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1 What is Theory?

Introduction

When writing a book that seeks to tackle a large topic such as planning theory there are important choices to be made about what to include, in what order, and what narrative (if any) should connect the various elements. In recent years planning theory has been characterized by fragmentation and diversification with a wide range of different understandings emerging and increasingly talking past each other. At one end of the spectrum are approaches that seek to understand and explain the purpose and impacts of planning as a function of the capitalist mode of production (currently under the overused label of ‘neoliberalism’) while at the other end of spectrum are post-structuralist approaches that reject a single, totalizing way of knowing. There is nothing inherently wrong with this seemingly incommensurable and growing diversity (though see Allmendinger, 2016 for an attempt at fusion of these two positions) but there are some consequences, particularly when attempting to decide where to draw the boundaries on what to include in a book on planning theory.

The first consequence of this fragmentation amounts to a challenge to the notion of planning theory itself. This goes beyond bemoaning the continued existence of a theory–practice gap to argue that planning as a social practice does not ‘need’ theory – it functions perfectly well without it (for recent examples see Talvitie, 2009; Lord, 2014). The point is that if the field of planning theory is so varied, incommensurable and unrelated to the practice of planning (which seems to carry on regardless) then why bother trying to theorize it? Rather than theory the practice of planning should be underpinned by experiential learning and reflection (which sounds suspiciously like a theory of sorts itself). A related position is that the ‘need’ for theory in planning arises not from the demands
of practice but for other reasons. According to Reade (1987) planning ‘needs’ theory to elevate its existence and justify its claim to professional status and all of the benefits that accompany this status. A third position is the suggestion that planning theory does exist but is no more than a justification for what planning and planners do to support capitalism. Planners help create a particular form of the built environment that provides the conditions necessary to maximize economic growth and accumulation by coordinating infrastructure such as roads, sewers, housing, etc., while helping avoid economic crises by acting as ‘crisis managers’ (see Harvey, 1985). Planning acts in the interests of capital but needs to do so in ways that seem balanced, open and fair. Theory provides a means by which planners can publicly justify their actions and mask their true role. These positions – that planning doesn’t ‘need’ theory, that planners only theorize because that is what is expected of a profession and that theory is just a ‘front’ for planning to mislead society – question the very purpose of a book on planning theory.

A second consequence of this fragmentation is that it is difficult, if not unwise, to provide a ‘story’ linking the evolution of theories in planning. This is a popular and understandable approach in the social sciences that helps capture the landscape of theory within areas such as planning while also echoing the progressive nature of theory in the natural sciences where theory is regarded as provisional and refutable: theories develop and ‘improve’ as they are subjected to testing. Such a narrative is not only rejected outright by some theories but also presents practical difficulties: explaining how we ‘got to now’ highlights a growing plurality of positions and lack of coherence that, at the very least, draws attention to the absence of any clear and underlying body of thought for planning. It is also not the case that theory in the social sciences progresses in the same ways as in the natural sciences: one cannot ‘prove’ that restricting development around the edge of a city encourages regeneration. There are too many factors that are linked in complex ways to be able to single out cause and effect. This lack of progression partly explains the proliferation of theory in planning as new perspectives are added rather than replacing existing ones. The outcome is that one can describe a fragmentation of positions and theories and the reasons for this development but the impact upon planning is to recall Wildavsky’s renowned suggestion: if planning is everything, maybe it’s nothing (1973: 127).

The final consequence of fragmentation comes from looking back at the ebbs and flows of theory where it is clear that some theories and schools
of thought are relatively enduring while others are the more ephemeral. There are some ‘classic’ theories of planning that have helped shape understanding and practice. In some cases the popularity and sustainability of such theories have been in part due to their appeal to planners, reinforcing a view of the profession as based around technical expertise or progressive values. In other cases theories have been critical of planning and planners, portraying them as dupes or instruments of capitalism. There is an element of fashion in the waxing and waning of theories as academics are always looking for ‘the new’.

These issues could stop a book on planning theory before it has started. Why bother with a book on planning theory? However, we can also consider the counter arguments. First, just because there is a growing diversity of theories in and around planning it does not necessarily follow that they are all of equal significance or validity. Second, we should not reject the notion of theory because it does not accurately correspond to social reality. Even if that reality is complex and difficult to theorize, theory is important if only because it allows reflection of planning practice against something even if that something is wide of the mark. Theory in the social sciences will always, by necessity, be much more limited in scope and applicability than in the natural sciences. Third, we should not dispense with theory for the fundamental reason that planning is largely a public sector-funded and led activity and there needs to be a justification for its existence and the intervention of the state in land and property markets. Two related questions arise from any justification for planning activity: what difference should planning make and what difference does it make? The former question requires theory while the latter evaluates the impact against that theory. There are significant methodological and practical problems in approaching both questions but this does not separate planning from other areas of public policy and intervention. Finally and most practically, planners theorize as an everyday activity whether they recognize it or not. After all the very activity of planning is based upon a theory that the world will be a better place (however defined) with it than without it.

So there are arguments for and against theory in planning as well as difficulties in actually theorizing planning. There are no easy or straightforward answers to such questions but they provide a backdrop to a book that seeks to help inform. Yet in informing we also need to be wary of being too helpful, of imposing a simplified and false understanding in the desire for clarity. I discuss the underlying approach to this book more
in Chapter 2 but it is worth pointing out that there is no simple way of capturing or communicating the scope and nature of planning theory. However, this book does not stand alone. There are a range of books and papers covering planning theory that, while they take a different approach, complement this book – some general introductions and some more focused on a particular area.

One way in which this book is distinguished from others is that I try and tackle some of the issues outlined above by locating theories within particular schools of thought. Planning is magpie-like if not voracious in its expropriation of theories from other disciplines and subjects, some of which are not really theories at all but more ways of understanding and looking at the world. Often such Weltanschauungen can encompass and frame theories. Is, for example, post-structuralism a theory in the same way that collaborative planning is? I think the answer to that is ‘no’ though post-structuralism has been highly influential in affecting how we think about planning and what we include in such thinking. There are, as well, post-structuralist-inspired theories or, at least, theories that fit within the cannon of post-structuralist thought (see Chapter 10). Such theories help us understand the nature of space (e.g. relational theory) as well as attempt to explain how the puzzle of how seemingly more open and transparent planning has been accompanied by more disillusionment and discontent (post-political theory). There are also self-proclaimed theories that fall within a broad, post-structuralist understanding though are not actually theories, such as Actor–Network Theory, a point accepted by one of its main proponents, Bruno Latour (2005).

What marks this particular book out is that it is written for those wishing to better understand this fuzzy thing called planning theory (whether it succeeds in that aim is another matter entirely) by engaging with a broad interpretation of the notion of theory. I wrote the first edition back in 2002 for students of my planning theory course with just such a purpose in mind. Since then things have become less, not more, clear and the justification for this approach has been reinforced.

In the rest of this chapter I take up some of these themes and issues about the nature of theory, both at a general level and between the natural and social sciences. I distinguish between different kinds of theory before turning to the idea of theory as discourse, that is, that truth and theory are socially produced. Such a view highlights how we choose a theory amongst many competing approaches to suit the circumstances and our values.
In a field such as planning with its significant scope for discretion and choice this is an important perspective.

**The nature of theory**

Before we embark on any exploration of theory it is necessary to define what we mean. The word ‘theory’ is used widely and can cover a variety of meanings depending on the context or use. For example, it can be used in a pejorative way to dismiss something as being impractical or unrelated to reality, as in ‘this is all too theoretical’. At the other extreme it can be used in a more positive way to criticize a piecemeal or knee-jerk reaction as in ‘this has no theoretical grounding’. Beyond its rhetorical use the word can also be used to cover a wide range of ideas or propositions, from Einstein’s theory of relativity to the theory that the relationship between birth and the relative position of the stars will influence daily experiences. The notion of theory then is a diffuse phenomenon. Regardless of problems with use and definition there are some general ideas of what is meant:

- Theory is an *explanatory* supposition which can be defined broadly or narrowly. (McConnell, 1981, p. 20)

- "A theory is not a theory at all, until it has been used in practice over a considerable period of time." (Reade, 1987, p. 156)

- The main concern of social theory is the same as that of the social sciences in general: the illumination of concrete processes of human life. (Giddens, 1984, p. xvii)

In addition, theory is normally required to include some element of prediction or prescription so as to guide action. Accordingly, theory could be seen as having a number of elements; *it abstracts a set of general or specific principles to be used as a basis for explaining and acting, with the theory being tested and refined if necessary.*

While this definition would seem broadly uncontentious, I would argue that it does not take us as far as we need to go. For a start, under this definition theory could cover a multitude of situations; for example, it does not tell us what distinguishes theory from conjecture or from ideas. Neither does it distinguish between the different uses and levels of theory;
for example, can all theories be used in different situations? This is particularly important in planning where it has long been argued that there are theories of planning (why it exists and what it does) and theories in planning (how to go about it). Second, the definition ignores the context of theory, particularly the social construction of knowledge. The idea that theories or ideas are ‘objective’ or privileged views upon ‘reality’ has been queried and rejected by philosophers for centuries. This is something that we will come to later but suffice to say here that theories can be regarded as part of a discourse formation: words, statements, symbols, similes, etc. that all mean different things in different contexts and are dependent upon their context and wider understanding. Words are contentious and ambiguous, and interpretations of meaning will inevitably vary. This has important implications for the formation, interpretation and evaluation of theory in different places. Finally, and linked in some ways to the last point, theory in the social sciences is not immune from the influence of power and its wider social context, that is, there are political and temporal elements to theories. Some theories have been advanced to protect or further expand the influence of powerful interests. Systems theory, for example (covered in Chapter 3), is not just a way of thinking about how cities ‘work’. It also has significant implications for the ways in which planning should be undertaken that empowers certain groups (planners) over others. This points to a need to examine the disciplinary and historically variable relations of power and its influence upon theories.

What we need, therefore, is an approach to theory that goes beyond broad definitions and addresses the points above.

The differences between the natural and social sciences

The first distinction that is usually made in theory is between the natural and social sciences. This may seem like an obvious difference to some but there is a strong tradition that argues that social science theory should follow the same apparently logical positivist approach as the natural sciences in trying to uncover general deductible laws and truths. In 1996 the journal Social Text published an article by the physicist Alan Sokal entitled ‘Transgressing the Boundaries – Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity’, which reflected upon recent developments in physics from the standpoint of postmodern cultural theory. The article was a hoax that aimed to expose what Sokal and others saw as the nonsense
paraded by cultural theorists (some of which we cover later on in this book). The point of the article was to expose some of the differences between the understandings and methodologies of the natural and social sciences by satirizing them. As Weinberg pointed out in a response to Sokal’s ‘paper’:

There are those ‘postmoderns’ in the humanities who like to surf through avant garde fields like quantum mechanics or chaos theory to dress up their own arguments about the fragmentary and random nature of experience. There are those sociologists, historians, and philosophers who see the laws of nature as social constructions. There are cultural critics who find the taint of sexism, racism, colonialism, militarism, or capitalism not only in the practice of scientific research but even in its conclusions. (Weinberg, 1996, p. 110)

The gap between the natural and social sciences is as broad as ever. While Weinberg and others attack the relativism of some social science, social scientists respond with criticisms of the reductionism of natural scientists. The problem, as with many of these ‘debates’, is that both sides were talking past each other. The realms of quantum physics and postmodern philosophy have little to say or contribute to each other. However, these are extremes. In planning, we deal with both social and natural sciences. The justification for many early planning controls was the relationship between physical conditions (e.g. slum housing) and its social implications (e.g. ill health).

Early sociologists such as Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber attempted to put studies of society on a more ‘scientific’ footing. However, it was the logical positivists typified by the ‘Vienna Circle’ who argued that if something was not observable then it was not verifiable and if it was not verifiable then it was metaphysical and meaningless. While logical positivism as an approach has been largely abandoned it continues to have an influence upon social sciences through the focus upon empiricism. The idea of both science and social science being linked by a search for general laws and causal explanations has in some ways made social science appear inferior by comparison. For example, there is no equivalent in the social sciences of a law explaining and predicting the influence of gravity. While there are still proponents of naturalism (the view that, with adaptation, the methodologies of the natural sciences are appropriate for the social sciences), the majority view is that society cannot be explained in the same way in which we can explain the workings of gravity; it can only be provisionally understood. The social sciences are
also dominated by what appear to be numerous conflicting theories based on fundamentally different views of the world, for example Marxism and liberalism. Giddens (1984) argues there will never be any universal laws in social science because of difficulties with empirical testing and validation. One problem is separating theory from the society that is being conceptualized or theorized. Society has a habit of shifting values, meaning and actions. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to test an idea or theory of society that has been taken up by society, thereby shifting the original grounds upon which it could be tested. Another issue concerns the extent to which our worldview shapes what we see: observing and measuring various dimensions of class, for example, requires us to believe that such a phenomenon exists even though this is disputed. Measuring class presupposes that we believe it exists, which is itself a political position. There is an issue, therefore, of context and distance. The social sciences can never fully divorce themselves from the subject that is being studied. Ideas that seem radical and new at one time can be now accepted as being ordinary and familiar. Social theory, therefore, not only reflects upon society but can also shape it in a way that natural sciences cannot. This is sometimes referred to as the difference between an ‘open’ system (e.g. society) and a ‘closed’ system (e.g. natural laws such as gravity). But this is not to elevate the natural sciences to a superior position where science holds a monopoly on truth or reason. It is to say, however, that science and social science study different manifestations of reality in different ways. Nor is it to say that there are not issues with scientific theory and methodology.

In the eighteenth century, the Scottish philosopher David Hume examined the inductive basis of science. Induction is an approach that examines the available evidence and uses it as a basis for formulating laws and theories. For example, if I observe 500 white swans I could conclude, on the basis of induction, that the next swan I see will be white. However, the 501st swan may well be black, thereby undermining my prediction. Induction uses past information as a basis for the future and is the basis of most scientific research. Generalizations or theories based on inductive reasoning go beyond what is known and observable and as such can never be ‘true’, or even probably true, and therefore much of science is based on conjecture. This situation has come to be known as ‘Hume’s puzzle’. Hume and his eighteenth-century colleagues did not consider this situation was anything more than an interesting philosophical point. After all, they were living in an age where Newton’s newly
discovered laws of motion had opened up much of the natural world to human study and control and were themselves based on the inductive approach. These laws ‘worked’, so why question the approach used to generate them?

Actually, they did not work in all situations. Following the discovery of quantum mechanics, Einstein’s theory of relativity and the newly emerging sciences of chaos and complexity, Newton’s laws were shown to be wrong in some circumstances. While for everyday purposes the differences between the theories of Newton and Einstein are irrelevant (Newton’s laws were good enough to take man to the moon and back) they have been jumped upon by some social scientists as proof that the natural sciences seek to grasp an objective reality that simply does not exist. This led Karl Popper and others to conclude that no part of scientific reasoning is above question, particularly if based on inductivism. Instead of induction Popper developed an account of science based on fallibility. Popper believed that there was no need for induction beyond the basic human search for patterns and regularities. But as long as we are aware that patterns and regularities can be wrong then the puzzle holds no problems. Good conjectures or theories should therefore be outlandish and provocative in order to test and falsify current theories. Falsification rejects the idea that theories are true and instead sees them as speculative or provisional truths that stand for as long as they are not disproven. Using the swan example again, a fallible approach would be to devise a hypothesis ‘all swans are white’. That hypothesis would be tested through observation and would remain a ‘provisional truth’ until disproven. Using this approach human knowledge could progress through a series of ever more falsifiable and accurate theories that can never be proven.

Popper’s ideas have been extremely influential, though they have not been without their own critics. One of the main problems with falsification (as with logical positivism) is observation. According to falsificationists, theory rejection is based on observation. So if observation refutes a theory then the theory should fall. But, as many writers including Popper himself have realized, observation statements are themselves fallible. Take a look at Figure 1.1 Do you see a staircase from beneath or from above? It may not be a theory that is wrong, it may be the observation. In modern physics much experimentation at the sub-atomic level can only be achieved through the medium of instruments, making observation itself subject to the accuracy of human-made forms of measurement. Consequently,
according to this view theories cannot be conclusively falsified because the observation statements that form the basis for falsification may themselves prove to be false (Couvalis, 1997, p. 63).

A further problem has been explored by Imre Lakatos who argues that a theory should not be refuted simply because it is counterintuitive or falsified. Many theories, as pointed out earlier, are a product of their time. Both Copernicus and Newton battled to have their theories accepted, as they were radical departures from contemporary thinking. The problem, according to Lakatos, is that science will never abandon a theory unless there is a better one to replace it. So, falsification is not enough. Refutation on its own appears to leave a vacuum, whereas scientists will actually continue to use a theory even if it has been falsified until a better explanation emerges.

This is an idea that has been most famously associated with Thomas Kuhn (1970). Rather than the logical and abstract falsification view of Popper, which saw science as a cumulative growth of knowledge, Kuhn argued that science proceeds on the basis of revolution. Science works with paradigms or views of reality that encapsulate current knowledge of
a subject. Once established a paradigm begins to be challenged when researchers probe its limits. Problems then emerge that cannot be explained by the paradigm and cannot be resolved until a new paradigm emerges and the old one is abandoned. Different paradigms will have very different worldviews, often making them incomparable. A classic example used by Kuhn to illustrate this concerns what is generally termed the ‘Copernican Revolution’.

The idea that the earth is at the centre of the universe had first been advanced by Aristotle in the fourth century BC. This idea dominated science and was reinforced by Christian doctrine. However, in the sixteenth century the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus developed a heliocentric (sun-centred) theory that addressed some of the less convincing aspects of the geocentric (earth-centred) approach. The problem was that Copernicus could not prove some aspects of his theory and it did not gain much support from the scientific community, who were still locked in the geocentric paradigm. For over 100 years the ideas of Copernicus remained a minority paradigm. It took the Italian physicist and astronomer Galileo to confirm the Copernican theories through observation. Galileo observed that the motions of planets and stars changed in the ways predicted by Copernicus. The scientific establishment were unconvinced and still wedded to the Aristotelian geocentric view. A more serious challenge was to come when Galileo’s ideas were denounced as heretical and he was forced to renounce his theories. The heliocentric view could not be reconciled with the Bible and therefore it was wrong (this decision was reversed by the Pope in 1992). Galileo’s ideas were to influence Isaac Newton and others, though it was not until the late seventeenth century that the heliocentric view of the universe was broadly accepted by science – over 200 years since Copernicus first advanced it.

Kuhn uses the Copernican example as an illustration of the ways scientific paradigms work. The geocentric and heliocentric views of the universe belonged to different worldviews – recourse to ‘evidence’ made little difference. Again, Kuhn’s ideas have been highly influential not only in terms of the explanation but also in terms of the criticisms and avenues he has opened up. There is still a widespread assumption that the scientific community in general and scientists as individuals are rational beings, that is, that they will act in a way that will reject or choose theories on the basis of evidence. As a result of Kuhn’s revolutionary view of scientific progress attention turned to the subjective or normative aspects of science. This focus on the subjective has been termed the relative view of science:
Since for the relativist, the criteria for judging the merits of theories will depend on the values and interests of the individual or community entertaining them, the distinction between science and non-science will vary accordingly. (Chalmers, 1994, p. 103)

Such relativism allows for different theories to exist side by side, each claiming with equal validity that their view is just as correct or legitimate as the next. This is not only true of, for example, Marxist versus liberal views, but also of the dominance of science against other areas of knowledge. Central to this relativist view of science is Paul Feyerabend (1961, 1978, 1981, 1988). Much of Feyerabend’s writings are motivated by a concern with freedom and in particular the need to question the dominant role given to science and the way in which it is perceived and presented:

Thus, while an American can now choose the religion he likes, he is still not permitted to demand that his children learn magic rather than science at school. There is a separation between state and church, there is no separation between state and science. (1988, p. 299)

The ongoing debate between evolution and creationism in the USA is a similar situation of competing worldviews that both appeal to different legitimacies. In planning, such relativism is characteristic of post-modernism and postmodern planning (see Chapter 8), though advocacy (Chapter 7) also argues for a plethora of plans based around multiple and competing viewpoints. In a similar vein, others have also focused attention on Kuhn’s questioning of the objective nature of scientists themselves. As Couvalis (1997) points out, scientists often appear to have been influenced by external factors that have nothing to do with evidence and more to do with whether a theory should bolster a particular social group to which they belong. Barnes and Bloor (1982), for example, claim that scientists always accept theories partly because of factors other than purely scientific ones. They identify what they term a ‘strong programme’ that, rather like Kuhn’s paradigm, dominates thinking, methodology, interpretation and results. So, for example, students who want to pass exams regurgitate the strong programme and, as science has been given a dominant position in society, the public accept a ‘strong programme’ as ‘truth’. Barnes and Bloor do not claim that a ‘strong programme’ is always wrong, but that it can be wrong. Scientists, researchers, students and society come to accept it as a ‘truth’ or dominant discourse regardless of its validity.
Others, such as Longino (1990), have also persuasively argued that the ways in which data are formulated and interpreted are also affected by social values. Any number of theories can be logically consistent with the same data. So if one theory is chosen over another there must be a reason for this that has less to do with objective science and more to do with social factors. While there is a great deal written on this topic (see, for example, chapters 1 and 2 of Flyvbjerg, 2001 for a good discussion) there is a final and increasingly influential contribution to this debate that is worth including. Three sociologists, Bruno Latour, Michel Callon and John Law initiated what is known as Actor–Network Theory (ANT) as an approach to understanding the relations between science and society. We will return to ANT when we discuss post-structuralism in Chapters 8, 9 and 10. Here I want to explore some elements of ANT thinking in relation to the traditional distinction between the notions of theory and knowledge in the natural and social sciences. ANT’s origins are to be found in the relationship with the laboratory (science) and the external world, a relationship opened up by Kuhn. Rather than a focus upon relativism ANT emphasizes and explores the reliance and co-dependence of science and society. Building upon the work of Kuhn and Foucault’s approach to power and knowledge ANT argues that science is not ‘out there’, separate from society but is, instead, thoroughly political. Such a view rejects the distinction between nature and society, a distinction that is premised upon knowledge providing a mirror on ‘nature’ for ‘society’:

Knowledge was an entity, to be held and used. It was produced by experts in distinct institutions through processes that ensured objectivity. (Rydin, 2007, p. 52)

Latour and others challenged this understanding, seeing knowledge not as an object but as embedded in sets of social relations:

The breakdown of this consensus [of the distinction between nature and society] involved recognising that knowledge is constructed through social processes and that institutions that generate knowledge will not necessarily ensure neutrality. (Rydin, 2007, p. 52)

Latour’s exploration of Louis Pasteur’s successful search for a treatment for anthrax in nineteenth-century France is held up as an example of how the power and influence of science requires networks and allies beyond the laboratory (Latour, 1987). Latour begins his analysis by asking how Pasteur became such a great and influential scientist. The answer,
according to Latour, is through the creation of a network of actors and resources that spanned scientific and non-scientific locations, persuading and corolling different actors necessary for the successful roll-out of a widespread vaccination programme. The distinction between the laboratory and wider society was deliberately blurred by Pasteur through the relocation of the laboratory to a farm and the extension of laboratory techniques to farming, e.g. disinfection, record keeping, etc., to the point where ‘no one can say where the laboratory is and where society is’ (Latour, 1987, p. 154). Once established and successful Pasteur extended this approach, transforming farming practices across France and changing society. Latour’s analysis points to the importance of actors and networks in the consensus building and stabilizing process of scientific influence. As well as the focus upon the importance of actors and networks Latour also criticizes the implications of such an analysis upon traditional dualisms such as the distinction between society, structure and agency. Broadly speaking (and I return to this point later in this chapter) Latour and others have questioned notions of the social that exclude or downplay non-human elements such as CO₂, water or the ozone layer. The argument is that such phenomena are not ‘non-social’ but actively help create the social through their influence upon society: we should not distinguish or separate an ‘active social world’ from a ‘passive natural-material world’ of things, objects and artefacts. Latour’s analysis highlighted how the anthrax bacteria was far from separate from the social but actively shaped it through the changes required to eradicate it as pursued by Pasteur.

The impact of ANT has been far reaching and goes far beyond the relationships between science and society. However, the point here concerns how science colonizes sites beyond the laboratory, creating networks of actors (human and, controversially, non-human) and flows of ‘power’ back to the scientist and science (to return to Latour’s original question of how Pasteur became such an influential scientist). Although many of these relativist and social constructivist views of science have been questioned and are by no means uncritically accepted they are important in understanding planning theory generally and much of the current writing on the subject. The main points to highlight are that, first, the natural sciences are not necessarily superior to the social sciences in terms of knowledge accumulation. This is not to say that a broad social constructivist view changes the nature of things themselves. The impact of gravity does not vary depending upon your culture, for example, nor does whether we call
Pluto a planet or dwarf planet change the nature of that mass in an elliptical orbit around the sun. Rather than being anti-scientific, such views emphasize and highlight the social dimension of theories and methodologies and how knowledge is closely related to power. Going back to the Pluto issue one can see that the heated debate on its classification within astronomy had real implications if funding for research was available to scientists to study planets rather than dwarf planets. This is turn could in turn affect discoveries and the nature of knowledge itself.

Second, the critique of natural science is equally applicable to the social sciences and helps us understand why we find a multitude of competing theories and views of planning. In particular, it has relevance to the grey areas between the two and, specifically, for fields such as planning, which draw upon approaches and knowledge claims from both the natural and social sciences. The direct relevance for such views is clear if one thinks of planners (as many themselves do) as ‘experts’ in a particular field or, as John Law has put it, as ‘heterogenous engineers’ (Law, 1987) who attempt to bring together actors and elements regularly confined to different fields, e.g. ‘the technical’, ‘the social’, ‘the natural’, ‘the economic’ and ‘the political’, assembling relations and defining what are and are not political issues by deciding what constitutes questions of technical skill (see Metzger et al., 2014, pp. 16–18). For Rydin, ANT raises fundamental questions of who decides what counts as knowledge in planning. Rather than knowledge in the singular, planning is replete with multiple knowledges representing multiple realities. There is no recourse to facts to reveal an objective truth. Instead one needs to ask why is some knowledge privileged over others and who decides what counts as knowledge?

Finally, the relationship between power and knowledge as exercised through discursive practices is a key theme of planning theory and understanding. Foucault’s approach to power as a normalizing force that works through discourses and practices framing the everyday experiences of people has helped focus attention in planning upon the assemblages of power in the forms of knowledge and space (see Chapters 8, 9 and 10).

Unpacking ‘theory’

After identifying and questioning the distinction between theory in the social and natural sciences, as well as problematizing the idea of theory in both, we can now turn to some other questions set out earlier: for
example, are all theories the same? Judge, Stoker and Wolman (1995) provide a useful starting point and identify six broad categories in the assessment of different kinds of theory (Table 1.1 and below).

**Normative theory** says how the world ought to be and provides ideas about how to achieve this state. Traditionally, these ideas could be regarded as theories of planning and could, for example, include Marxist, liberal and communicative or collaborative planning approaches.

**Prescriptive theories** concern themselves with how to go about things, or the means. Traditionally, this has been termed theories in planning and includes, for example, cost–benefit analysis, mixed scanning, etc..

**Empirical theory** explains and interprets reality and focuses on causal relationships and dependent and independent variables. Hypotheses form part of empirical theory that allow it to be tested and adjusted. Examples could include theories concerning the impact of out-of-town retail upon town centres.

**Models** are more simple representations and pictures of reality that do not always include hypotheses but are still testable.

**Conceptual frameworks or perspectives** are really a linguistic analysis of situations and ideas leading to perspectives and critiques that might otherwise be lost. Some Marxist perspectives can be seen to fall into this category (though into others too) and can lead to a perspective on, for example, class or freedom that questions assumptions, practices and theories.

**Theorizing** generally is a catch-all category that covers thinking and debating ideas and other theories to ascertain their suitability and applicability.

These six categories provide a useful way in, going beyond the general idea of theories described at the beginning of this chapter. We can see how theories are not homogeneous, that they perform different roles and come in different shapes and sizes. However, this categorization still raises a number of questions. First, as social constructivists would point out, to what extent are all theories normative, for example in undertaking empirical work (e.g. looking for evidence to confirm or refute a theory) can you escape a particular view of the world in choosing what to study and how to study it? Similarly, in putting together a prescriptive theory you will be
choosing what to include and exclude. Many prescriptive theories implicitly include normative elements, for example reducing inflation through controlling the money supply or punishing crime by locking criminals up. All include some a priori assumptions and prescriptions about how the world operates or should be. This builds on the work of Kuhn, etc., above – we are ‘programmed’ to see things in certain ways in both the natural and social sciences. Thus, whether we consider al-Qaeda to be terrorists or freedom fighters points to a socially constructed framework or paradigm with which we view the world. This adds a further dimension to our idea of theory – to what extent is science a random trawl or a deliberate process in which the scientist sets out to find data to confirm or refute expectations?

At the very least, the boundaries between different kinds of theory are not black and white. At worst, and this is what I argue, *all theory is to greater and lesser degrees normative*. Ernest Alexander (2003) comes to a similar conclusion when he rejects the possibility of a ‘general theory’ of planning:

I have gone so far as to assert that, for any practical purposes, there is no ‘planning’. Rather, there is a diversity of practices in planning (as there is everywhere), and different kinds of planners in different contexts should (and do) enact different models or theories of planning. (Alexander, 2003, p. 181)
Highlighting the normative dimension of theories is not a particularly new position, as I have outlined above, but it is one that has been traditionally more implicit than explicit. This perspective does not undermine the concept and usefulness of theory or the use of any specific research technique. What it does do is point to a more political and contestable approach to theory. This brings us to the view of theory as discourse.

Theory as discourse

At the heart of this understanding of theory as being socially constructed is the relationship between power and discourse (see the brief discussion on Actor–Network Theory above). Such an approach rejects the idea that there is such a thing as ‘truth’ as an absolute or objective concept. If social science theory is a search for understanding rather than explanation and prediction then we must accept the normative element of methodology. This relates to fundamental debates in philosophy that need not concern us here. What writers such as Hume, Hegel and Nietzsche advance to greater and lesser degrees and with different emphases is the idea of truth as a relative concept, that is, the idea that truth varies from context to context, relative to language and culture. Central to this is the widely held view that rationality and science have hijacked and dominated the idea of truth in an absolute or objective sense since the Enlightenment. Modern philosophy is sceptical of such views and critical of the implications. For example, Lyotard questions the whole Enlightenment basis of objective scientific knowledge:

Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of these prove to be fables. But to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game. It then produces a discourse or legitimation with respect to its own status. (1984, p. xxiii)

In Lyotard’s relativistic view, science has no more claim to objective knowledge than what he terms ‘narratives’ or stories. Instead, science is itself based on higher-level narratives or ‘meta-narratives’ that involve values and assumptions. We can see this through the ways in which there has developed a symbiotic relationship between science and the state. For example, scientific progress is often seen as a necessary and crucial part of the drive for industrial and commercial growth. However, Marxists, for example, would argue that science ultimately serves, or ought to serve, the
What is Theory?

lperation of humanity from exploitation. Others would ascribe a different ultimate goal for science: ‘many supposedly objective aspirations to science inevitably tend to be framed by some kind of metanarrative involving distinctly value laden notions of social progress and human emancipation’ (McLennan, 1992, p. 332). According to this view the ability of science to ‘uncover’ the truth was dealt a severe blow with the discovery of relativity and quantum mechanics, which imply that science can at best approximate rather than pinpoint. Scientists strongly reject this argument and invite those who think that they can defy the laws of gravity to do so. This postmodern view of rationality and truth poses a number of questions for ‘facts’ and processes as well as any approach to objective and absolute ideas of right and wrong. Under this view truth is socially produced: ‘Truth is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements’ (Fontana and Pasquino, 1991, quoted in Richardson, 1996, p. 282). One example has been explored by Michel Foucault and concerns the treatment of madness throughout history. The contemporary theory that we should exclude the mad from society is a relatively recent phenomenon. According to Foucault, the treatment of mental illness in the West is a particularly cultural condition in contrast to many primitive societies where the mad are often the centre of religious or other social activities: ‘Such a comparative, historical approach highlights both that madness has no pre-social essence and also that there is nothing natural or inevitable about the strategies through which, in modern society, the mad are confined or socially excluded’ (McNay, 1994, p. 17). Therefore, the answer to the question of ‘What is mad?’, as well as the theory of treating the mad through excluding them from society, is built not upon some scientific or objective truth but upon changing social attitudes. Such attitudes act in a similar way to Kuhn’s paradigms or what are also termed discourses. The concept of discourse is notoriously difficult to pin down, though van Dijk (1997) identifies three main dimensions: discourse as language use, as the communication of beliefs (cognition) and interaction in social situations. Insofar as it is possible to separate these aspects we are mainly concerned here with the second area, namely discourse as cognition, in both written and verbal communication. Through the choice of words, style, nuance, emphasis, inflection, etc., users of language express opinions and ideologies. Written and spoken language is consequently an inherently political act based on a unique individual interpretation of a situation and a socially shared stock of meaning. This social stock of
meaning is itself founded on the premise that ideas or theories are generated by the social forces dominant in and characteristic of their age. They are a framework that provides a system of meaning, which in turn influences the way people understand their role in society and how they act. It should be clear how the idea of discourse relates to and helps ‘flesh out’ the social nature of theories discussed earlier through helping identify the inputs of society and mechanisms such as language.

Discourses are historically contingent and politically constructed, as we saw in Foucault’s example of the treatment of madness. The contemporary social perspective on madness created ‘knowledge’ of the mad as being different from other people and a threat that should be excluded from society. But this knowledge was politically produced, that is, there were different perspectives on madness that were possible, as Foucault demonstrated, but this particular one became dominant. Foucault argues that confinement was presented as being benevolent. However, he goes on to claim that it was actually a way of discouraging idleness and sloth in society where cheap labour was necessary. In recent years we can see that confining the mad is far less prevalent in many places where community-based care is now the current approach.

To take an example from planning, we can see ideas such as green belts as discourses. Green belts emerged to tackle perceived problems of urban growth and are used, with different labels, throughout the world. One hundred years ago people would not have known what a green belt was (or would have thought it was literally a belt that was green, perhaps), though now they are one of the most well-known aspects of planning practice. This is not to say that they are uncontroversial or have not developed, but green belts have become a symbol of planning and carry meanings and significance. For some they represent a desirable attempt to limit urban sprawl, for others they are the basis for ensuring cities are sustainable and for others still they are a reflection of middle-class Nimbyism (‘Nimby’ standing for Not In My Back Yard). And yet they only exist as social constructions to represent a vision or idea that cities should not grow indefinitely and carry with them enough of a common vision that people know that they exist. Some have tried to explore the implications of green belts upon a range of factors, to appeal to evidence and study the implications. Evans and Hartwich (2006), for example, highlight the detrimental impact green belts have had on land and house prices, travel to work times, carbon emissions and access to recreational facilities. Yet despite this ‘evidence’ successive governments remains as committed as
ever to them. Why is this? The main reason is that the data and evidence
selected by Evans and Hartwich (and others who have criticized green
belts) has been chosen and used to fit a position that is critical of planning
regulations per se. Other organizations, such as the Campaign to Protect
Rural England (CPRE) (2006) choose very different evidence or use simi-
lar evidence in different ways to argue for the ‘success’ of green belts.
Again, their position helps define what evidence and theories are used to
support it. Without a hint of irony (and providing a good example of how
heated such debates can get on planning matters), the CPRE respond to
Evans and Hartwich’s position:

Several of the claims made in them are mere assertions. A few can only be
described as bizarre. But CPRE has also uncovered misuse of statistics to make
a false comparison between the UK’s housing and cities and those of other
European nations. A few politicians and commentators appear to have swal-
lowed this nonsense whole. In this rebuttal we expose the confusions, the
lack of evidence and the dodgy statistics underlying the Policy Exchange’s
ill-conceived attack on planning, housing and the environmental movement.
(Campaign to Protect Rural England, 2006, p. 2)

There is no appeal to objective evidence in the same way that exists in the
natural sciences. So the discourse of green belts includes certain ideas
and elements that are commonly understood but are also very personal:
restraining urban growth, protecting the countryside, etc.. The combina-
tion of social and personal interpretation allows them to be described
both positively and negatively, depending on a point of view. And in
expressing that view (or ideology) a person is constructing or changing
the discourse of green belts.

The term ‘green belt’ is highly evocative and conjures up images that
people will understand and in doing so includes certain ideas and excludes
others. The discourse of green belts ‘makes sense’ of the term, though
it is changeable and socially constructed. Green belts become a ‘norm’
and such norms represent truth and knowledge in modern society. But
what are the influences upon norms, knowledge, truth and discourse?
According to this analysis, power is posited as the influence. Traditionally,
power was exercised visibly in society, for example the authority of
the king being exercised through public executions. In modern societies,
however, power is far more hidden and surreptitious. For example, Michel
Foucault rejects the idea that power is unidirectional (i.e. the orthodox
Marxist view of class and economic power being dominant), but instead
argues that power is found at all levels of society and social existence. It is invisible and ‘flows’ through the complex web of networks that make up modern life. His argument is that centralized power (e.g. absolute monarchies) are no longer necessary to maintain discipline as modern power is insidiously disciplinary. This form of discipline overcame a central weakness of centralized power whose effects were uneven and dysfunctional. Changes to a more democratic system of government did not therefore aim to create a more equitable system but ‘to set up a new economy of power which was better distributed, more efficient and less costly in both economic and political terms’ (McNay, 1994, p. 92). Instead of centralized power, we now have ‘social control ... produced by a complex network of rules, regulations, administrative monitoring and the management and direction of people’s daily lives’ (Painter, 1995, p. 9).

Monitoring and regulating these internalized rules of behaviour are various ‘judges of normality’ such as doctors, social workers, teachers and planners. Power is consequently disciplinary and such discipline is crucial to the growth of capital and the search for new forms of accumulation. In this sense Foucault’s analysis has some strong parallels with Marxist and Weberian approaches.

Here, then, we can see the link between disciplinary power, ‘judges of normality’ and discourse. It is the judges of normality who generate discourses such as green belts and regulate them. Here also we can begin to see wider arguments concerning knowledge, power and truth. We should not be asking whether an argument or theory is true, but instead ‘ask how, why and by who, truth is attributed to particular arguments and not to others’ (Richardson, 1996, p. 283). Power is legitimized in the name of scientific ‘truth’, which is valued above other forms of knowledge because the discourse around science has granted it a valuable status. Because of this, society has a ‘will to truth’, valuing scientific truth, which masks power: ‘A vast range of social practices, such as economies or punishment, seek to justify themselves by reference to a true discourse, yet should be subject to a politically motivated critique’ (Simons, 1994, p. 43). We could, therefore, conclude that the thrust of the argument so far in this chapter is that theory can be seen as discourse and could be argued to be a mask for power and politics. The recognition of theory being another discourse used and open to abuse by powerful policy analysts has been investigated by Richardson: ‘theoretical perspectives are called upon in a selective and arbitrary way, to suit a given situation. Clearly this tendency bestows significant power in the policy analyst, who informs the selection
of perspectives, theories and ultimately methods’ (1996, p. 286). For ‘policy analyst’ we could insert ‘planner’. The use of theory as discourse by planning practitioners has been explored by Grant (1994, p. 74) who confirms the political and power-laden nature of theory, as well questioning its empirical basis: ‘People promote theories that fit their normative perspectives. Theories that become part of popular culture meet community needs and expectations.’

We can see, therefore, that there are two major inputs into theory: normative elements (societal and individual) and discursive elements, both of which are influenced by power. In planning there are a variety of influences upon both normative and discursive aspects of theory formation, but one that we will focus on in particular is the role of what Foucault termed ‘agents of norms’, or planners themselves, and their relative autonomy in society.

Theory, structure and agency

To better understand the role of ‘agents of norms’ we need to appreciate the influence upon such actors. Many ideas and theories contain implicit notions of the relationship between structure and agency that reflect deeper understandings about the relative autonomy of actors and agents in the settings in which they find themselves (Hay, 1995). We discussed the idea of planners as ‘agents of norms’ above, which implied an autonomous role for them. But there has been a prolonged debate in the social sciences about the extent of this autonomy: what influences come to bear on them? The main question that we should concern ourselves with is: to what extent are individuals (agents) autonomous in their thoughts and actions and how much does society (structure) influence them? In planning terms, we could ask whether a plan was a reflection of the local desires and needs of an area or whether it was directed far more by the influence of central government or powerful economic forces. In planning theory, the relationship between structure and agency is equally important for a number of reasons. First, the use of theory by planners may be limited by the influences of structures. In other words the wish to pursue a particular line or theory of planning is contingent upon the broader, societal context including legal frameworks, finance and culture. Second, some theories ignore this relationship, particularly theories in planning (i.e. how to go about planning) and thereby limit their usefulness. An understanding of the two is essential for an appreciation of the use and limits of theory.
The social sciences have witnessed two broad approaches to this relationship: structuralism and intentionalism. Structuralism is often associated with Marxism and emphasizes the role of structure (e.g. the capitalist mode of production) in dictating and shaping actions and events (Hay, 1995, p. 194). As such, structuralism has been heavily criticized for ignoring the role and influence of actors and portraying them as automatons. An alternative approach, termed ‘intentionalism’ takes the polar extreme in focusing on individual action and the micro-politics of interaction and underpins approaches such as Public Choice Theory (see Chapter 5). Criticism of intentionalism has been levelled at the sometimes ‘illogical’ nature of human behaviour and the importance of unintended consequences of action. There have been a number of attempts to fuse structuralism and intentionalism and overcome the apparent dualism. The most influential of these attempts has been advanced by Anthony Giddens through what he terms structuration. Structuration replaces this dualism with a duality; for example, instead of two coins, structuralism and intentionalism, Giddens sees them as two sides of the same coin. It attempts to switch attention to the interrelationship between structure and agency and:

1. to recognize the duality of structure: that is, the manner in which structures enable behaviour, but behaviour can potentially influence and reconstitute structure; and
2. to recognize the duality of structure and agency: that is, to transcend the dualism of deterministic (structuralist) views of structure and voluntaristic (intentionalist) views of agency. (Cloke, Philo and Sadler, 1991, p. 98)

There is then mutual dependence and clear link between structure and agency: ‘social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution’ (Giddens, 1976, p. 121). Both structure and agency are important – people make structures and structures influence people. Another broadly similar attempt that seeks to fuse structure and agency is the critical realism of Bhaskar (1979, 1998) and the strategic relational approach of Jessop (1990). As Hay (1995) points out, Jessop’s approach takes a more structuralist starting point, claiming that there are layers of structure that influence agents and limit the range of options that are open to them. Jessop (1990) also adds a strategically selective element that implies that political and
economic structures of the state, such as capitalism, are more open to certain strategies of agents than others.

While Giddens, Bhaskar and Jessop all place different emphases on the fusion of structure and agency, the general conclusions we can draw from their work is of action producing:

1. *Direct effects* upon structural contexts within which it takes place and within which future action occurs – producing a partial transformation of the structural context (though not necessarily as anticipated).
2. *Strategic learning* on the part of actors involved, enhancing awareness of structures and the constraints/opportunities they impose, providing the basis from which subsequent strategy might be formulated and perhaps prove more successful. (Hay, 1995, p. 201)

Other perspectives, particularly those aligned around Actor–Network Theory, highlight the importance of social relations and power as the main constituency of agency while also controversially adding a further dimension of non-human actors (e.g. machines, animals). Actants is the term ANT uses to denote human and non-human actors. In the example of Pasteur, above, the bacteria had an influence upon society in a way similar to that of a human actor. One of the main foundations of ANT is its anti-foundationalism – that we should not assume an a priori significance of different elements in any network, including non-human components. Such a perspective reflects the post-structuralist (see Chapter 10) rejection of a distinction between structure and agency. According to this position structures are indistinguishable from the actions within them. This doesn’t help us a great deal, particularly as communicative planning theory (see Chapter 11), which, as Watson (2008) points out, is the dominant paradigm in planning theory, is explicitly based upon the notion of structure and agency. These theories have two uses for our understanding of planning theory. First, the relationship between structure and agency potentially helps us understand the relationship between theory and practice in planning. As I discuss further on in this chapter, there is a long-standing debate in planning concerning the relationship between theory and practice and how the two influence each other. Academics claim that practitioners ignore theory, while practitioners claim academics are divorced from reality. Yet both clearly influence each other. Planners do not turn up to work each day without any knowledge or preconceived...
ideas. A critical realist approach as set out above potentially helps us understand this relationship. If we associate theory with structure and practice with agency we can draw parallels between the ways in which theory is formed in a complex symbiotic relationship. In some ways it backs up the discursive arguments earlier but adds an important dimension of existing structures (theories) being more influential than pure agency. The implications of this are that agents (e.g. planners) create and interpret theories in the light and knowledge of existing theories. Thus, in trying to tackle issues of homelessness the planner might have in mind neoliberal theories on the supply and demand of housing as well as Marxist theories on surplus labour (these theories are both covered in more detail later in this book). Neither may be directly applicable to the situation in a certain place but they may help direct or formulate thinking along a particular path.

Second, the critical realist perspective also helps us comprehend the relative autonomy of individual planners and the way they use, interpret and develop theory for their jobs. Planners do not operate in a vacuum devoid of structural influences. There are rules, existing processes and norms, for example, that limit what they can do. When planners say they are acting in a ‘professional’ way, that implies they are in some way detached from other influences and they are, perhaps, underestimating the pervasive influence of society upon them. What planner could honestly claim that issues such as their upbringing, societal norms or even the impact of a decision upon a career would not, even implicitly, have an influence on what they decide? Similarly, when planners, as they sometimes do, try to shrug their shoulders and blame ‘the system’ or factors beyond their control it is worth remembering that they and others like them created that system or set of ideas. A collection of decisions creates a precedent or even ‘policy by decision’ that amounts to a structure. Planners are influenced by structure, as well as creating that structure.

Theory, time and space

I have looked at the ways in which planners and society influence the development, use and interpretation of theory. It is now necessary to add two further dimensions to this: time and space. It is often tempting to take what has been termed the ‘Whig view of history’: ‘the argument that human history has been leading up to the present day and that past forms of social and political organisation should be evaluated according to how far they
advanced or retarded that process of development’ (Painter, 1995, p. 34). I argued above that theory was normative and discursive: that is, produced by individuals within a wider social context. As such, theory is historically contingent and dependent upon cultural, social and political circumstances. But can a normative and discursive view of theory be seen as consistent with the evolutionary, linear Whig theory of history? As Giddens (1984, p. 237) points out, human beings make their history in cognizance of that history, that is, they are aware of time and give it meaning as well as simply ‘living it’. The evolutionary/Whig view implies that history and theory develop into higher and higher levels of sophistication and understanding. It is difficult, writes Gellner, to ‘think about human affairs without the image ... of an all embracing upward growth’ (Gellner, quoted in Giddens, 1984, p. 237). The danger that Giddens identifies with this view is the inclination to identify superior power with moral superiority. In terms of theory, we could see certain ideas that have current ascendancy as being in some ways superior to theories that were more dominant at some other time. Theories sometimes build upon each other, developing ideas that have been criticized and tested, but the terms of their development, as I discussed above, are dictated by changes in society and the grounds upon which they can be tested often change. Theories also develop and emerge in response to changes in society. One example of this, which I cover in more detail in Chapter 4, concerns the development of the classical tenets of Marxist theory. Marxist theory predicted the fall of capitalism. However, a century or so after Marx developed his ideas capitalist economies were still flourishing in many parts of the world. To account for this some theorists began to rework Marxism in the late 1960s and develop it to tackle new values, the cultural dimension of Marxism and modes of behaviour in society. In the natural sciences there tends to be progress as theories are tested and refined to better explain and predict a natural phenomenon. In the social sciences such linear progress is replaced by a much more crowded and contingent landscape of theories and ideas. As I discuss in Chapter 2, there is no one planning theory that we can assimilate and take into practice. Instead, there are a range of competing ideas and theories that will, to greater or lesser degrees, correspond to our values and views of their world.

Turning to the spatial aspects of theory we can see that its discursive basis raises the possibility of different discourses existing in different places. For example, it would not be controversial to suggest that at the level of the nation state ideas will be interpreted differently because of the historical,
cultural, economic and political windows through which theories are seen. But, beneath the nation state, different locales also interpret ideas and theories differently. A number of studies have pointed to what they term the ‘locality effect’, where every locality is a unique configuration of economic activities, divisions of labour, cultural traditions, political alignments, spatial arrangements and physical form (e.g. Healey et al., 1988). This has been dubbed the ‘geological metaphor’ (Warde, 1985) because of the way that various ‘layers’ of influence form a unique social geology in different areas. So, for example, the industrial employment background to a particular area may have influenced historic political attitudes that may have led to a proactive local stance on cooperative banking, allowing the growth in small businesses. But the economic is not always the most important factor. Religion, immigration, geography, etc., can all have a major impact on place. More recently places – cities, regions, etc. – have begun to be looked at as assemblages. Assemblage thinking goes to the heart of the structure–agency debate and emphasizes the broad direction of travel of this chapter, namely the social embeddedness and contingency of theory and knowledge. Assemblage thinking posits that places are subject to government departments, policies, professional doctrine and the whims of international capital (structure). Neither do places simply have autonomy and discretion (agency). Instead ‘there is an interplay of forces where a range of actors mobilise, enrol, translate, channel, broker and bridge in ways that make different kinds of government possible’ (Allen and Cochrane, 2007, p. 1171).

Cities are subject to multiple and competing demands, ideas and influences yet such factors are interpreted and deployed in local contexts. As such, cities are dynamic assemblages of local arrangements and interpretations of flows of ideas, influences and underlying theories. The implications of such a view on theory in general and planning theory in particular are myriad but I want to raise two here. First, assemblage thinking shifts the focus of theoretical reflection from theory being somehow ‘out there’ and uncontentiously linked to policy and practice to ‘how – through what practices, where, when, and by whom – urban policies are produced in global-relational context, are transferred and reproduced from place to place, and are negotiated politically in various locations’ (McCann and Ward, 2011a: xix). Second, there is a clear acceptance of multiple, competing theories jostling to inhabit and influence places. Similarly, the uniqueness of place can affect the formulation, interpretation and modification of ideas and theory. So theory is not ‘fixed’ nationally or sub-nationally. The extent to which this is the case will vary, depending on
such factors as the ‘level’ of theory; for example, more general theories such as Marxism are more likely to be interpreted similarly in different areas than those dealing with the relationship between government and society. This may seem of little importance until you realize that planning is practised at different levels of government where often the local interprets planning policies formulated nationally and generates local policies and plans. Discretion or choice is inherent to planning and governments throughout the world and allows for some autonomous interpretation and formulation of theory. I do not want to over-emphasize this dimension to theory, but merely highlight that when we talk of theory we must not assume that what we mean will necessarily be understood in different contexts or will even be used or interpreted in a similar fashion.

I have argued that all social science theory should be seen as more or less normative, that is, not value-free. Theories, like truth, are socially created and can be seen as discourses that ‘make sense’ of society at a particular time. Because of their power-laden nature, theories can and do have a highly political role. They are not ‘objective’ or in some way separate from society; they are part of that society. Such a society itself is not homogeneous; it varies through time and space, allowing for different formulation, interpretation and uses of theory. This brings us to a recurrent theme in all assessments of planning theory – the so-called ‘theory–practice gap’, or how theory is or is not used in planning practice.

The theory–practice gap

To bemoan the theory–practice gap is now de rigueur for any exploration of planning theory. Watson (2008) complains about the lack of a ‘good fit’ between planning theory and contextualized planning practice. A further dimension is that there is a mismatch between theory that largely originates in English language-based journals (what Watson terms the ‘metropole’) and other contexts of planning, particularly in the developing world. As I briefly mentioned above, academics argue that they think up new theories for planners to use and to justify planning which are totally ignored by practitioners. Practitioners on the other hand claim that academic theory has no bearing or meaning for practice that is based on ‘common sense’. The whole situation still echoes Glass (1959) and Reade’s (1987) view that the legitimation of planning came too easily and
too soon and that planning has no endogenous body of theory. Alexander (1997) asks some pertinent questions of the situation.

First, he asks, is there really a divorce between planning theory and practice? Second, if the gap exists, so what? If the gap exists and it matters, what can be done to bridge it? Alexander comes to the conclusion that each development in planning theory fills a gap in retrospect, that is, practice develops apace and different theories emerge with ‘champions’ who say, ‘No, this theory best explains planning’s raison d’être and how to do it.’ There is a gap then and, according to Alexander, it is unbridgeable because there is a ‘market’ in theories. As I mentioned above, this allows planners to ‘pick and choose’ theories to justify their actions or approaches. As Cliff Hague puts it, planners have been magpies across the disciplines, picking relevance where they found it (Thompson, 2000, p. 127). This is a dimension to theories that I have explored elsewhere (Allmendinger and Tewdwr-Jones, 1997). The argument in this chapter is that, in answer to Alexander’s second question, ‘If the gap exists, so what?’, practising planners actually find the diversity and abundance of theory an advantage. They can never aspire to ‘truth’ but neither would they want to.

If we see planning and planners as being involved in a continuous power ‘game’, as portrayed earlier, then the absolute claim to ‘truth’ in planning theory would involve a loss of power and discretion by planners. Planners and others who ‘use’ theory (even if implicitly) benefit from being able to advance theories that cannot be ‘proved’ but nevertheless are to their benefit. So, as well as Alexander’s claim that the theory–practice gap is ontologically unbridgeable we can also add that there are strong practical reasons for making it so – nobody seems to have considered why there has been little interest in bridging the ‘gap’ by practitioners.

We can also begin to see, therefore, why it is that some current theories, such as those based on communicative rationality or collaborative planning (covered in Chapter 11) which Alexander (1997) claims have so much potential, have not largely been adopted by practising planners (Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas, 1995). The problems are not only in translating the principles of communicative rationality into practice (though this itself is a significant difficulty); it is also that such an approach involves a loss of power for planners by challenging their expert status and current dominant discourses. This perspective presents planning theory as a battleground: a battle over the creation of knowledge and theory; a battle over the distribution and (mis)use of power; and a battle over the
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translation of theory into practice. This is not to take a totally nihilistic view of theory but, instead, locate it in a political context.

But why should planners ‘pick and mix’ theory? Is it a deliberate ploy to concentrate power or is there another reason? The view of planning and theory as ‘power’ is only one aspect of why there is a theory–practice gap. There is another aspect that needs to be explored to fully appreciate the role of the planner. To understand it further we need to look at some theories of the state and professions. Planning practice the world over is a highly bureaucratized function carried out, on the whole, by planners working for public authorities. Although some have argued that planners could potentially include ‘the planned’ (e.g. the public), and planners themselves are increasingly working for private companies, we will stick to the public sector planner in this analysis.

Most countries that have public-led planning have a professional organization to represent them and their profession. In the USA, the American City Planning Institute (ACPI) was established in 1917; in the UK, the Town Planning Institute was formed in 1913. Such organizations projected a self-image of planning as one of rational, apolitical and universal ‘problem solving’. The notion of an identifiable and achievable ‘public interest’ abounded. As Evans (1995, p. 55) points out, one could expect such newly formed organizations to claim altruism and political neutrality if they wanted to professionalize, but the feeling of neutrality and public interest is actually implicit in the ethos of planning. Much of this belief can be traced back to the early philanthropic or reforming views of planning, but what is of interest to us is the way in which it has been perpetuated and the impact it has had.

Once planning had a professional institute distinct from the engineering and architectural professions it followed the same path as other professions in establishing a symbiotic (or corporate in Reade’s (1987) terms) relation between itself, its members and the government or state. We can now begin to see the basis of a reciprocal relationship. Government needs planners to undertake its policies. Planners and their professional body need the government as an employer and to legitimize their claim to professionalism (and associated status and benefits). This relationship also extends to private sector planners. While planners in consultancies bemoan regulations and bureaucracy, they also realize that such processes provide them with the ability to sell their time and expertise to clients. Parts of the requirements of professionalism are neutrality and expert status. So planners, through their professional status, are unlikely to take political stances or perspectives that are overtly
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anti-status quo. This does not preclude them from taking stances that are political and justifying them from the perspective of ‘professionalism’.

But an even more subtle relationship exists within this trinity of planner, profession and state. Planning is dominated by chartered planners, that is, members of the ACPI or the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). While you can still be a planner without being a member, it is certainly more difficult without membership. As a member, the institute’s codes and ethics bind you. For the planners’ institute to maintain its privileged (or corporate) status with government it needs to assure the state that it can maintain a regulated and educated membership capable of implementing centrally directed policies, processes and systems. Therefore, government does not negotiate with planners – it does this with their professional body. And the professional body in turn fulfils its side of the bargain by regulating its members and ensuring they cooperate and implement government objectives.

The situation is a little more complicated than the stark outline above, especially because of the autonomy and discretion offered to planners who work for local public bodies. There is evidence to suggest that planners can and do implement policies differently than envisaged by government (Allmendinger, 1997). However, the professional status of planners limits the extent to which they can act as reflective individuals and the extent to which they are subject to the normal influences of social science approaches, as their views, opinions and options are limited. As Evans (1995, p. 46) puts it:

The process is obviously two-way. Professional groups are granted a high level of influence on policy matters in their respective areas and ... the state legitimises professional knowledge and credentials. In exchange, the professionals are expected to participate in achieving policy goals which fit within certain parameters and limits.

The relationship between planners, their professional body and the state ensures that planners are not ‘free agents’ able to objectively investigate, explore or challenge existing discourses or theories. In addition, a number of writers (e.g. Reade, 1987; Thornley, 1993; Evans, 1993, 1995, 1997) have pointed to what are termed ‘contradictions’ in the planners’ role. Though planners still portray themselves as apolitical and technically expert, roughly 80 per cent of them are employed in the public sector in the UK, through which they are charged with carrying out preferred
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policies of central and local government. Although the RTPI code of conduct, for example, clearly states that planners shall ‘fearlessly and impartially exercise their independent professional judgement to the best of their skills and understanding’ (1994, p. 1), it would be a brave (foolish?) person who did not appreciate the relationship to their employer as being of equal importance. The ACPI code has similar provisions (Howe, 1994). As a result, planners are constantly mediating at least three potentially contradictory influences: their own personal and professional feelings, their employers’ objectives and the code and ethics of their professional institute. I cover this in more detail in Chapter 7.

Another issue is the extent to which planners can claim to be acting in the ‘public interest’. Apart from the difficulties in defining the ‘public interest’, in acting as mediator for development proposals planners must cooperate with private interests to, for example, meet the requirement for housing land supply or to ensure that enough land is available for industrial expansion and growth. There is no point in allocating land for the future development needs of a community if the owner has no intention of developing it. There is, necessarily, a close relationship between the planner as regulator of development and the development industry itself. While many planners recognize the skewed nature of ‘public interest’, there is still a widespread claim to impartiality (Evans, 1995).

We can see some close parallels between the foregoing discussion and the structure and agency debate earlier. As we have seen, Giddens attempted to overcome the duality of structure and agency and argue that, ‘social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet are the same time the very medium of this constitution’ (Giddens, 1976, p. 121). Bhaskar and Jessop went further and argued that certain economic and social theories proposed by actors are more likely to be acceptable to the state structure than others, specifically those that supported existing structures such as capitalism or the centrality of government. We can see how the triad of bodies relevant here (planners, professional institute and state) emphasizes and reinforces the status quo and acts as a constraint upon change.

We can also see why planners pick and choose theory. Because of the conflicting pressures upon them (personal/professional, employee, professional body, state) it is hardly surprising that different justifications and approaches are required in different circumstances. It is not the individual planner’s fault per se; they are caught in an unresolvable dilemma. But before we feel too sorry for the planner we must remember three things.
First, that a large proportion of planners actually believe that they are neutral and apolitical. Second, that they receive significant benefits from their ‘professional’ status (jobs, social standing etc.). Finally, that there is little if any pressure from planners to change the situation.

What we are concerned with here, however, is the extent to which these influences upon planners affect the formulation, interpretation and use of theory. This perspective recognizes that theory formulation is not confined to academia and that planners can and do formulate theories themselves based upon a variety of influences including, but not exclusively, those from educational and research institutions.

What I have attempted to do in this chapter is ‘problematize’ the idea of planning theory and outline and explore its social and political basis. It should be clear that when we are talking of planning theory there is far more to it than a simplistic notion of modelling, predicting or understanding causes and effects. By these measures, much of what is considered to be planning theory would fail to be classified as theory at all. Planning is by no means alone in this. Theories are tools that mask as much as they reveal. Attention is normally paid to whether or not a particular theory corresponds with reality or how accurately it might tell us something. The view taken here questions what philosophers call the ‘correspondence view of truth’ and instead argues for a more relativistic and socially embedded perspective. Instead of asking whether a theory ‘works’, we should be asking questions about why this particular theory was used, who is using it and for what purpose. The answer to these questions will tell us as much (if not more) of importance as whether the theory corresponds to reality.
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