position highlights that the state must necessarily serve the interests of capital or the dominant class and holder of power of any period given its historical origins. This is the classical Marxist position. It is on this basis that the political and economic spheres are considered
interdependent; those with the greatest levels of economic power have considerable power and influence in the political arena. Thus, rather than advocating reformist solutions to the inherent inequalities that are generated in a class-based society, Marxism looks towards a classless society where the eventual need for a state will no longer remain. The analytical power of the Marxist political economy approach offers penetrating insights from which to explore issues surrounding how power arises, is exerted and ultimately operates within the state and its associated institutions such as the planning system.

However, it is important to note that the future of Marxism and its continued relevance to planning theory will likely require Marxist scholars to engage more with and address contemporary political economy issues which it has done only sparingly over the past three decades. This is particularly important to the issue of power in the planning system. Power finds a whole series of means by which to influence the planning system for its own ends (see Olesen, 2014). In this regard, the rise of neoliberalism and its impact on planning has surely not been studied closely enough by planning theorists. This is important because neoliberal experiments have been embraced by powerful interests in the planning process and across a variegated range of public policies (see Mercille and Murphy, 2019).

Furthermore, the intersection of political economies via a range of neoliberal experiments in the planning process and Marxist political economy critiques of such changes is well placed to reveal the underlying nature of broad-based changes in planning systems. In planning practice, Marxist political economy frameworks have provided evidence that theoretical approaches such as communicative action (or collaborative planning) have been co-opted to marginalise, nullify and sideline the potential effectiveness of any power redistribution within participatory processes (Fox-Rogers and Murphy, 2014; 2015) and Sager (2005: 7) has cautioned planning theorists against ignoring critiques ‘… suggesting that their well-intentioned reforms are being transformed and perverted by economic-political forces only to end up making society less rather than more democratic’. Indeed, the previous section has highlighted the extent of the influence of Marxist political economy scholarship on wider debates relevant to planning. The implication of Sager’s aforementioned comment is that Marxist political economy understandings of power in the planning system need to be embraced to a more significant degree in contemporary planning theory and practice debates than is currently the case.

While there is a tendency to think of Marxist scholarship in terms only of radical planning interventions and solutions, there is a need for Marxist political economy frameworks to assist with producing more progressive outcomes in the planning process. In this sense, Fainstein and Fainstein (1982) have emphasised that less determinist positions can be employed to highlight the possibilities for planners to be progressive, even if they legitimise the system in the short run. This position is common in other political economy analysis. For example, Chomsky (2002: 345) notes that it is ‘completely realistic and rational to work within structures to which you are opposed, because by doing so you can help to move to a situation where then you can challenge those structures’. Of course, this does not negate the need for Marxist political economy scholarship to adapt and demonstrate its continued relevance for planning in the future, and particularly for understanding systems of power. There is little doubt that such a project will need to focus more on advocacy in planning (Davidoff, 1965), and for planners to take an opposing (rather than neutral) position to the interests of power, one more focused on issues of human well-being, reducing inequality and promoting environmental and ecological sustainability (Rydin, 2013). As Holgersen (2020: 3) rightly asserts: ‘We need to embrace what previous Marxist discourse did not manage to include, something that is necessary if
a Marxist discourse on planning is going to have an impact – the greatest promise of Marxism: a call for social change’.

REFERENCES


