Neoliberal Urbanism Redux?

JAMIE PECK, NIK THEODORE and NEIL BRENNER

Abstract

Neoliberalization processes have been reshaping the landscapes of urban development for more than three decades, but their forms and consequences continue to evolve through an eclectic blend of failure and crisis, regulatory experimentation, and policy transfer across places, territories and scales. The proliferation of familiar neoliberal discourses and policy formulations in the aftermath of the 2007-09 world financial crisis masks evidence of more deeply rooted transformations of policies, institutions and spaces that continue to combatively remake terrains of urban development. Accordingly, the critical intellectual project of deciphering the problematic of neoliberal urbanism must continue to evolve. This essay outlines some of the methodological and political challenges associated with (re)constructing a 'moving map' of post-crisis neoliberalization processes. We affirm a form of critical urban theory that adopts a restlessly antagonistic stance towards orthodox urban formations and their dominant ideologies, institutional arrangements and societal effects, tracking their endemic policy failures and crisis tendencies while at the same time demarcating potential terrains for heterodox, radical and/or insurgent theories and practices of emancipatory social change.

Introduction

For three decades now, neoliberalism has defined the broad trajectory of urban restructuring, never predetermining local outcomes on the ground as if some iron law, but nevertheless profoundly shaping the ideological and operational parameters of urbanization. This historical offensive has also reshaped the terrain confronted by resistance movements, meaning that alternatives to market fundamentalism are now refracted through a tendentially neoliberalized ideological and institutional landscape. Despite the continued vibrancy of such alternatives, many have remained local(ized), whether due to strategic choices, external pressures or supralocal repression. Meanwhile, the political left’s article of faith, that neoliberalism must eventually succumb to its own contradictions, has been tested to breaking point due to the project’s remarkable adaptability — its Houdini-like ability not only to survive, but to gain further momentum through the exploitation of crisis conditions for which it is often largely responsible.

Although the aftershocks continue 5 years after the Wall Street crash, the view from 2013 suggests that neoliberalism has once again risen from the ashes of crisis — this one not only palpably close to the control centers of financialized capitalism, but also manifestly of its own making. One might have thought that the mounting evidence of serial policy failure, destructive social and ecological externalities, endemic inequalities, exploding uneven spatial development, and continued vulnerability to financial and regulatory crises, large and small, would by now have led to the undoing of this singularly contradictory regulatory paradigm. But apparently not — at least not yet. The quasi-Keynesian rescue mission that the panic itself brought on — supposedly
suspending the rules of neoliberalism to save the system from itself — may in retrospect have done more to discredit, rather than recuperate, the economics of Lord Keynes. New rounds of neoliberal medicine are now being administered, in alarmingly high doses, in the context of a still highly volatile geo-economic (dis)order. Indeed, in the present period of post-crisis recalibration, the ideological bandwidth of mainstream economic policy debates appears to have been narrowed further. Across the interstate system, orthodox neoliberal nostrums regarding the putative virtues of deficit reduction, austerity programming, public-sector downsizing and growth restoration at any cost resound with drumbeat monotony. And crucially the class interests that have been served so well over the preceding decades of deepening neoliberalization — including the now infamous ‘one percent’, conservative politicians of many stripes, bankers and financiers — have conspicuously instrumentalized the crisis to fortify their own positions, even as the legitimacy of these maneuvers is much more openly questioned.

Following what has also become a familiar pattern, the urban dimensions of the protracted crisis and its politicization have been especially pronounced (Smith, 2009; Harvey, 2012), not least as a vital link in the subprime mortgage meltdown, a regulatory space of renewed fiscal discipline, a terrain of deepening enclosure and dispossession, and a roiling and creative site of protest. It must be said, however, that the medium-term prognosis for cities looks depressingly familiar: more social-state retrenchment and paternalist-penal state expansion, more privatization and deregulation, more subjection of urban development decisions to market logics, a continued delinking of land-use systems from relays of popular-democratic control and public accountability, more courting of mobile events, investment and elite consumers, and a further subordination of place and territory to speculative strategies of profit-making at the expense of use values, social needs and public goods. This, in short, does not look like a substantial departure from the regulatory terrain as mapped by the critical literature on neoliberal urbanism (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Leitner et al., 2007; Künkel and Mayer, 2012; Park et al., 2012). Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose?

Notwithstanding the sobering evidence of some kind of neoliberal restoration, we reject such an interpretation, though we do not go so far as to embrace the equally problematic notion of post-neoliberalism, which briefly acquired some currency in the wake of the 2007–09 financial crisis (Peck et al., 2010). While neoliberalization tendencies are certainly being perpetuated within and across urban landscapes, this circumstance should not be mistaken for a mere makeover, or redux, of neoliberal urbanism. What may look like business-as-usual neoliberalism, on an ideological level, can never be only that. Across the global urban system, the widespread adoption of all-too-familiar neoliberal discourses and policy formulations is connected to a more deeply rooted and creatively destructive process of diachronic transformation — of policies, institutions and spaces — that is mutating the landscapes of both urban development and urban governance. It follows, therefore, that the critical intellectual project that has developed around the problematic of neoliberal urbanism must evolve as well.

Spiraling between contextually specific analyses and broader methodological and conceptual refinements, critical studies of neoliberalized urbanism have articulated a powerful set of metanarratives and analytical orientations that should, in principle, equip us to decipher the (il)logics of post-crisis urban restructuring and their consequences — for institutions, spaces, policies, subjectivities and struggles. And yet, to achieve this goal, such approaches cannot drift into normal-science incrementalism, as if the collective task consisted simply of assembling an exhaustive catalog of affirmative cases, in the form of a cartography of neoliberal hegemony conducted as if the socio-spatial contours and effects of neoliberalization are fully known in advance. Rather, critical urban scholarship must continue to confront the challenge of constructing a ‘moving map’ of neoliberalization (Harvey, 2005: 88). In so doing, we believe, such work must also continue to elaborate and fine-tune an epistemological and methodological stance that is both analytically and politically disruptive, as it confronts the challenges of tracking the variegated geographies of neoliberal hegemony.
Hegemony in motion

What does it mean to state that neoliberalism is (still) hegemonic? Does it mean that the dominant ideological paradigm reigns uncontested, suffocating all alternatives? Stuart Hall, for one, would say not. While he recognizes that neoliberalism has achieved, and retains, hegemonic status, Hall (2011: 727–8) is equally insistent that no project achieves a position of permanent ‘hegemony.’ It is a process, not a state of being. No victories are final. Hegemony has constantly to be ‘worked on,’ maintained, renewed and revised. Excluded social forces, whose consent has not been won, whose interests have not been taken into account, form the basis of counter-movements, resistance, alternative strategies and visions . . . and the struggle over a hegemonic system starts anew.

If hegemonies are always in (re)construction, there can be no neoliberal replicating machine, running on autopilot, no permanent socio-regulatory settlement, and no guarantee that the rescheduling and displacement of crises and contradictions can continue indefinitely.

It is hardly mere sophistry, therefore, to insist that the hegemonic process of neoliberalization is both systemic and contextually embedded — it entails a worldwide reorganization of regulatory arrangements; yet it can only be reproduced and advanced through historically and geographically specific politico-institutional formations, strategies and struggles. It follows that cities are not just relay stations for a singular, unchanging, world-encompassing neoliberal project, but are better understood as institutional forcefields positioned within (and continuously transformed through) an always mutating and unevenly developed landscape of regulatory reform, experimentation, circulation, failure, (re)consolidation and crisis. No less essential is the evolving, relationally constituted positionality of cities with respect to geopolitical and institutional hierarchies, centers of economic (mis)calculation and circuits of transnational policy transfer. Cities, in other words, are not merely at the ‘receiving end’ of neoliberalization processes, imposed unilaterally from above. Even in a context in which few cities are able to exert controlling influence over the trajectory of regulatory change, processes of neoliberalization continue to be actively constituted (and contested) across a planetary system of urban(izing) regions.

Furthermore, even if neoliberalizing hegemonies are characterized by totalizing forms of market fundamentalism, they do not describe a total process. As a utopian ideology married to a ‘flexible credo’ in the form of strategically adaptable and opportunistic policy protocols, neoliberalism is destined to remain incomplete, even if its guiding logics of boundless marketization and commodification are aggressively expansionist. This means that, no matter how single-mindedly they are pursued, programs of neoliberalization are doomed to coexist in fields of socio-institutional difference, dwelling amongst their ideological others, more often than not antagonistically. Thus, even as it organizes the leading fronts of market-driven regulatory transformation — consistent with its character as a paradigm of restructuring, rather than as a condition or end-state — neoliberalization is never found alone. There is always more going on than neoliberalism; there are always other active sources and forces of regulatory change; there are always countervailing interests, pressures and visions. As a necessarily incomplete program, wherever it is found, neoliberalism is therefore a creature of less-than-happy marriages, revealed in various states of contradictory yet constitutive cohabitation with ‘other halves’, the result of contextually specific histories of institutional organization and regulatory tinkering.

Consequently, the unevenly developed geographies of neoliberalization are not mere variations around an emergent norm, but are inscribed into this form of social rule (Peck, 2010; 2013). This is the expression of path dependency, inherited socio-institutional difference, and past social struggles and compromises, as revealed for instance in the distinctive trajectories of neoliberalization in (post)Keynesian, (post)developmentalist and (post)socialist cities (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Stenning et al., 2010; Collier,
2011; Webber, 2011; Park et al., 2012). It is in this context that the notion of variegated neoliberalization acquires a distinctive meaning, connecting variant ‘local’ conjunctures with the supralocal patterned movements of a hegemonic front (Brenner et al., 2010a).

If processes and projects of neoliberalization exist within local fields of difference, it also must be said that they exist within transnational fields of power. There is evidence of apparently organic, recurring connections with powerful interests — such as financial and corporate factions, governmental and financial elites, dominant transnational agencies and institutions — although these must be (re)established on a case-by-case basis, not by blanket imposition. For this reason, there are few substitutes for theoretically informed ethnographic approaches that use contextualized investigations to illuminate the operations and projections of neoliberalization (see Goldman, 2005; Fairbanks, 2012; Greenhouse, 2012). But neoliberalization is also a cross-case, cross-institutional and cross-jurisdictional process, and as such is reproduced through fields of power marked by infrastructural, capillary and hierarchical features (cf. Mann, 1984; Gill, 1995; Dezalay and Garth, 2002; Simmons et al., 2008). While there are good reasons to be skeptical of one-sided impact models of neoliberalization, as well as of diffusionist conceptions that postulate its linear expansion from the moment of immaculate invention to that of global dominance (Bockman and Eyal, 2002; Hart, 2003; Peck, 2010), it would be equally problematic to delink investigations of neoliberalism from extra-local fields of power — which we have elsewhere characterized as the ‘context of context’ (Brenner et al., 2010a; 2010b). The reproduction of neoliberal hegemony occurs through concrete historical conjunctures (Hilgers, 2011), but it also occurs across these conjunctures (Peck and Theodore, 2012). The notion of variegated neoliberalization, in this sense, stands as much more than a contingency-finding device; it is centrally concerned with the reproduction of market rule as a multi-sited, unevenly developed, relationally interpenetrating and more-than-the-sum-of-its-parts process, under which ‘internal’ forms and ‘external’ relations are jointly constituted and continually transformed in a contradictory mutually recursive dialectic (Brenner et al., 2010a; 2010b; Peck, 2013).

Not only does this demand that attention be paid to the interaction and patterning of neoliberalization processes across sites (see Peck and Theodore, 2012; Aalbers, 2013, this issue), it also stands as a warning against the adoption of simplified template models of neoliberal urbanism, where these claim self-affirming status on the basis of the recurring appearance of similar institutional forms and reform routines across a diversity of cases. Under certain circumstances (e.g. creative-cities discourse), this observation might be a starting point for analysis, but it should decidedly not be confused with substantive explanation (‘Neoliberal urbanism strikes again!’). If the goal is to explain, say, the privatization of urban infrastructure development in Chicago or Johannesburg or Bangkok or Moscow, then to tag these policy outcomes as ‘neoliberal’ is no more than an initial analytical orientation (neoliberalism as a general classificatory schema) on the path to understanding and explaining such phenomena in relation to both contextually specific developments and more-than-local institutional, spatial and policy transformations (neoliberalization as a cross-case process).

It is through the seemingly banal but always frustrated repetition of neoliberal maneuvers that the hegemony of market rule is operationalized and (borrowing Stuart Hall’s terminology) ‘remade’. To appropriate a favorite phrase from Antony Fisher, the inventor of the free-market think-tank, who dedicated his life to propagating neoliberal policymaking rationalities, ‘the echo is more important than the message’ (Peck, 2010: 135). There certainly is a sense in which the post-crisis world of urban policymaking resembles an echo chamber, one in which so many of the same old formulations, from creativity to clusters and competitiveness, continue to reverberate (see Oosterlynck and Gonzalez, 2013, this issue; Rossi, 2013, this issue). But the shopworn shallowness of such mainstream manifestations of urban policy, for all the Orwellian spinning of ‘innovation’ and ‘best practice’, itself demands explanation. If there is superficial evidence of some kind of redux, then, this should not be an occasion for pre-emptive
explanation, weakly tagged to an off-the-shelf static conception of ‘neoliberal urbanism’ (in the vein of ‘just another case of . . .’). What otherwise might be an occasion for pragmatic resignation or poststructuralist ambivalence can be seen here in a different light, as an opportunity for a deeper analytical and political problematization: why is it that mainstream late neoliberal urban-policy formulations appear to be so tired, so prosaic, so anemic, and yet still continue to represent the doxic ‘common sense’ of urban policymakers around the world?

If the rate of neoliberal urban-policy innovation has indeed slowed (a marker of ‘late’ status, one might say) to the point of an incrementalist recycling of neo-Porterian, neo-Floridian and (let it be said) neo-Castellsian formulations, then surely this reveals something significant about the character of the program’s post-crisis hegemonic hold. To recall the terms of Peter Hall’s (1993) exemplary analysis of the Keynesian rupture, neoliberalism persists as a social ontology, as a meta-framing device and as an overarching policy paradigm; but the game-changing paradigm-altering ‘third order’ of policy change has not (yet) occurred. On the other hand, while there is evidence of crisis-driven forms of first- and second-order policy change (respectively defined by Hall as the recalibration of established policy instruments in a context of continuity in underlying objectives, and as the adoption of new instruments of policy with the same strategic orientation as earlier ones), these experimental maneuvers seem to be failing to displace crisis pressures, let alone install sustainable patterns of post-crisis urban development. Relative to the vacuity of mainstream urban policy at the present time across North America, Europe and elsewhere, which might imply some depletion of the creative capacities of neoliberalism, much of the new energy is coming from left-field (e.g. the indignados, right-to-the-city movements), even as insurgents have yet to reoccupy the urban-political terrain on a more permanent basis. The dead hand of austerity measures continues to structure this terrain, though as a decidedly unpopular program this would surely be more appropriately characterized as an indicator of brute political force or domination, rather than consent or hegemony.

Critical urbanism, after the crisis

It would be unwise to extrapolate incautiously from what Don Kalb (2012: 318) has characterized as a post-crisis ‘global mass upheaval in fragments’ to suggest that redemptive potentially post-neoliberal patterns are crystallizing across recent flashpoints of urban protest, from Madrid to Madison, and from Tahrir Square and the Arab Spring to the daily eruptions of labor unrest across China. The very fact that such popular-democratic mobilizations are being articulated ‘in fragments’, both geographically and politically, attests to their disarticulated and still rather inchoate character. Meanwhile, the combined forces of economic austerity and state repression continue to circumscribe and (re)order this terrain, seriously impeding the scale-jumping maneuvers that would be required among these dispersed sites of protest in order to forge a broader and interurban anti-neoliberal front. Nonetheless, these signs of unrest may still be indicative of a significant rebalancing (or perhaps an unbalancing) of urban-political forces across quite diverse sites of political-economic contestation. The unvarnished reassertion of state-assisted market rule after the Wall Street crash, more or less from the top down, through austerity measures and debt-bondage nihilism, has bluntly exposed neoliberalism’s coercive power relations and self-serving rules of the game as never before.

As we have argued elsewhere, the dynamism of neoliberalization projects stems from their combinatorial capacity to continually respond to endemic failures of policy vision, design and implementation through a rapid succession of crisis-displacing strategies, fast-policy adjustments, improvisations, workarounds and experimental reforms, often through tactics that are stitched together eclectically across scales of governance.
Such a makeover of neoliberal urbanism is clearly occurring in the wake of the 2007–09 financial crisis, which has seen the asymmetrical scale politics of neoliberalization once again being recalibrated. Clearly, then, even if the persistent churning of policies and crisis-displacement strategies within narrow ideological parameters is all too familiar, these are new historical-geographical conditions.

In concluding this essay, we highlight three analytical dimensions for investigating the evolving expressions and pathways of neoliberal urbanism in the wake of the Wall Street crash and the wave of austerity measures it has unleashed. This discussion builds upon our previous periodization of post-1970s neoliberalization processes, and an associated speculative outline of several possible scenarios for contemporary and future regulatory reorganization (Brenner et al., 2010a; 2010b). Our concern here is to consider the ways in which such an analytical orientation might inform investigations of the extremely volatile formations of post-crisis neoliberal urbanism we have sketched in general terms above.

A first analytical dimension centers on place-based investigations of how power relations and regulatory ideologies, practices and institutions condition the evolution of urban regions. It is crucial that investigations, even those that are mainly place-specific and geographically discrete, are attuned to the multi-scalar and multi-sited nature of neoliberal urbanism. Especially under conditions of spiraling economic crisis and deepening austerity politics, evaluations of the sway that neoliberalism apparently has over policy choices and repertoires in a given city-region cannot be detached from the wider extra-local fields of policymaking, modeling and manipulation; from considerations of the shifting institutional balance in (and discursive construction of) policy experimentation and failure; and therefore of the relational positioning of revealed ‘local’ policy pathways, at the leading or bleeding edges, on the breaking waves or in the backwaters. Interurban competition over jobs and investment, shared discourses of growth and development, and the realities of increasing international economic integration mean that even the most ‘local’ of studies must account for extra-local influences, pressures and relationalities. This suggests the need for an always more-than-local understanding of the urban, extending to the analysis of specific hybrid formations in connection, across places and scales. Just because neoliberalization does not operate through mechanisms of unmediated cookie-cutter replication does not mean that its local instantiations should be presented as autonomous ‘islands’ of practice. Crucially, ‘alternatives’ too should be evaluated in and against these wider fields of difference, not as separatist enclaves, somehow insulated from the pressures, externalities and downdraughts of pervasive neoliberalization.

The interconnectedness of neoliberal projects prefigures a second analytical dimension whose exploration is essential to understanding post-crisis urban governance — namely the critical investigation of policies-in-motion across multiple sites, with a focus on how regulatory practices and institutions achieve ‘model’ status, and circulate and mutate between places and through distended policy networks. These concern processes of neoliberalization as interurban phenomena, dependent upon circulatory systems that connect cities as policymaking sites, and the concomitant movement of techniques, discourses, models and actor-facilitators across interurban space (see Peck and Theodore, 2010; McCann and Ward, 2011; Peck, 2012b). In recent decades, cities have become increasingly important targets and proving grounds for neoliberal policy experiments, in the process becoming incubators for, and generative nodes within, the reproduction of neoliberal regimes themselves. While urban policy arenas never resembled hermetically sealed laboratories, it can be said that they have now become more porous than ever, as they are increasingly exposed to the influence of distant experiments and traveling advocates, and more directly subject to the pervasive ‘soft’ influence of best-practice models. The porosity of policy fields has, in turn, been associated with the serial reproduction and imperative adaptation of various policy prototypes, punctuated by moments of failure and the accumulating drag of
underperformance. City elites are confronted by intensifying pressures to act (and to be seen to act) on urban problems, including localized poverty and unemployment, faltering growth, environmental degradation and social inequality, and to do so in ways that connect, pragmatically and presentationally, to dominant lines of policy development and financing, even if the capacity to achieve meaningful leverage over these issues routinely exceeds the scale of the urban. Urban policymaking has therefore become ‘over-responsibilized’, even as the limitations of prevailing modes of intervention become increasingly evident. Under the threat of legitimation crisis, these conditions, in turn, contribute to the speed-up and accelerated churn of regularly made-over, relaunched and rebranded policies, helping to constitute a ready audience for new models and putative ‘solutions’. This is an interurban condition.

These stressed conditions of urban-policy experimentation are sharply circumscribed and dynamized by pressures arising from a third analytical dimension, those macro-structural and macro-regulatory forces that shape the evolving ‘rules of the game’. These include large-scale institutional ensembles, financial systems and monetary arrangements, and international organizations that variously frame, formulate, finance and sometimes even fulfill policy programs across diverse sites. The resulting rules of the game impose powerful constraints on the scope of policy innovation and the repertoires of realistic (and, indeed, imaginable) policy change, which in the wake of the financial crisis have gravitated towards especially austere and instrumental rationalities: downloading of regulatory, socioeconomic and environmental risks; devolution and dumping of financial obligations; and further retrenchment of social-state commitments. They are also embodied in the dull compulsion of supra-local competitive pressures and techniques of fiscal discipline, which in turn shape the conditions of possibility for policymaking at the urban scale, and which effectively establish the operational, discursive and perceptive parameters of this process (see Leitner and Sheppard, 1998; Blyth, 2008; Roy and Ong, 2011; Peck, 2012a; Theodore and Peck, 2012; Rolnik, 2013, this issue). Under these conditions, competitive anxiety has become an entrenched syndrome among urban elites, perversely prompting policymakers to deepen the degree of reliance on the very same policy portfolio that was responsible for so much of the predicament in the first place. Remaking hegemony under such conditions is a manifestly challenging task, hence the fields of tension between recirculating neoliberal formulation, urgently increased expectations (not to mention real needs) and the lengthening track record of prosaic policy failures at the local scale.

From our point of view, the posture of critical urban theory must remain one associated with a restlessly antagonistic stance towards orthodox urban formations and their dominant ideologies, institutional arrangements, practices and societal effects. As a critique of power and ideology, critical urban theory problematizes sites and sources of social injustice. But more than mere description, this itself is an intervention, one that aims to analyze the fissures and contradictions of urban formations in order to shape insurgent theories and practices of emancipatory social change. Since it can never be enough simply to interpret the world, studies of neoliberalism’s persistent present will need to reclaim the radical aspirations of critical urban theory if they are to meaningfully contribute to its transcendence. By the same token, if alternatives will have to be constructed, in a sense, from the terrain of the neoliberalized now, then critical analyses of the terrains of neoliberal power and practice surely have indispensable roles to play in the formulation of heterodox forms of praxis. Even if the global crisis may have yet to produce a systemic alternative to hegemonic forms of market rule, Neil Smith (2009) may well have been right to suggest that neoliberalism was tumbling into an atrophic phase, shorn of intellectual credibility and sapped of political momentum. As the power plays of national and global elites are exposed for what they are, and as long-metabolizing crises at the urban scale are unevenly met, at the same time, by a manifestly vacuous policy orthodoxy and reanimated forms of street-level militancy, then perhaps Smith (ibid.: 29) was also correct to declare that ‘the urban future is indeed radically open again’.
References


