

# Neoliberalism and the urban condition

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Over two decades ago, the term “restructuring” became a popular label for describing the tumultuous political-economic and spatial transformations that were unfolding across the global urban system. As Edward Soja (1987: 178; italics in original) indicated in a classic formulation:

*Restructuring* is meant to convey a break in secular trends and a shift towards a significantly different order and configuration of social, economic and political life. It thus evokes a *sequence of breaking down and building up again, deconstruction and attempted reconstitution*, arising from certain incapacities or weaknesses in the established order which preclude conventional adaptations and demand significant structural change instead [...] Restructuring implies flux and transition, offensive and defensive postures, a complex mix of continuity and change.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, scholars mobilized a variety of categories—including, among others, deindustrialization, reindustrialization, post-Fordism, internationalization, global city formation, urban entrepreneurialism, informalization, gentrification and sociospatial polarization—in order to describe and theorize the ongoing deconstruction and attempted reconstitution of urban social space. These concepts provided key intellectual tools through which a generation of urbanists could elaborate detailed empirical studies of

ongoing urban transformations both in North America and beyond. In the early 2000s, such concepts remain central to urban political economy, but they are now being complemented by references to “neoliberalism,” which is increasingly seen as an essential descriptor of the contemporary urban condition. This widening and deepening interest in the problematic of neoliberalism among urban scholars is evident in the papers presented in this special issue of *CITY*: all deploy variations on this terminology—“neoliberalism,” “neoliberal,” “neoliberalized,” “neoliberalization,” and so forth—in order to interpret major aspects of contemporary urban restructuring in North American cities. At the same time, like earlier analysts of urban restructuring, the contributors to this special issue reject linear models of urban transition, emphasizing instead its uneven, contentious, volatile and uncertain character. Indeed, each of the contributions included here suggestively illustrates Soja’s conception of restructuring: whether implicitly or explicitly, each postulates a systemic breakdown of established forms of urban life (generally associated with postwar, Fordist-Keynesian capitalism) and the subsequent proliferation of social, political, discursive, and representational struggles to create a transformed, “neoliberalized” urban order.

The concept of neoliberalism has been widely used to characterize the resurgence of market-based institutional shifts and policy realignments across the world economy

during the post-1980s period (see, for example, Fourcade-Gourinchas and Babb 2002; Gill 1998; Bourdieu 1998). While neoliberalism refers, technically, to a set of doctrines regarding the appropriate framework for economic regulation, the term has been appropriated by scholars and activists to describe the organizational, political and ideological reorganization of capitalism that has been imposed through the attempted institutionalization of such “free market” doctrines in specific historical and geographical contexts (Agnew and Corbridge 1994; Brenner and Theodore 2002a). Until quite recently, neoliberalism has been investigated primarily with reference to national regulatory trends (for instance, the rise of Reaganism in the USA and Thatcherism in the UK) and supranational institutional realignments (for instance, the role of the World Bank and the IMF in imposing structural adjustment programs upon developing countries). Since the late 1990s, however, there has been an impressive body of work on neoliberalism among urbanists and sociospatial theorists, who have reflected in some detail upon its underlying political-economic dynamics and its associated geographies stretching from the global to the local scales (for an excellent overview, see Peck 2003; 2001).

While the meaning of concepts such as neoliberalism and neoliberalization continues to be a topic of intense debate, recent theoretical work in this field has generated a number of important insights that arguably have significant implications for empirical research on political-economic restructuring at all spatial scales (Brenner and Theodore 2002b; Peck and Tickell 2002; Tickell and Peck 2003; Gough 2002). For present purposes, we offer a series of brief propositions that is intended to capture some of the key ideas developed in this emergent literature:

1. *Neoliberalism is a process.* Neoliberalism is not a fixed end-state or condition; rather, it represents a *process* of market-driven

social and spatial transformation (“neoliberalization”);

2. *Neoliberalism is articulated through contextually specific strategies.* Neoliberalism does not exist in a single, “pure” form, but is always articulated through historically and geographically specific *strategies* of institutional transformation and ideological rearticulation;
3. *Neoliberalism hinges upon the active mobilization of state power.* Neoliberalism does not entail the “rolling back” of state regulation and the “rolling forward” of the market; instead, it generates a complex reconstitution of state-economy relations in which state institutions are actively mobilized to promote market-based regulatory arrangements;
4. *Neoliberalization generates path-dependent outcomes.* Neoliberalism does not engender identical (economic, political or spatial) outcomes in each context in which it is imposed; rather, as place-, territory- and scale-specific neoliberal projects collide with inherited regulatory landscapes, contextually specific pathways of institutional reorganization crystallize that reflect the legacies of earlier modes of regulation and forms of contestation;
5. *Neoliberalization is intensely contested.* Neoliberalization, understood as the attempt to impose market-based regulatory arrangements and sociocultural norms, is aggressively contested by diverse social forces concerned to preserve non-market or “socialized” forms of coordination that constrain unfettered capital accumulation;
6. *Neoliberalization exacerbates regulatory failure.* The imposition of neoliberalism has not established a framework for stable economic development, political regulation or social cohesion. Rather, neoliberalization projects are deeply contradictory insofar as they tend to undermine many of the economic, institutional and geographical preconditions for economic and social

revitalization. Thus, instead of resolving the political-economic crisis tendencies of contemporary capitalism, neoliberalism seriously exacerbates them by engendering various forms of market failure, state failure and governance failure.

7. *The project of neoliberalism continues to evolve.* The failures of neoliberalism have not triggered its abandonment or dissolution as a project of radical institutional transformation. To the contrary, this project has continued to reinvent itself—politically, organizationally, spatially—in close conjunction with its pervasively dysfunctional social consequences.

It is against the backdrop of these theoretical discussions that many scholars have begun to interpret contemporary *urban* transformations as expressions and outcomes of broader neoliberalization processes. However, the operationalization of such insights in the context of concrete, empirical research on cities presents significant methodological challenges. In our own work, we have coined the term “actually existing neoliberalism” in order to underscore the profound disjuncture between orthodox neoliberal ideology and the complex, contested and uneven geographies of regulatory change that have emerged in and through projects of neoliberalization (Brenner and Theodore 2002a). In addition, the concept of actually existing neoliberalism is intended to demarcate a terrain for further critical inquiry into the contextually specific pathways of neoliberalization that are crystallizing in cities and regions throughout the world economy.

From our point of view, one of the contributions of the articles in this special issue is to begin to explore this research terrain on the urban geographies of actually existing neoliberalism. All of the articles investigate the dynamics of neoliberal urban restructuring “on the ground,” through focused case studies of particular strategies and struggles within a rapidly evolving institutional and ideological landscape. While the articles do not, for the most part, engage directly with

the theoretical issues outlined above, they can be read, nonetheless, as attempts to map some of the contextually specific geographies of actually existing neoliberalism that are being imagined, constructed and resisted in North American cities. They confront this task in a number of ways that, in turn, reflect at least three overlapping interpretive perspectives on the nature of neoliberal urbanization. Within these perspectives, neoliberalism is conceived, respectively: (a) as a modality of urban governance; (b) as a spatially selective political strategy; and (c) as a form of discourse, ideology and representation.

### Neoliberalism as a modality of urban governance

First, and on the most general level, the preceding articles conceive neoliberalism as a framework that powerfully structures the parameters for the governance of contemporary urban development—for instance, by defining the character of “appropriate” policy choices, by constraining democratic participation in political life, by diffusing dissent and oppositional mobilization, and/or by disseminating new ideological visions of social and moral order in the city. In each case, the contributions track the discourses, strategies and alliances of political elites as they advance policy proposals aimed at (re)igniting market-led growth while glossing over the socially regressive outcomes that are the frequent by-products of such initiatives. From this perspective, neoliberalism is identified primarily with supralocal forces—for instance, new forms of capital accumulation or new regimes of state power—but the latter are understood to have enveloped cities within an increasingly market-dominated governance regime.

The contributors elaborate this perspective in a number of ways. For instance, in their wide-ranging case study, Roger Keil and Julie-Anne Boudreau draw attention to the neoliberalization of municipal governance in the Toronto city-region in the aftermath of

the 1980s economic downturn and the restructuring of Canadian intergovernmental relations. They document the rescaling of metropolitan governance that has accompanied federal devolution, regional institution building, and the resultant reshuffling of political alliances at the local level. They show that, ironically, despite strident anti-statist rhetoric among many national, regional and local political elites, an activist, market-driven form of statecraft has been consolidated in Toronto. Just as crucially, Keil and Boudreau outline a variety of regulatory failures and political struggles that have emerged in the wake of these political and institutional transformations. According to Keil and Boudreau, rather than resolving basic problems of urban governance in the Toronto metropolitan region, neoliberalization projects have triggered new forms of elite strategizing and popular resistance in key regulatory arenas such as economic development, environmental policy and transportation policy. Neoliberalization thus reconstitutes the terrain of political-economic governance—and social struggle—in the urban region as a whole.

Meanwhile, in his study of mass transit infrastructure investment in Vancouver, Matti Siemiatycki examines the character of public planning processes in a political setting that has embraced an enhanced role for private-sector actors in (formally) public-sector mega projects. Grounded in claims of private-sector efficiency and enforced through national, provincial, and local fiscal policies, the promotion of private-sector initiative has led to a loss of transparency within the policy-making process. The prioritization of private-sector involvement has become entrenched institutionally as public-private partnerships have been elevated in local political discourse to a type of “best practice” in urban governance. Yet, as Siemiatycki demonstrates, the shifting spending priorities associated with these newly consolidated public-private partnerships are likely to result in chronic underinvestment in the services upon which most low-income commuters are dependent. Relatedly, Joe Grengs studies the evolution of mass

transit policy in the United States, focusing specifically on policy change and social struggle in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. Grengs argues that mass transit policy in Los Angeles is abdicating its traditional role as a redistributive mechanism due to at least two trends—first, a shrinking public sector under conditions of national and state-level neoliberalism; and second, a shift in policy priorities that systematically neglects the needs of low-income, transit-dependent residents. Within this neoliberalizing policy landscape, Grengs argues, funding for public services needed by poor, central-city residents is being reduced in favor of transit spending intended to ameliorate the traffic congestion and air pollution generated by affluent suburban commuters. In this sense, as both Siemiatycki and Grengs indicate, neoliberalism is generating new forms of empowerment and disempowerment within a key sphere of urban governance.

In her article, Liette Gilbert explores the interplay between national immigration policies, local regulatory restructuring and socio-political struggle in present-day Montreal. Through a sympathetic critical engagement with the film *Tar Angel*, Gilbert shows how the protagonist, a political refugee from Algeria, experiences the ongoing neoliberalization of everyday life in one of Montreal’s growing port-of-entry immigrant neighborhoods. Here, the mutually reinforcing effects of neoliberal policy priorities—market liberalization, international capital mobility, and domestic welfare-state cutbacks—are clearly evident. For, as Gilbert underscores, migrants are being channeled into depressed sectors of the local economy at a time when national governments are devolving fiscal and policy-making responsibilities to lower tiers of government. Meanwhile, anti-immigrant sentiments are stoked by political actors who cynically exploit nationalist impulses in order to shrink the public sector and to impose stricter welfare eligibility rules based on citizenship rather than on residency or economic hardship. Gilbert thus shows how the process of neoliberalization entails not only a reorientation of policy priorities, but

also a remaking of political identities as the meaning of urban and national “community” is redefined.

In their contribution, Gerda Wekerle and Paul Jackson extend Neil Smith’s (1996) concept of the “revanchist city” to anti-terrorism campaigns being carried out in U.S. cities. According to the authors, local law-and-order policies and new urban security measures are being rescaled to achieve national security objectives in the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> era. Furthermore, the Bush Administration’s “homeland security” initiatives have recursively shaped (and served to legitimate) local-level policing strategies that increasingly restrict political action, as well as monitor and control population movements through urban space. In short, the new “security agenda” is a strategically selective one that has been insinuated into the everyday life of the city while also targeting radical environmental and other social movements in the name of combating “domestic terrorism.” While Wekerle and Jackson frame their article primarily as an analysis of the post-9/11 security agenda, it can be read as an account of some of the new political and spatial strategies that are being mobilized by neoliberalizing state institutions.

In sum, all of the contributions show how market-dominated regulatory arrangements and political norms are being imposed upon cities across North America through a complex interplay of global, national and local political-economic realignments. In this sense, they all demonstrate how supralocal patterns of neoliberalization are being “urbanized” so as to fundamentally reconstitute the foundations of political-economic regulation, social contestation and everyday life within major North American cities.

### **Neoliberalism as a spatially selective political strategy**

Second, the detailed case studies presented by the authors also provide important insights

into the spatial selectivity (see Jones 1997) of neoliberalism as a political strategy. The impacts of the policies highlighted in these papers do not fall uniformly across the urban landscape. Rather, either implicitly or explicitly, these policies have extremely variegated geographical implications insofar as they differentially impact particular locations, places and scales.

Gilbert, for example, notes that national immigration policies are now redirecting immigrants away from prosperous city-regions and towards laggard rural zones as a way of reigniting processes of regional development. In so doing, Gilbert argues, immigration policies work to constitute a (more or less) captive labor pool in areas in which employers face severe labor shortages. Likewise, Grengs shows how mass transit policies are increasingly favoring the interests of suburban commuters, while low-income, central-city, mass-transit-dependent residents witness significant cutbacks in transit funding. Siemiatycki, meanwhile, emphasizes the strategic centrality of large-scale investments in urban transportation infrastructure to the establishment of neoliberalized governance arrangements, such as public-private partnerships. In their article, Wekerle and Jackson show how, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, anti-sprawl initiatives have lost momentum in the United States as deconcentrated settlement patterns are increasingly promoted as a basis for maintaining public safety. At the same time, the authors illustrate a number of ways in which a new “geography of fear” is being consolidated as urban spaces are increasingly militarized through the so-called “War on Terror.” And, finally, Keil and Boudreau analyze the ways in which neoliberalization projects in the Toronto region have entailed a multifaceted rescaling of inherited political geographies. As they indicate, the politics of neoliberalism in Toronto have been articulated in significant measure through efforts to reorganize the geographies of governance within the region as a whole. In light of this, anti-neoliberal social movements have likewise had to create new geographies

of resistance through which to oppose the politics of the “competitive city.”

Taken together, the contributions underscore the impossibility of equating neoliberal political strategies with any singular spatial strategy or geographical pattern. For, within each national, regional and local context, neoliberalization projects are reorganizing inherited spatial configurations in highly variegated, place- and scale-specific ways. The point, however, is not that spatial organization is a static platform on which the politics of neoliberalism are articulated. Rather, we might read the contributions to this special issue as efforts to decipher the intimate, if contextually specific, linkages between neoliberalization strategies and urban-regional sociospatial restructuring. In other words, spatial organization is at once a foundation, an arena and a mechanism for the mobilization of neoliberal political strategies.

### Neoliberalism as a form of discourse, ideology and representation

Finally, the papers in this special issue provide vivid examples of how neoliberal political ideology may exert a dominant, perhaps even hegemonic, influence on urban governance. Whether cloaked in the discourses of inter-local competitiveness (Keil and Boudreau), narrow economic or institutional efficiency (Keil and Boudreau, Grengs), urban entrepreneurialism (Keil and Boudreau, Siemiatycki), or urban disorder (Wekerle and Jackson, Gilbert), such representations of market rule present an idealized neoliberal “utopia” wherein social relations are said to be governed by the principles of unfettered competition and exchange.

Beyond this pervasive naturalization of market relations, there is an even more sinister side to this emergent neoliberal *Realpolitik*: several of the papers provide examples of how such discourses often are fused with other reactionary or “militant particularist” discourses by political elites aiming to legiti-

mize both neoliberal ideology and more generally repressive political measures. For example, Gilbert shows how anti-immigrant backlash in some quarters has complemented neoliberal calls for reductions in public services and the discursive valorization of low-wage work. In this context, insertion and assimilation policies may effectively consign recent immigrants to social spaces of extreme economic and political marginalization. Likewise, Wekerle and Jackson show how expanded definitions of terrorism have ensnared certain environmental activist groups whose activities disrupt local business activities.

From this point of view, urban neoliberalism is not only a form of political, institutional and geographical change; it is also, centrally, a means of transforming the dominant political imaginaries on which basis people understand the limits and possibilities of the urban experience. In an urban context, as elsewhere, this redefinition of political imagination entails not only the rearticulation of assumptions about the appropriate role of state institutions, but also, more generally, the reworking of inherited conceptions of citizenship, community and everyday life. The contributions included here do not delve at length into such matters, but in thematizing the ideological, discursive and representational aspects of neoliberalism, they usefully suggest a number of directions in which these dimensions might be explored more systematically.

### Concluding reflections

Clearly, the debate on neoliberalism and the city has only just begun. Recent scholarship, including the contributions to this special issue of *CITY*, has opened up a number of new theoretical and empirical perspectives on the ongoing neoliberalization of urban space. Just as importantly, scholars have now begun to consider more seriously the tendential crystallization of new forms of resistance to this profoundly uneven and contradictory

process. Yet, key conceptual, methodological and empirical issues remain to be explored: our understanding of “market rule,” its strategic and ideological foundations, its institutional manifestations, its contradictions and its variegated local consequences, remain seriously incomplete. While these challenges arguably obtain at all spatial scales, cities and city-regions represent key spatial arenas in which they may be confronted as the urbanization of neoliberalism proceeds apace. The articles included in this special issue contribute to the ongoing project of deciphering the urban geographies of actually existing neoliberalism.

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