

## **Power and politics in the planning system: a political economy approach using evidence from Ireland.**

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### **Abstract**

The urban planning system and property development sector have come under increased scrutiny in recent years as people begin to critically reflect on the conditions that contributed to a series of property crashes in countries such as the U.S, the U.K, Ireland and Spain. Much of the criticism has been levelled at the emergence of urban governance structures that foster close relationships between actors in the economic and political spheres. Mounting evidence and speculation surrounding the interactions of politicians, officials and property developers in the urban development process has cast doubt surrounding the democratic nature of the planning system as it seems that the interests of private capital increasingly preside over the common good. Although this phenomenon has been widely critiqued by academics, this paper argues that accommodating relations between the economic and political spheres is an intrinsic feature of the planning process and should in fact be expected when one considers the structural relations that govern the distribution of power in advanced capitalist societies. By adopting a theoretical framework that draws upon Marxist political economy approaches of the state and Chomskyan notions of power, this paper positions planning as an activity of the capitalist state and thereby seeks to demonstrate the inherent links that exist between the economic and political spheres in the planning system. The methodology consists of a series of stakeholder interviews with urban planners operating within the Irish planning system. Empirical findings are offered to elucidate the manner in which power navigates the planning system by focusing on how power relations arise between competing stakeholders, the mechanisms by which power is exerted in the planning process, and the extent to which power relations become reflected as outcomes in the built environment. In doing so, the paper seeks to demonstrate how the realities of the planning system can be aligned to the theoretical framework employed.

Keywords: Urban planning, political economy, urban governance, Ireland.

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### **1.0 Introduction**

As commentators continue to critically reflect on the contributing factors to the global economic crisis, attention has turned to urban planning and its role in the creation of a series of property market crashes around the world (Lovering, 2010;

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Melia and Hogan, 2010; Kitchen et al., forthcoming). In particular, the extent to which the ‘neoliberal turn’ has been “reflected in, and in turn encouraged by, the reinvention of planning as a service to special interests, especially property owners and boosterist politicians” has been raised (Lovering, 2010: p. 227).

Although critically reflecting on the role of planning has a renewed significance in light of the current property crises being experienced, the emergence of increasingly entrepreneurial or neo-liberal approaches to urban planning have long been critiqued by a wide range of academics for their inherent focus on private-sector development activity and market forces<sup>2</sup> (see Brindley et al., 1989; Squires, 1996; Drudy & Punch, 2000; MacLaran and Williams, 2003; Kitchen et al., forthcoming). The emergence of neo-liberal planning policies has been broadly associated with the ‘creeping enfeeblement’ of local government (Peck and Tickell, 1994) and emergence of public private partnerships, appointed quangos, private sector alliances and entrepreneurial initiatives dominated by property-led regeneration (McGuirk and MacLaran, 2001).

Looking towards the Irish experience as a case in point, McGuirk (1995) elucidates the powerful position of developers within the Irish planning system and the significant barriers that hinder effective public participation, whilst recent changes to Irish planning legislation also appear to have exacerbated the privileged position of private capital over the common good (Fox-Rogers et al., 2010). Mounting criticism and speculation surrounding the interactions of politicians, officials and property developers in the urban development process has also been exacerbated by the recent publication of the final report emanating from a tribunal of enquiry<sup>3</sup> which was set up to investigate planning corruption in Ireland. The central findings of the tribunal (which lasted 917 days) broadly demonstrated the ability of development interests to exert power over politicians and the planning process in a manner that disproportionately serves their own vested interests at the expense of the population at large.

Central to all of these wide-ranging critiques is a concern with the extent to which urban planning deviates from its normative foundations which are rooted in the assumption that planning is an apolitical, value-free, technocratic process that serves the public interest. The reinvigoration of these debates in light of the current economic downturn have cast further doubts surrounding the democratic nature of the planning system as it seems that development interests increasingly win out over those of the general public. Although such concerns are indeed warranted, this paper argues that the facilitative nature of the planning process and the links that exist between the economic and political spheres are *inherent* and should therefore be *expected* if one situates urban planning as an activity of the capitalist state and critically reflects on the manner in which power operates in society.

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent and comprehensive review of planning related neo-liberal policies see Sager (2011).

<sup>3</sup> The Tribunal of Inquiry into Certain Planning Matters and Payments.

As part of a piece of on-going research that seeks to shed light on the manner in which power navigates the urban planning system, this paper offers some insights from the perspectives of Irish urban planners based on their own experiences<sup>4</sup>. The paper begins by setting out a theoretical framework based on Marxist political economy perceptions of planning and Chomskyan notions of power before outlining the methodological approach employed. Preliminary results are offered which seek to elucidate the manner in which power relations arise, are exerted and manifest themselves in the planning process and the extent to which such findings support the theoretical framework are explored in the concluding discussion.

## 2.0 Capitalism, power and politics in planning

As planning is an activity of the state, our understanding of the state is central to our perception of the role of urban planning. Marxist political economy perspectives of the state and urban planning differ significantly from more conventional pluralist perceptions as they are much more cognisant of the structural relations that govern how power is distributed in society.

While pluralist perceptions of the state and urban planning assume that individuals have equal power to assert their stake regardless of their resource levels, Marxist political economy perceptions question the ability of the state (and thus planning as a state activity) to act as a politically neutral institution given its historical origins. Rather than viewing the state as a neutral arbitrator between competing interests, the Marxist approach views the state as "...the instrument by which the organisation of society becomes the means of preserving intact the material interests of the dominant classes" (Paul, 1917: p. 95).

*"Nominally it administers in the name of society, but in reality it only seeks to preserve the domination of the master class of any period." (Ibid: p.95, emphasis original).*

Central to this theoretical position from a planning perspective is that planning, as an activity of the capitalist state, is not an autonomous activity. Rather planning must be functional to capitalism and planners are thus seen as state agents that favour capital interests rather than the common good (MacLaran and McGuirk, 2003).

Although Marxist theory does not explicitly theorise about power per se, it implicitly elucidates the power relations which emerge between the capitalist and the worker under capitalism given the former's control over the means of production. Marx's (1976) concern with the threat posed to human liberty by the capitalist mode of production and its alienating effects can be aligned to classical liberal assumptions about the innate "human need for liberty, diversity and free association" (Chomsky, 2005: p. 123) unbound by external force or coercion. Given that the state serves the

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<sup>4</sup> The full research project will involve interviewing three additional stakeholder groups namely, developers, councillors and community interest groups. As such, this paper relates to the first stage (of four) in the overall research project.

ruling class of any period, under capitalism its role is to preserve the basic power structure inherent in capitalist society by facilitating the continuation of the capitalist mode of production and assuaging class conflicts. From a Marxist perspective, the planning system is thus considered as one of the many state instruments that functions in a manner that reflects dominant interests in capitalist society.

It was not only Marx that was concerned with the power relations arising out of the ownership of private property. More recently, Noam Chomsky (2003) has argued that under capitalism real power lies in the private economy rather than the political system as political decisions made in the ‘national interest’ are “articulated by those who control the central economic and political institutions” (*Ibid*: p.147). Also drawing upon classical liberal ideas, the central tenant underpinning Chomsky’s understanding of power is the assumption that any structure of domination is illegitimate unless it can be justified. The burden of proof rests with those in positions of authority to substantiate and legitimise their position; if cannot be justified, they should be challenged and ultimately dismantled<sup>5</sup>.

However, both Marxist political economy perceptions of the state and Chomskyan notions of power recognise the self-preserving nature of power and the need for those in power to acquire the “consent of the majority of the governed” (Harvey, 2001: p.277) in order to survive. For Chomsky (2002: p.11), the standard way that such power relations are protected is to place a “cloak of mystery around power”. This can be done in a variety of ways via a “complex system of filters” (*Ibid*: p.27) in the media and education, as well as the “terms of political discourse [which] are designed to prevent thought” (*Ibid*: p.41). Ideologically-laden terminologies such as the ‘common good’ and ‘national interest’ are examples Chomsky uses to demonstrate the manner in which language can be used as a means of ‘containment’. Flyvbjerg’s (1998: p.228) landmark study of power and planning in Aalborg similarly demonstrates that rationalisation (presented as rationality) is a “principle strategy in the exercise of power which can be difficult to identify and thus requires deconstruction”. Marx and Engels (1970 as cited in Harvey, 2001) also identify similar strategies to gain the allegiances of the subordinate class. The first is to represent dominant interests as the ‘illusory general interest’ by universalising ruling class ideas as the only universally valid ones’ (*Ibid*: p.71). The second is to give the appearance of neutrality in state operations by providing certain social goods such as social housing, education and transport. The fact that such goods are prerequisites to facilitate the continuation 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). Strategies such as these are essentially employed to avoid class conflict and prevent challenges being brought to bear on the power structure governing capitalist society. As explained by Chomsky (2003: p.149) “power will work for its own purposes, whatever the rhetoric to disguise or legitimate it”.

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<sup>5</sup> See Anarchism 101 with Noam Chomsky. Accessed at: <http://www.sciencestage.com/v/1038/anarchism-101-with-noam-chomsky.html>. Last accessed 20th April 2011.

Analogous sentiments can be traced back to the work of Bertrand Russell (2004) in the 1930's, who similarly highlighted the importance of challenging structures of power and domination. Russell (2004) argued that to make 'naked' the 'traditional' and disguised form of power that is exerted by the capitalist state and the illegitimacy of the power relations it creates, a period of "free thought and vigorous criticism" is required (*Ibid*: p.75). He argues that "in every democracy, individuals and organisations which are intended to have certain well-defined executive functions are likely, if unchecked, to acquire a very desirable independent power" (*Ibid*: p.232). In order to overcome such issues there is a need "to bring swift criticism to bear upon officials, police, magistrates, and judges who exceed their powers" (*Ibid*: pp.231-232). Increased political awareness and public contestation is thus required in order to place more stringent check and balances on those with the power to administer decisions in the interests of the 'common good'.

Whilst it is acknowledged that placing checks and balances on those in power in advanced capitalist societies will do little to change the structural drivers of power that are inherent in the capitalist system, it is argued here that such challenges can assist in working towards a more equitable redistribution of economic and political power *within* that system, thus making tangible differences to those who are ill-placed and relatively powerless at present. To quote Chomsky:

*"I think it's 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."*

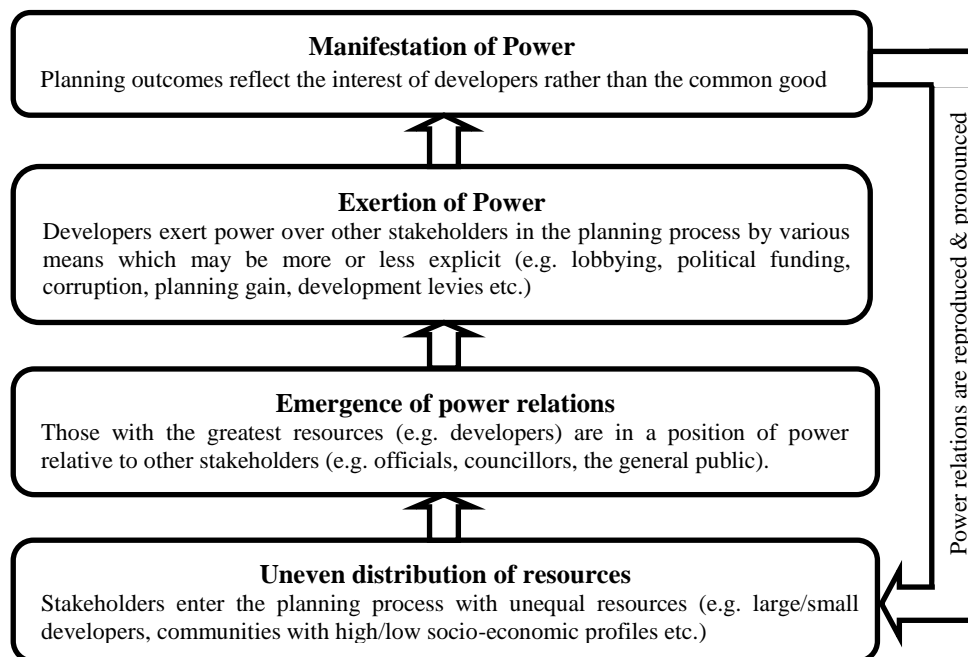
(Chomsky, 2002: p.345)

Based on the theoretical framework outlined above, it is assumed that power relations arise out of the ownership of private property or the means of production which confers power upon groups or individuals (see Figure 1). An unequal distribution of resources leads to leverage in the political sphere and political economic interactions work to serve the interests of the economically powerful by creating the conditions necessary for further capital accumulation and the consolidation of systems of private power. The outcomes arrived reflect the interests of private capital and thus serve to reproduce and reinforce existing imbalances of power in the system. However, checks and balances can be placed on those with decision making power to bring about somewhat more democratic outcomes than would otherwise occur.

By applying this theoretical lens to the sphere of urban planning, it is hypothesised that stakeholders enter the planning process with unequal resources and those with the most economic resources (e.g. property developers) are able to exert power in the political sphere and influence planning decisions in a manner that serves their own interests at the expense of other stakeholders (i.e. the general public). Given that planning is an activity of the capitalist state, public participation in planning and the politicisation of planning is needed to place greater checks and balances on those with decision-making power in order to generate more equitable planning outcomes.

The physical and social impacts experienced by receptive communities depends not only on the level of participation achieved, but also tends to reflect the socio-economic profile of the community as those with greater resources (e.g. education, money, skills) tend to be better placed to challenge the status quo.

Figure 1: Conceptualisation of the theoretical framework



### 3.0 Methodology

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were carried out to attain data from respondents from a selection of four local authorities within the Greater Dublin Area (GDA)<sup>6</sup>. The local authorities were selected on the basis that they together provide a wide range of planning contexts, development pressures, socioeconomic profiles and geographic locations<sup>7</sup>.

Semi-structured interviews were used because many of the in-depth questions being asked did not lend themselves to quantitative approaches. Qualitative methods are also considered suited to the theory verification approach being employed, with

<sup>6</sup> The GDA was selected as the study area on the basis that it has experienced the highest levels of residential and commercial development pressure over the past decade nationally and also consists of a diverse mixture of urban, suburban and more rural local authorities. The GDA's economic dominance nationally, coupled with it being the centre of national decision-making and political power also makes it an ideal study area from which to analyse political economic interactions in the planning system.

<sup>7</sup> These criteria draw upon earlier bodies of research that link varying levels of active citizenship and participation in the planning sphere to an area's level of growth (Scott et al., 2011) or its socio-economic profile (Ellis, 2001; Lowndes et al., 2006).

Silverman (1993) outlining that pre-specified theories are increasingly being tested with qualitative data despite the traditional dominance of theory generation approaches in qualitative studies. An interview schedule was drawn up which focussed on core themes specifically relating to the objectives of the research. The questions were theoretically guided, exploring broad issues of power and politics in planning. Respondents were also invited to draw upon specific planning cases/controversies to help illustrate their responses and provide some specific contexts from which to understand these broader processes at work. A preliminary scoping exercise<sup>8</sup> of significant planning decisions and planning issues in each of the four local authorities over the past decade was thus carried out so that more detailed discussions could be facilitated where such cases arose during the course of the interviews. The interview guide was piloted successfully and no significant changes to the guide were considered necessary.

Respondents were selected on the basis of three core criteria: (1) their local authority; (2) their professional grade and (3) on the basis of whether they worked in development management or forward planning. In terms of (1), a quota of 5 planners was sought from each of the four local authorities, thus equating to 20 respondents in total. For (2), variations in the employment grade (i.e. assistant, executive, senior executive and senior) was sought to ensure that responses were not skewed in any particular direction on the basis of their level of experience or position. For (3), a mix between planners working within the development management (DM) and forward planning (FP) sections of their respective local authorities was also sought<sup>9</sup>. This was to ensure that appropriate information could be gathered from the various stages in the planning process. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the respondents based on the foregoing criteria.

Table 1. Breakdown of respondents by local authority, grade and expertise.

Local Authority 1	Local Authority 2	Local Authority 3	Local Authority 4
P1- Executive (DM & FP)	P6- Senior (DM)	P11- Senior (FP)	P16- Assistant Executive (FP)
P2- Senior (DM)	P7- Senior (FP & DM)	P12- Senior Executive (DM & FP)	P17- Executive (DM)
P3- Assistant Executive (FP)	P8- Executive (FP & DM)	P13- Assistant Executive (DM)	P18- Senior (FP)
P4- Senior (FP)	P9- Executive (DM)	P14- Executive (DM)	P19- Executive (FP)
P5- Executive (DM)	P10- Executive (FP & DM)	P15- Executive (FP)	P20- Senior (FP)

<sup>8</sup> The scoping exercise involved exploring some prominent planning cases, drawing upon an array of planning sources such as newspaper archives, individual planning authority's on-line planning systems, urban planning forums, An Bord Pleanála (appeals authority) inspector's reports etc.

<sup>9</sup> In some instances, planners had relatively equal levels of experience working within development management and forward planning.

Non-probability or ‘snowball’ sampling methods were adopted to generate respondents based on the criteria outlined above. The ‘snowball’ approach began by making initial contact with a small group of suitable respondents to establish further contacts with others. Many of the planners who agreed to participate did so upon initial contact, with some requiring follow-up e-mails and telephone calls. The interviews were anonymous to encourage the respondents to be as open and transparent about the realities of the planning system as possible and also to improve the participation rates of those contacted<sup>10</sup>. The interviews ranged from 48 to 73 minutes in duration, with the average interview taking 62 minutes to complete. All of the interviews were fully transcribed verbatim.

### **3.1 Analytical framework**

In seeking to trace the manner in which power navigates the planning system, a series of hypothetical indicators of power were developed as a methodological tool to help identify instances where issues regarding the operation of power emerged from the data. These indicators were developed by applying the theoretical framework to the planning domain in order to postulate how one might expect power to operate in the urban planning system. Each of the interview transcripts were carefully analysed and instances where any of the ‘indicators’ emerged in the data were recorded and documented for each of the respondents. This facilitated the identification of the most commonly cited indicators and also illustrated the degree to which the realities of the planning system could be aligned to the hypothesised indicators and by extension, the theoretical framework. The following section outlines the most common indicators emerging from the interviews<sup>11</sup>.

## **4.0 Results**

### **4.1 The emergence of power relations**

As outlined previously, it is hypothesised that stakeholders enter the planning process with unequal resources and those with the most economic resources are in a more powerful position to exert leverage in the political sphere and influence planning decisions. The two most common indicators relating to the emergence of power relations in the planning system are presented below.

#### **4.1.2 Power emerging (1)**

Having regard to the manner in which power relations arise in the planning system, the relative lack of local government resources and the subsequent reliance of local

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<sup>10</sup> Out of the 30 planners contacted, 22 agreed to participate, 7 failed to reply and 1 declined to participate.

<sup>11</sup> Given the constraints on this paper, the results will be limited to the two most common ‘indicators’ in each category namely, power arising, power exerted and power manifested.

authorities on the private development sector to generate income streams<sup>12</sup> was the most commonly raised issue by the respondents. Indeed 80% of the 20 planners interviewed made reference to this issue highlighting that it places developers in a powerful position in the planning process. The level of consideration that is afforded to generating income streams from private development activity by planning officials was clearly outlined by an executive planner:

*“...as a planner, we are not supposed to be considering the financial aspects of it [an application] but it’s an impossibility not to and you have to realistically” (P1: 11)*

The relatively powerful position that this places developers in during the planning process was explained by the same respondent:

*“...in a plan process, we also have to set it out or word it in such a manner that it will say ‘yeah come, come here and it will be great. Yeah we do things better here. We’ll give you another couple of floors on it or whatever it is. You know if you’re going to build down town here, you’re going to get- generally, not always, you’re generally going to get a bigger development than if you’re building in Sandycove industrial estate, but not always you know.’” (P1: 11)*

The current economic climate appears to have exacerbated the power of developers relative to the executive in this regard and was highlighted by an assistant planner reflecting on the ability of local authorities to provide public goods since the downturn:

*“We’re completely reliant on them [developers] now anyway- it’s the only way anything is going to get built in the future.” (P13:14).*

Another executive planner highlighted that the reliance on the private development sector to fund local government through building activity may be even greater in smaller local authorities that experience lower levels of central government funding:

*“I suppose the smaller ones [local authorities] have a lot more to lose...because of a lack of budgets and a lack of resources, they won’t get X amount of money into the county if they are not kind of seen to bend the rules you know?” (P12: 12)*

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<sup>12</sup> The means by which local government in Ireland is structured has resulted in limited opportunities for local authorities to raise income independently of central government. Two of the principal means of raising income within the control of local authorities (and hence planning authorities) are commercial rates (payable to the local authority annually) and development contributions (payable to the planning authority as a condition to a grant of permission).

The forgoing suggests that the reliance of local authorities on income streams from development levies, commercial rates etc. to supplement central government funding places developers in a powerful position over the executive.

#### 4.1.3 Power emerging (2)

Having regard to the democratic nature of the planning system and the power of communities to affectively engage in the process, the importance of resources appears to be of paramount importance. Of the 20 planners interviewed, 80% highlighted that the relative power of communities to assert their stake in the planning process was closely linked to their respective socio-economic profiles with stronger levels of opposition reported in more affluent neighbourhoods. As one senior planner outlines:

*“There’s a very poor relationship between the middle class people and the city council and Dublin in general, but by God do they come out when you see the likes of the Sean Dunne development [a controversial high rise proposal] then you have the ‘A list’ of barristers and the resources in Ballsbridge [an affluent city centre neighbourhood]...” (P2:10)*

The availability of resources appears to determine the power that communities have in planning process with those with higher socio-economic profiles being in a more powerful positions than those with lower resource levels. As explained by one executive planner:

*“They [a relatively affluent community] just seem to have that real focus, a real drive, the know-how, the knowledge, able to get out there and get so and so’s attention and interest in the project quicker. So I’m definitely thinking like the other group then [a less privileged community], it’s a newer area, there’s been no investment out there in the last number of years because they didn’t push for things. They [a relatively affluent community] seem to demand, they seem to know this is what we want, this is what we expect you know?” (P10:10)*

In a similar vein, the impact that this has on respective communities in terms of the planning outcomes arrived at is succinctly put by one senior planner:

*“I suppose the evolution of the city would show that stuff gets put beside those who argue least...” (P4:6)*

The forgoing suggests that those communities with higher socio-economic profiles or resource levels are better placed to challenge dominant interests and prospective developments in their area, raising serious concerns for those communities who lack such resources.

## 4.2 The exertion of power

The following section outlines the most commonly cited mechanisms by which power is exerted in the planning process based on the experiences of the planners interviewed. Based on the theoretical framework employed it is assumed that those with the most economic resources (i.e. property developers) are best placed to exert power in the political sphere and influence planning decisions in a manner that serves their own interests at the expense of other stakeholders (i.e. the general public).

#### 4.2.1 Power exerted (1)

Of the 20 planners interviewed, 85% highlighted that developers exert considerable leverage over councillors during the development plan making stage by lobbying them for favourable land zonings<sup>13</sup> in return for political funding. One planner succinctly explained the manner in which political funding plays a role in exerting power in the forward planning process:

*“I’m [a developer] giving you [a councillor] a hefty donation knowing that the zoning is going to come up in two or three years’ time. Now you know don’t forget me.” (P6:6)*

Another planner highlighted that political donations enable donors to exert influence over councillors in the development plan making stage or during the subsequent submission of a planning application:

*“...now some people are quite happy I suppose to give money over [to councillors] because they are affiliated with such and such a party but some people have an agenda and there’s no doubt about that. They’re giving money knowing that they know they might need a hand down the road for whatever reason whether it’s a planning permission coming in and they’ll get the councillor to see can they you know, sway the decision a certain way...” (P14:6)*

The extent to which developers and councillors cooperate in the development plan making process was explained by a senior planner working in forward planning:

*“...when I was in X [local authority], they [developers] were definitely lobbying and they were lobbying them [councillors] constantly. In fact the gallery was packed and they were texting each other [developers and councillors] up and down you know, I mean the scale of involvement. I mean it’s no fun going into a council meeting and when they’re actually having to*

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<sup>13</sup> The Local Government Act 2001 provides the framework for reserved and executive functions that are carried out on behalf of a local authority. Reserved functions are performed by elected members (i.e. councillors) who essentially constitute the policy-making arm of local government. Executive functions are carried out by the local authority’s manager or delegated officials (e.g. planners). Granting or refusing planning permission is an executive function, but the adoption of a development plan is a reserved function of the elected members.

*elbow through all the developers, lobbyists, farmers and they're all trying to get stuff zoned, all standing in the lobby of the council meeting you know and it's packed...when they're making certain decisions.” (P4:10)*

The forgoing clearly illustrates the links between the political and economic spheres in the forward planning process and the manner in which the resources available to developers enables them to exert power in this regard.

#### **4.2.2 Power exerted (2)**

In contrast to councillors working on behalf of development interests, many planners highlighted that councillors can also be responsive and representative of community needs. The ability of certain communities to exert power over their elected representatives was raised by 75% of the planners interviewed. However, the extent to which councillors represent the interests of their electorate at large appears to depend on the extent to which the community places demands on them by making them accountable during the democratic process. As one senior planner explained:

*“I mean they need to get re-elected so maybe if something was so widespread unpopular that they thought it might not stand to them at the next general election or if an opposing party was taking a strong argument against it then that might sway them.” (P15:21-22)*

An interesting distinction was made by many of the planners between the representativeness of councillors in the rural verses more urban local authorities. Various planners report that Dublin-based councillors rarely lobby on behalf of development interests and instead tend to lobby against developments on behalf of their constituents. This appears to contrast with non-Dublin based authorities when respondents reflected on their experiences of how councillors operate in more rural authorities. However, many planners simply attribute this distinction to the higher demands that are placed on Dublin-based councillors from their electorate rather than any moral obligation.

*“Councillors in Dublin would be more sensitive about development and again it's not because they are virtuous, it's because they are responding to their constituents who are against development” (P2: 15).*

Another planner reflecting on the differences between urban and rural local authorities in this regard outlines:

*“It's to do with the voting public. The difference is, well one- there's the political difference. In Dublin you've a much stronger Labour vote. It's a much more organised population so the urban vote is more left-leaning naturally...” (P4: 15)*

The forgoing suggests that communities who place greater checks and balances on their political representatives appear to have more accountable and representative councillors than they otherwise may have. Without these checks and balances being placed, it seems that councillors are more facilitative of private interests rather than their electorate at large. This may have significant implications in terms of planning outcomes arrived at as those elected representatives who are closely monitored by their electorate may be more likely to champion more socially just and equitable planning decisions. However, this raises serious concerns when one considers that many communities fail to engage with their elected representatives or politicise planning related issues.

### **4.3 The manifestation of power**

Having regard to the manner in which the exertion of power becomes manifested in the planning process, it is hypothesised that planning outcomes reflect the interests of developers rather than the common good. The following highlights some of the most commonly cited effects that ensue from the exertion of power in the planning process.

#### **4.3.1 Power manifested (1)**

The most common manifestation of power in the planning process which was raised by 80% of respondents was that development plans (or material contraventions to the development plan) which are adopted by councillors tend to reflect the interests of developers rather than the principles of sustainable development or best planning practice. Some planners identified particularly ‘crafty’ ways that councillors ensure development interests are represented in the adopted plan. As explained by one senior planner working in the forward planning process:

*“You go through numerous late evenings going on to midnight with the councillors going through the manager’s report and then as I say, at the last minute they will submit motions from the floor and the motions are coming through completely left of field you know and you’ve had no time to prepare for them. They usually involved rezoning submissions or issues that really are not appropriate but they tend to be pushed through on the final night or the last couple of nights of the development plan process you know, which is a wee bit galling to be honest.” (P20:2)*

The impact that this has on the quality of development plan was clearly outlined by the same planner:

*“And usually the manager in the planning authority, to push the local area plan or the development plan over the line usually bargains away things that in the normal course of events they wouldn’t.” (P20: 1)*

#### **4.3.2 Power manifested (2)**

Another key issue emerging from the data with regards the manifestation of power is that the executive is hamstrung to facilitate development on the basis of rate generation and development levies. 75% of the respondents drew attention to this phenomenon during the course of the interviews. In terms of the manner in which authorities ‘facilitate development’, one planner explains that lower development contributions or less stringent assessments on planning applications may be used to attract development and help to stave off competition from other local authorities for the lucrative rates base.

*“Yeah like a development contribution scheme, a lower development contribution scheme to reduce the cost of developing within a particular area- that’s one way. Not sticking to principles in terms of land, develop wherever they [developer] manage to find the land, rather than within zoned land which might be more expensive.” (P 7:10)*

The importance of attracting development and investment into counties was highlighted by another planner who outlined the lengths that a manager will go to in order to prevent the loss of prospective investment in the county:

*“...it can get to the stage where for example a refusal is going out....he [the manager] can get on to the developer and suggest that he removes it from the system, that we sit down again and start negotiating about a revised development. I don’t know whether from a political or whatever point of view it might appear bad for us to be say, refusing an employment generating proposal at the moment. So rather than it going out as a refusal, it might be withdrawn by the applicant and then they start negotiating to have to sort of a compromise.” (P6: 7)*

The forgoing suggests that the needs of developers are catered for to a greater extent than the population at large given their inherent ability to exert power over officials and councillors. As a result, it appears that planning outcomes do not serve the common good but rather reflect the interests of developers given the power they exert in the planning system.

## **5.0 Conclusions**

This paper has attempted to demystify the manner in which power operates in the planning system by clearly identifying some of the most commonly cited mechanisms by which power relations arise, are exerted and manifest themselves in the planning process. The results highlight the importance of resources (i.e. economic power) in the creation of power relationships between various stakeholders in the planning system. In particular, the importance of resources in determining: 1) the powerful position of developers relative to local authority officials; and 2) the ability to effectively engage in the planning system were the most commonly cited indicators. As these relations emerge, it becomes apparent that those in economically

powerful positions are best placed to exert power in the planning process. In this regard, the ability of the property interests to influence councillors to adopt development plans that reflect their vested interests emerged as the most commonly cited mechanism by which power is exerted. Conversely, the respondents also highlighted that certain community groups can exert leverage over their elected representatives through the democratic process to ensure they serve their own interests rather than the interests of property developers or big business. This observation in particular illustrates the importance of placing checks and balances on those in positions of power. In terms of the manifestation of power in the planning system, the most common indicators emerging were: 1) development plans being adopted that reflect the interests of developers; and 2) local authorities being overly facilitative development proposals. The potential impacts that these ‘micro’ level manifestations can have on a community become even more apparent when one considers the broader planning outcomes that emerge from these smaller manifestations that occur at various stages in the planning process. In this regard 80% of respondents made reference on some level to planning outcomes being arrived at that do not divert significantly from a non-planning scenario.

Although the results offered in this paper are preliminary findings and require further in-depth analysis and investigation, the foregoing indicates a strong degree of correlation between the hypothetical indicators of power developed from the theoretical framework and those emerging from the data. In doing so, these findings support a Marxist political economy approach which views planning as a state activity that facilitates the interests of private capital. By adopting such a position, critical reflections on the facilitative nature of urban planning in the lead up to a series of property crashes in countries such as Ireland, the US and Spain should come as no major surprise. As a result, it is argued here that any further reflections on the role of planning must be more cognisant of the structural relations that govern how power is distributed in society.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper is part of an on-going body of doctoral research that is being funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences<sup>14</sup>.

Attendance at AESOP’s annual conference 2012 has been jointly funded by UCD’s School of Geography, Planning and Environmental Policy’s Graduate Travel Fund and the College of Human Science’s Graduate Research and Innovation Fund.

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<sup>14</sup> The **Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences** (IRCHSS) funds leading-edge research in the Humanities and Social Sciences, including Law and Business Studies. Its primary strategic objective centres on building an expertise-driven research system in order to enhance Ireland's innovation capacity and skills base in a rapidly-changing global environment where knowledge is key to economic, social and cultural development. IRCHSS is further committed to facilitating the integration of Irish researchers in the humanities and social sciences within the European Research Area. For further information, please see [www.irchss.ie](http://www.irchss.ie)

The author is grateful to Dr. Enda Murphy for his comments and feedback on an earlier version of this paper and for his continued supervision of her doctoral research.

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