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**NEO LIBERALISM AND URBAN CHANGE: STRETCHING  
A GOOD IDEA TOO FAR?**

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Does neo liberalism matter for cities, urbanisation processes, urban governance and policies? Surely but what is this suppose to mean? How and to what extent? Those questions are important as neo liberalism is a nasty and ferocious political project and paradigm and as the term as become over-used without much care and precision in urban studies around the world.

The question of neo liberalism and the city has been central to the body of work produced over the last 15 years or so by the three amigos, N. Brenner, J. Peck and N. Theodore. In a remarkable series of publications, they have developed an in-depth analysis of neo liberalism and the city, a nuanced and intellectually stimulating set of sophisticated arguments about the making of the hegemonic neo liberal project and its confrontation with different terrains. This intellectual project has rightly stressed the importance of neo liberalism and greatly influenced our understanding of it. I share many points with their analysis, including the importance given to neo liberalism as a ferocious ideology and political project, the historical importance of M. Thatcher to implement this project (also R. Reagan), neo liberalism as an explaining variable of urban transformations (Peck 2013), the understanding of various geographies of neo liberalisation, neo liberalisation as a process (never complete) and the fact that the crisis and austerity polices are rather proofs of its robustness. They also importantly make the point that cities are more than sites for top town neo liberalization. Some of them have resources and capacities to constitute neo liberalization processes in relations with other cities and other levels of

government. Neo liberalism is indeed an important paradigm (Hall 1993) leading to serious processes of neo liberalization that are politically cruel and unfair. Its analytical importance as a concept in social sciences should not be abandoned. However, it may require qualification.

With all due respect and political sympathy for their innovative and important work, this contribution suggests to follow an alternative path (arguing that there is no one best way) to that developed within the intellectual framework of Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2002, 2010, 2013). They examine neo liberalism in its different forms to analyse particular contexts of implementation, various processes (even contradictory one) of roll out and roll in neo liberalisation. Their strategy has been macro-scale, very constructivist at time, and all-encompassing. However, one could identify a contradiction between a rather deterministic macro framework relying upon a very fluid and constructivist definition of neo liberalism.

Within a large body of the urban studies world, neo liberalism has been referred to as a great deus ex machina without much qualification. Too much of the literature has become confused in particular about the relationship between liberalism, globalised capitalism, and neo liberalism. This is a point rightly mentioned by Brenner, Peck and Theodore, who noticed in their 2010 paper (p.183) that they were quite perplexed with the conceptualisation and use of the term « neo liberalism » in urban studies :

« The concept has become, simultaneously, a terminological focal point for debates

on the trajectory of post-1980s regulatory transformations and an expression of the deep disagreements and confusions that characterize those debates. Consequently, 'neoliberalism' has become something of a rascal concept - promiscuously pervasive, yet inconsistently defined, empirically imprecise and frequently contested ».

The paper is a contribution to the debate about this « rascal concept ».

At times, the self-labelling as "critical" on the part of some urban studies scholars, seems to be an excuse for weak empirical research, an over reliance on fuzzy conceptual frameworks, and a lack of attempt to design research to contribute to analyse or explain urban change. There are many ways to be involved in critical work in urban studies, such posturing is rarely the most convincing. Neo liberalism has been hailed as one of the main factors of transformation of cities all around the world. It's a key issue to examine. However, too often in urban studies, neo liberalism has been seen as explaining all sorts of transformation in different places, leading to assumptions of global convergence, and explaining anything taking place in cities from gentrification to the changing forms of organization of waste disposal, the role of NGOs, the rise of mega projects and sometimes of new forms of democratic participation and governmentality.

Those claims are too often crudely overblown. Nevertheless, neo liberalism, as a paradigm and a political project, has beyond doubt been very successful in changing representations of problems, providing programmes to conservative politicians and

destroying Keynesian arrangements, with consequences for the organizations of states and cities. Far too often however, the arguments about neo liberalism are general, unprecise, lacking discussion of any specific mechanisms, missing empirical data and marked by confusion between a number of processes such as globalisation, financierisation, privatisation, or blunt capitalist transformation. By contrast, in his classic Marxist vein, David Harvey's precise analysis (2005) clearly relates neo liberalism to changing power relations and class relations, and the capitalist accumulation process, including the destruction of existing institutions.

The paper aims at sharpening the analysis of neo liberalism, using a different research strategy which has its own different strengths and weaknesses. The paper argues that it may be fruitful to be clearer about the content of neo liberalism rather than adopting an all-encompassing constructivist framework and second, that neo liberalism may not explain that much about current transformation of urbanisation processes and cities. Mechanisms have to be specified and limits have to be set about the appropriate use of the concept: urban worlds and cities do not change all the time about everything.

Neo liberalism is indeed a political project, a nasty one, related to a paradigm. As a paradigm neo liberalism should be more clearly distinguished from liberalism, a point often neglected by urban scholars. Too often, the critical stand against liberalism, policies, state interventions, politics dominated by the bourgeoisie was seen as so obvious that it did not require much nuances to criticise neo liberalism

(Harvey 2005). Our strategy to critically deal with neo liberalism is by contrast to try to characterise it and to take this paradigm seriously. After all, the term « neo liberal » may largely be a misnomer, as neo liberalism is very much anti liberal, paving the way for a different kind of iron cage (King, 1999, Gamble 1996).

The paper firstly suggests that constructivism makes the neo liberal argument too elastic thus limiting its explanatory power. Neo liberalization is a process but it might be worth exploring some of the substantial characteristics of neo liberalism by contrasting it with liberalism. An element of clarification is suggested by contrasting neo liberalism with liberalism thus stressing major differences in relation to market failures or rights of individuals. Rather than embracing the idea of multiple ever changing forms of neo liberalism and the constructivist underpinning of this position, the paper suggests, in parallel to Michael Storper, to identify a set of central points to define neo liberalism by contrast to liberalism<sup>i</sup>.

Thirdly, the paper discusses the neo liberalization of cities and urban policies, and argues that cities change for many reasons, neo liberalism being only one of them.

#### 1) Stretching a good idea too far

Firstly, let's sound some notes of nuance about the impact of neo liberalism by starting with two quotes from major neo liberalism scholars. Mitchell Dean, the great Australian Foucauldian scholar, has voiced some worries about the conceptualisation of neo liberalism:

Neoliberalism, it might be argued, is a rather overblown notion, which has been used, usually by a certain kind of critic, to characterize everything from a particular brand of free-market political philosophy and a wide variety of innovations in public management to patterns and processes found in and across diverse political spaces and territories around the globe (2014, p.150).

British political theorist John Clarke made a similar point (2008, p.135 and 138):

... the core problems of neo-liberalism as a concept: it is omnipresent and it is promiscuous. There may be a third: that neo-liberalism is omnipotent .....There is little in the present for which neo-liberalism cannot be held responsible. ...I encountered the following list of sites, institutions, processes, and practices that were identified as neo-liberal (and I do not think the list is exhaustive): states, spaces, logics, techniques, technologies, discourses, discursive framework, ideologies, ways of thinking, projects, agendas, programs, governmentality, measures, regimes, development, ethnodevelopment, development imaginaries, global forms of control, social policies, multiculturalism, audit cultures, managerialism, restructuring, reform, privatization, regulatory frameworks, governance, good governance, NGOs, third sector, subjects, subjectivities, individualization, professionalization, normalization, market logics, market forms of calculation, the destatalization of government and the degovernmentalization of the state. That's an impressive list.....what is and what is not neo liberal ?...».

This will sound all too familiar to urban scholars.

Secondly, however contested, there is a set of ideas that may be labelled as a « neo liberalism », paradigm. In the literature it may be conceptualised as a political and a cultural project, as a class legitimation project , as an ideology or a paradigm, or as the new governmentality. For the sake of the present paper, neo liberalism is used as a paradigm. A set of ideas has been in existence since the 1920s in their early form

and gained prominence, from the 1970s onwards. This set of neo liberal ideas has deeply influenced a number of policies all over the globe. One way or another, neo liberal ideas have had long term disastrous impacts on a number of economic policies in particular (Blyth 2013, Gamble, 1993, Schmidt and Thatcher, 2014).

Thirdly, there are many ways to deal with neo liberalism. The term is now used in all sorts of ways and some would disregard the concept for that reason. What is new? As is always the case in social science, once a term is widely used, there are creative, innovative, contradictory ways to deal with it. Some will analyse all the discourses and the genealogy of the different uses (Audier 2012), or the use within different national ideological traditions (Denord, 2007). One strategy, followed for example by Jamie Peck in his book « Construction of the neo liberal reason » is to stress the genealogy and ongoing diverse and multiple forms hybridized in different contexts, the « polymorphic » neo liberalism:

As a discrepant, contradictory, and shape-shifting presence, found in a wide range of political-economic settings, governance regimes, and social formations, neoliberalism will not be fixed. In some respects, it is more appropriate to define neoliberalism—or the process of neoliberalization—through its recurring contradictions and uneven realization than in reference to some presumed, transcendental essence (Peck, 2010)

Peck concludes that “neo liberalism defies explanation in terms of fixed coordinates”. Taking a constructivist position, stressing the different meanings in different contexts, he concludes that no fixed definition should be used<sup>ii</sup>. This is obviously a smart argument in the framework of a classic constructivist epistemology. But with

such a non definition, bits of neo liberalism are everywhere and changing all the time. It's no surprise if any attempt to explain or characterise processes of urban change is made perilous if not desperate. Despite the fuzziness of the non definition, the argument is intellectually ambitious :

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 (Brenner, Peck and Theodore, 2013)

The emphasis on the fluidity of neo liberalism and, at the same time, on the strength of the process may be seen as an elegant « tour de passe passe » where many things can be dealt with, and all sorts of explanation brought forward. In other ways, this combination of structural processes and constructivist conceptualisation may be seen as a contradiction, at the very least as a not very convincing research strategy.

Also, there is a difference between trying to characterise a relatively stable definition of neo liberalism at a given moment, within a particular period, and to essentialize the concept. I mostly differ in the analysis of hegemony, the definition given to neo liberalism and the conclusion derived for understanding current urban transformations with the neo liberalism glasses. The very constructivist understanding of neo liberalism limits the capacity to mobilise it in order to explain urban change. Even if Brenner, Peck and Theodore might argue that in good Marxian analysis there must be a tension between abstract theoretical concept and a more

diverse set of historical situations, the definition of the concept raises serious problems<sup>iii</sup>. That is where the argument presented here differs from them.

Despite Peck's stimulating argument published in his paper « Explaining 'with' neo liberalism » (2013) there may be some other ways, possibly more fruitful, to explain urban change with neo liberalism. By contrast, this paper is about the sharpening of our analytical understanding of neo liberalism in order to be more precise about its consequences for cities or urbanisation processes. As with every intellectual strategy, this one has limits: it runs the risk of reifying or simplifying a particular version of « neo liberalism », but allows more precision in its use to analyse change and to interpret the transformations of cities.

Instead of following a highly constructivist route and underlining inconsistent use of the term over time, let's follow a « moderately constructivist » road. The following paragraphs aim at reflecting upon the making of this category and at suggesting one interpretation of neo liberalism. There is no need for transcendentalism. It should be emphasised that the interpretation put forward in the paper cannot justify a claim about what « true » neo liberalism is. Understandings of neo liberalism vary over time but the situation is not so fluid. The paper is not based upon an exhaustive analysis of the genealogy to identify the « real » concept<sup>iv</sup>. Let's quote Venugopal (2015, p.15) because the spirit of his paper echoes the argument:

But even if neoliberalism were such an extraordinarily tangled and messy phenomenon that has myriad, contradictory forms, there must nevertheless be some minimal set of defining common characteristics that would warrant preserving it. Much of what is explained – and hence left under-

explained – as neoliberal can benefit, if it were simply to be disconnected from this universalizing framework and if neoliberalism were to be reconceptualized down in a sharper and unambiguous way to one of its constituent forms.

The constructivist approach is a classic research epistemology. In the case of neo liberalism, this has led to overstretching the concept and blurring the capacity to identify specific mechanisms. A first order of clarification is required distinguishing liberalism and neo liberalism. This is important because liberal democratic orders provide a general context for many societies, but not all governing ideas and practices in these societies are neo liberalism.

2) Liberalism and the quiet state versus Neo liberalism, illiberalism and the market society

Neo liberalism has profound roots in liberalism, something which is very clear in the work of Hayek for instance. There is no need here to go back to the different conceptions of liberalism emerging in Italian cities of the Renaissance, in England after Cromwell in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, in Scotland or in France during the Enlightenment, in the American and French Revolutions, in the synthesis and development of John Stuart Mill or in Bentham's seminal work on utilitarianism. In Britain, Germany, the US, France, Italy, particular liberal traditions have developed over time now hybridized within different traditions all over the globe. They are many variations of the liberal tradition (Freedman 2008)<sup>v</sup>. In his paper (same issue), Storper gives a precise account of the relations between traditions of liberalism and neo liberalism.

Liberal social thought was the modern social rival and contestation to all forms of conservative, royalist, traditionalist or divine conceptions of social organization in order to replace royal power with limited states and self-governed democracies. Liberalism is best understood as a political economy comprising some economic elements, some political elements (states and markets) and as Gamble emphasises, strong emphasis on a different conception of households (2013)<sup>vi</sup>. It was the ideology of the upcoming bourgeoisies within nation states in the making. The core of liberal thought in the classical writings of Stuart Mill is a principle of restraint on organized state power in favor of creating a large sphere of individual autonomy and liberty to act, which is “liberal” in the sense that there is a presumption in favor of the freedom of the individual unless there is a specific and justifiable reason in limiting this freedom. The state should be quiet, benevolent, concentrating on the policing and on enforcing property rights. Moderate interventions might be envisaged in the case of market failure, hence limited tax and the presence of rules to limit its interventionist role. The emphasis on individual rights and freedoms raised a number of complementary issues, i.e. the coordination of a complex society, the question of how social order could be achieved and how some collective goods could emerge in such an individualistic world. But as Tocqueville stresses, that runs the risk of the state actually limiting democracy.

Liberalism has also been shaped by the rise of the bourgeoisie associated to forms of rationalisation as stressed by Max Weber. Laval (2007) has in particular emphasised the importance of utilitarian ideas and the work of Jeremy Bentham, i.e. the rise of

men as a calculating beast, looking at maximising their interest - the rise of the *homo economicus*. For the Foucauldians, liberalism is a form of governmentality, or as Dean put it after Foucault « certain ways of governing, which we will broadly define as liberal modes of government, are distinguished by trying to work through the freedom or capacities of the governed ». Beyond the question of individual rights, freedom and rule of law, Foucauldians emphasise liberalism as a particular form of governmentality characterised by knowledge, means, calculating devices or an art of government « considered as an art and rationality of government, it views the operation of individual liberty as necessary to the ends of government ». (Dean, 2010 p.51)

Liberalism is therefore an attempt to reconcile the search for private interest with the making of the collective good, emphasising the autonomy of the individuals in part guaranteed by the state (including property rights of course) and the rule of law.

Four points are central in the discussion in the classical writings on liberalism :

- Firstly, most liberals accept the idea of market failure, which can be monopoly, corruption, failure to deliver services or even, not often, too much inequality. This recognition allowed for the rise of progressive liberalism over the 20<sup>th</sup> century including Keynesianism. The intervention of the state can be justified to deal with market failures. But that point should not be stretched too far: for most liberals, the question of inequality is not central but residual<sup>vii</sup>.
- Secondly, liberalism is not always associated to democracy, but the emphasis on the rights and autonomy of individuals suggest some distrust of the

authoritarian tendency of the state or oligarchies, and a distrust of illiberal policies.

- Thirdly, liberals tend to promote harmonious, moral (Amable 2011) , natural views of market societies controlled by hard working bourgeois, reconciling merit, hard work, « enrichissez vous » strategies and the search for the common good, thus neglecting or ignoring power, class relations, conflicts, or the exclusion of other social and ethnic groups.
- Fourthly, liberalism often emphasises the question of political order and fear of protest and revolutions

Instead of giving a rather comprehensive and sometime floating conceptualisation of neo liberalism, it may be useful to identify key features of neo liberalism contrasted with those of liberalism identified above, beyond the issue of the intensification of market relations<sup>viii</sup>.

Of course, neo liberalism has many strands - from the Austrian group, German ordoliberalism, Hayek and the mount Pelerin Society, the Virginia Public Choice school, the Chicago School of Economics of Milton Friedman, or the economic libertarians in the US (Gamble 2013). Most authors agree there are contradictions between different currents, with more or less strong elements of continuity with liberalism. As always therefore, it is difficult to define the beast. In his book "*Constructions of the neo liberal reasons*", Jamie Peck clearly underlines the non linear development of this paradigm, shaped by the input from Hayek, Friedman and the Mont Pelerin Society, from

different experiences, including the contradictions, the strange mix of ideas, the intellectual project, the process, the institutional matrix, the relations to capitalism and globalisation, the Thatcher touch of neo liberalism, or what he eloquently calls “normalized neo liberalism.....-which- can fade into invisibility” in the American debate.

However, acknowledging that neo liberalism is more than a simple set of monolithic ideas does not necessary lead to the most fluid and constructivist position. Dean argues that

“if the notion is to be of any use, it needs to be severely circumscribed, above all to a limited range of schools or forms of thought and certain practices and policies concerned with the construction of market and market-like relations, and fostering and utilizing capacities of economic freedom. To do so would mean that the term should no longer be used to characterize all aspects of state governing in contemporary liberal democracies and the majority world beyond them » (2014)

One way to make sense of neo liberalism’s diversity is to focus on different periods as suggested by Stedman-Jones (2012). Neo liberalism has also been interpreted in more direct class terms most convincingly by Harvey (2005), or in Polanyan terms in relation to the making of the market society or through the template provided by Foucault that has led to the search for a neo liberal governmentality (Dean, 2010, Miller and Rose 2007). Neo liberalism has some points in common with liberalism. Classical Liberalism and Neoliberalism are both concerned with circumscribing the power of the state, so as to promote a society based on freedom from either arbitrary

power of state elites and managers (authoritarianism) or the possibility of majority or conservative-traditionalist tyrannies (collectivism). They also make property rights the cornerstone of society and are always worried about the « tax state » (Gamble 2013).

Several points can be stressed in order to analyse the core of neo liberalism. This is an interpretation, in no way a universalist definitive account. Neo liberalism can also be defined in relation to its political enemies, socialism, social democracy, all sorts of leftist or green ideas, and progressive liberalism for instance in the form of Keynesianism.

- The first point is about the market. The market is seen as always good. It is by definition a superior form of social and economic organisations, and an end in itself. This is a major difference with both political and economic liberalism: *there is no such thing as market failures*. Solutions to problems or crisis are always requiring more markets<sup>ix</sup>. Markets should govern every domains of social life and as long as some activities make money, they are legitimate. State regulations should be limited to extreme cases. The capacity of the state to tax has to be strictly limited. By contrast, for Liberals, markets are efficient for a wide range of goods and services, but there are exceptions. When externalities are high, when there are free rider effects, when transaction costs are very high in decentralized markets, and when there are economies of scale that make for the existence of natural monopoly, then public provision is often

more efficient than private markets. Neo liberals do not see the market as natural, however, but as Polanyi had so clearly understood, the market has to be created, constructed consolidated, imposed. In other word « laissez faire was planned ». In Friedman's account in particular the state has to be mobilised to create the market society, to disciplin the individuals, a language of disciplin that is prominent in Hayek's thinking too.

- The role of the state is central to extend property rights and to enforce market logics. That includes coercion and violence. The mobilisation of the authority of the state is required to force a change in the conduct of conduct, to impose the creation of a new political and social order. In many ways, neo liberalism contradicts some pillars of liberalism by supporting illiberal measures and policies in the interest of the market and does not protect the freedom of individuals. The state is crucial in two ways in the making of the market society (Scott, Le Galès, 2010 : 1) to control and destroy social relations, 2) to create market actors by institutional mechanisms that maximize insecurity and unpredictability. Central to the constitution of an economic subject is the structure of rewards through which the social order seeks to assure its maintenance and reproduction. Market societies are established by new institutions which legitimise, reward, and sanction different behaviours (Scott, 2012). Wacquant (2009) has also argued that one central element of neo liberalism is the rise of the penal state and the criminalization of the poor or the migrants hence the sharp increase of imprisonment in the US (this is less

so in the UK, less relevant in Western Europe, although some similarities are witnessed e.g. in Sao Paolo or Mexico).

- Hayek has written at length on the problem of politics. In neo liberalism, the question of the articulation between the individual interest and the general interest is simple: the maximisation of the individual interest more or less automatically results in the maximisation of the general interest<sup>x</sup>. Many neo liberal strands are marked by systematic criticisms against politics, democracy, seen in terms of rentiers, corruption, clientele. They advocate strict rules and a different form of politics excluding the people. Democracy is not a priority, to say the least (remember Chile) when forms of oligarchy or plutocracy do not seem to be seen as issues. By contrast to liberals, the rule of law is used in aggressive ways to protect the rights of firms and property rights against anything else, including the states. K.Pistor has analysed the development of transnational laws, norms, private arbitration or bilateral investment treaties creating extensive rights aiming at structuring a hardly reversible political order protecting large firms and property rights before anything else, profoundly undermining urban governance capacities or more generally self governance capacity (Milhaupt, Pistor 2008).
- General competition in all domains is seen as a universal norm (a central element of the neo liberal governmentality for Foucauldians). For them, the neo liberal governmentality is defined as the discourses and dispositifs

determining the government of populations in accordance to the principle of universal competition (Dardot and Laval 2009). Firms, individuals, households, governments should be organised along those lines. The conception of freedom has moved from autonomy to the disciplined, self governed, calculating, *entrepreneurial homo economicus* who may be incentivised by rules. As stressed by Dean (2002, p.157), for Hayek, freedom is not natural but an artefact resulting from the development of civilization and its disciplines. For more Foucauldian scholars, neo liberalism is therefore the prioritization of the self, the individuals, the personhood (Skegg, 2011). The individual is disconnected from the collective dimension. In order to be recognised, to gain value, to be worth, individuals have to transform themselves as performing entrepreneurs of their self. In other words, neo liberalism is also about the development of new metrics and measurement about what is a worthy person, the production of the self as an entrepreneur (Block and Somers 2014).

- Contemporary neo-liberalism is little concerned with the concentration of private power and wealth, in contrast to classical Liberalism, early neo-liberalism and all the social philosophies. As stressed by Crouch (2011), by contrast to liberals, *neo liberals ignore the threat to freedom, and the resources accumulated by the large firms, their capacity to constrain the democratic process and to edict regulations in their favour, including to limit competition (in obvious contradiction with the gospel of generalised competition)*. As seen in

the case of contemporary financial markets, corruption is largely tolerated at the centre of the system. Indeed, contemporary neoliberalism finds justification to use state power to enhance private economic power and wealth, including active intervention to preserve it, as was the case with rescuing the world financial system after 2008. Its advocates a combination of public choice theory and “efficient inequality” arguments, arguing that state intervention should be used to counter the majority’s tyranny and other collectivist forces that it believes would destroy the efficiency-enhancing qualities of concentrated wealth and power. Allied to the preceding point, contemporary *neo-liberalism ignores inequality in income distribution or wealth, arguing that it comes from efficient markets and has benefits for economic growth and social mobility.*

- Neo liberalism may be seen also a social process, creating opportunities for some groups to alter existing social relations, hierarchical orders, and challenge old elites (Evans and Sewell 2012). Beyond the strengthening of capitalist social relations, the group led by P.Hall and M.Lamont has argued that sometimes, to some extent, those opportunities were used to combat, sometimes successfully, gender or ethnic inequalities (Hall and Lamont, 2012, Kymlicka, 2012). Neo liberalism is mostly constraining, may be violent, but may also be enabling in some particular contexts.

In the world of urban studies, as argued in section 1, overstressing the concept of neo liberalism has become a regular feature to characterize urbanization processes, the trajectories of cities all over the world or various urban policy changes. Distinguishing neo liberalism from liberalism, and providing a working definition aims at providing intellectual tools to explain and characterize more precisely forms of neo liberal urbanisation<sup>xi</sup>.

### 3) Neo liberalization as a factor with limited scope to explain urban transformations?

This section first aims at presenting an ideal type of the neo liberal city and then contrasts this with the importance of liberalism.

#### *A neo liberal city?*

Once upon a time, in the late 1980s, Nicholas Ridley - a maverick neo liberal conservative minister within Mrs Thatcher government in Britain, in charge of local government - set the tone for his ideal view of local government. A local council would meet once a year to allocate contracts to various private firms running all the services. He had in mind a model where politics would be marginal, with low taxes, goals set by principles of efficiency, and economic development behaviours regulated by the discipline of enforced competition. Strong policing was however to be reinforced, including the massive development of surveillance cameras and police to control a population that could not be trusted. This may be defined as a sort of paradigm of the neo liberal city, including the capacity to impose competition,

destroy existing institutions by using state authority, illiberal surveillance, low tax, minimum welfare, and the marginalisation of politics and democracy.

Another example is provided by some of the neo liberal utopias of “new cities” i.e. avoiding tax, rules, undesirable populations (whoever they might be). Projects of smart, eco-, tax-free cities in Honduras, or South America, are not so far away from the neo liberal urban utopia, also in Dubai or in India (Datta, 2015).

According to our definition, one would be tempted to sketch an ideal type of the neoliberal city quite close to Nicholas Ridley’s pernicious dream. Every service would be privatised and cases of market failures would only lead to more privatisation. One would imagine large utility firms developing monopoly in different services but that would not be an issue. The welfare state would be dismantled and politics would play a residual role to define the rules of the game. More areas of social life would be commodified. The poor and the “undesirable” would be increasingly sent to jail and policing would be strengthened to maintain social order. All resistance to the idea of the superiority of the market would be destroyed. The idea would be hegemonic. Individuals would be incentivised to maximise their economic interests and would be sanctioned if not behaving in *homo economicus* terms. The labour market would be deregulated. All investments would rely upon private funding. Urban governance would consist in sanctifying property rights, defining rules and norms, creating patterns of insecurity and unpredictability to generate a social order based upon the constant adjustments to market norms.

Inequalities would lead to unstable social order, and the use of violence by state and urban authorities. Housing would be systematically financiarised, a financial asset for households (Rovnik, 2013). Land would be completely privatised, public spaces at the mercy of private individuals. Collective conceptions of public goods would be eradicated.

However, as J.Hackworth (2007) rightly argues in his book, “neo liberalism, like many other ism, is a highly contingent process that manifests itself, and is experienced differently, across space. The geography of neo liberalism is much more complicated than the idea of neo liberalism” (p.11). Indeed. Many scholars have tried to study the discrepancy between the neoliberalization project and ideology and its implementation in different context. Brenner, Peck and Theodore (2010) have suggested the term “variegated neo liberalization” to capture the “systemically produced geoinstitutional differentiation” under neoliberalism and stress that the malleability and inherent unevenness of neoliberalism can actually be its strength (p. 26). Analytically, they argue, we must combine the study of “local regulatory experimentation” with an investigation of “institutionalized rule regimes” (Brenner et al, 2010a: 35). They offer a strategy to analytically and empirically analyse the impact of neo liberalism even if the operationalization of the framework is far from obvious and is clearly influenced by their focus on the US or the UK<sup>xii</sup>. But all in all, even they remain rather vague to explain urban policy changes.

*Neo liberalism as a paradigm to explain urban transformations*

Are cities becoming neo liberal? Does neo liberalization or waves of neo liberalization explain urban change? We accept the analysis of the change of paradigm in economic policy, at least in some part of the world (Fourcade-Gourinchas, Babb, 2002). But things might be more nuanced for urbanization process and metropolises. There is no doubt about the neo liberal offensive, in particular in the US, UK and international organizations, and, to a much lesser extent, beyond those. The focus on the neo liberalization process, however central it might be, however runs the risk of making it difficult to identify those elements from other key characteristics inherent to capitalism or liberalism.

Understanding change in relation to a paradigm shift has been well documented by public policy scholars in particular. Thinking about paradigm changes to analyse public policy change is a classic subfield of the sociology of public policy and different conceptualisation and mechanisms have been put forward in particular by Hall (1993), Sabatier and Jenkins (1993), Jobert and Muller (1987), Fisher (2003) or Zittoun (2014). One might conceive for instance that in many cities the neo liberal paradigm may transform the ideas, the power relations, the actors, the substance, or the instruments of the policy. In other cases, the paradigm may be interpreted in terms of core beliefs of actors beyond their interest (Sabatier and Jenkins Smith 1993). In other cases, neo liberalism may not determine policies or urbanisation processes but may be used as a 'trendy label' by elites and opponents alike. Neo liberalism may also add a layer of political initiatives within a deeply institutionalised context. It may influence the content or the implementation of urbanisation processes, or urban policies to a small extent. All this has to be examined empirically.

After all, a great deal of urban restructuring rather reflects the changing scale of capitalism and the intensification of the liberal logic that has accompanied capitalism, a point also clearly stressed by D. Harvey (1989, 2005). Beyond issues strictly related to the economy, even the World Bank or the OECD have put aside the more neo liberal elements of their strategies in favour of the search for a liberal capitalist order including a concern for inequalities (market failure), climate change, health issues and gender equality. This is very far away from a progressive agenda, but that is not just neo liberalism. Indeed, in their 2010 paper, our three colleagues tended to present neo liberalism as the intensification of market logics or in other words the intensification of liberalism. The stress on hegemony and neo liberalization allowed the authors to explain that lots of processes are part of the neo liberalization process, that neo liberalism is hegemonic but always take different forms and that there are very different types of implementation in different context. The argument is not convincing. No wonder why privatization, partnership, NGOs, competition, governmental rationalisation may sometimes all be framed within the same package.

Historically, both urbanisation processes and the trajectories of cities were influenced by liberalism, to a smaller or greater extent, but that has taken different forms over time and in different contexts. In some parts of the world, and in different historical periods, the development of cities had nothing to do with liberalism. In Europe by contrast, the medieval and then Renaissance urban bourgeois were the vanguard of

liberalism. In European cities, liberalism was promoted to limit the influence of feudality, the king or religious and military authorities as eloquently analysed by Max Weber. In urban policy terms, cities have developed with public private partnerships, private capital, public interventions, political projects, calculating capacities, knowledge and equipments or ad hoc actions from various groups and organisations. Cities were also the result of political strategies and capitalist accumulation creating massive inequalities and differentiated power relations as stressed by Marx. In the European context, capitalism, welfarist nation states and war have strongly oriented urbanisation processes and the developments of cities. By contrast metropolises in the US are often seen as illustrations of the liberal city, more structured by market logics, property rights, private actors but also political strategies, policies, regulations and public investment following more liberal norms and rules. In other part of the worlds, many other processes have been central to the shaping of cities - from religion to colonisation.

In the Western world, cities and urban regions are highly governed environments, where many public policies are implemented, where the level of public goods and the level of regulation of the patterns of urban development is far from neoliberal, hence the importance of neo liberalism in attempting to destroy those existing institutions and policies, as seen in particular in the UK from Mrs Thatcher to today Cameron's government. Socialist ideas (sometimes), social democratic and environmental ones have often supported the rise of public policies, rules, or social redistributive policies (Le Galès 2002, Kazepov, 2005) now under pressure because of

austerity policies This high level of publicly-imposed order and public investment was called for by the extreme “liberal” complexity of the city as a decentralized interaction system (Storper 2014). Clientelism, institutional and political exchanges are far more important than neoliberalism to explain policy change in the European context and beyond.

Beyond Europe, many other metropolises are more or less governed, in a more or less linear way, for example by a centralising federal state and neo liberalism does not play a major role. In Mexico, Sao Paolo, New York, Delhi, the state (part of a federation) governs and defines the rules and the tax power for cities. But many policies are not implemented. In Istanbul, Moscow, Santiago, Shanghai, Djakarta, the central state is very important. Urban and/or central government governs, but to a smaller or greater extent, and not all the time hence the limited capacity to impose a supposedly hegemonic neo liberal order. Cities and urban regions are more or less governed by governments, and alternative formal or informal governance mechanisms are always combined uneasily with official institutions of government (Le Galès, Vitale 2013). The quest for the creation of social and political order in cities, the process of planning and implementing policies is always incomplete and fraught with contestation, implementation failure and lack of knowledge.

Let’s take the case of Istanbul for instance. A series of papers have now argued that the transformation of Istanbul is all about neo liberalism and that the Tahir square movement is an example of resistance comparable to the Occupy movement. Neo

liberalism explains Istanbul development (Karaman, 2013, Eder, Oz, 2015). Is that really so? It is not too difficult to provide ample evidence of the massive development of Istanbul over the last three decades, e.g. through the huge new housing schemes organised by the state agency TOKI to get rid of informal settlements, the Gecekondu. But the development of Istanbul reflects the political economic project of a group of conservative Muslim elites of the AKP party under the leadership of the increasingly authoritative leader Erdogan. That project includes water infrastructure, schools, hospitals, malls, mosques, transport infrastructure, police stations, stadiums, buildings for public institutions... and massive construction of social housing. It also includes a new financial district, massive new transport investment, and a giant mosque. One part of the story is about Istanbul's status in the competition between large globalising metropolises - not really a new issue that is grounded into neo liberalism. In that case, the mobilisation of neo liberalism as an explanatory framework hides interest groups - the conservative Muslim anti-Kemalist state project, the role of family-based interests (the Erdogan family, friends and foes together with islamic business interests) and the support of part of the urban middle classes and aspirational migrant population. The contemporary Turkish case might be more fruitfully be analysed as a particular religious version of the developmental state once identified and then revised by Peter Evans (2010), with a particular historical state inherited from the Ottomans and the Kemalist regime (Aymes, Gourisse, Massicard 2014), leaning towards authoritarianism. By contrast, the general explanation in terms of neo liberalism is both empirically very weak and reveals a naive analysis of the role of ideas on policy changes or about

the state. The same analysis would apply to contemporary analyses of many Asian or even more so, African metropolises (Fourchard and Bekker 2013).

Many processes of urban changes rather reflect liberal orientations, the pressure of globalised capitalism and political projects. Sometimes the neo liberal paradigm is central, but very often it is more a label used by elites to hide classic liberal unequal policies, rarely in the progressive sense. As mentioned in the first section of the paper, urban liberalism leads to privatization, low taxes, more consumer choices, some deregulation. Cities and metropolises may be far more resistant to neo liberalism than argued, particularly beyond the UK and the US. Classic liberal capitalism at a globalised scale is central as are political projects by different kinds of elites.

Urban policies are more often than not changing without neo liberalism. A good deal of urban policies change because of solutions invented by local actors to solve problems, because of political conflicts and interests (including those of private developers and others within urban growth coalitions), because of new regulations, policies, laws edicted at the national or international level, because of discrete institutional changes or because of the role of skilled social actors in developing new ideas (Fligstein, 1996). Urban policies change for many reasons which may or may not be related to neo liberalism (Le Galès 2015). The focus rightly put on neo liberalism has sometimes led to an overemphasis on what is « new ». Urban policies

are rarely new, and as public policy scholars know quite well, policies rarely die, they are reorganized with new combinations and new labels all the time.

Sometimes, neo liberalism is used as a clear paradigm leading to massive policy change as Loic Wacquant has convincingly argued in his analysis of the rise of the neo liberal penal state in the US, less convincingly elsewhere (2009). By contrast, policies might be intentionally developed within the neo liberal framework and may be painted or presented within a social democratic discourse.... or the other way around.

For instance, markets have many of their most notorious areas of failure in resolving the problems of the urban environment. Across the political spectrum of ideas and social theories, most would agree that many non-market forms of urban governance are thus necessary. These non-market forms of governance include rules for the use of land, and the public provision of infrastructure, police, social services transportation, education, planning, recreational and leisure and cultural opportunities, and many other kinds of urban public goods. Public policies are geared towards certain clientels and generate victims. Who benefits and who is excluded are always central questions. While there is significant conflict and disagreement as to which kinds of policies and governance systems to use, and about the specific types of outcomes desired, there are not many examples of neo liberal views according to which the city can be successfully governed uniquely through private action and market institutions.

## Conclusion

Neo liberalism is an important concept. In accordance to Peck, Theodore and Brenner, and against the post structuralist literature, the paper argues that analysing urban transformations through neoliberalization is an important task for urban scholars. Without succumbing to too much universalization, macro processes and various forms of political economy are important features to understand both urbanization processes and the trajectories of cities and metropolises. This requires some level of theoretical abstraction to define concepts. Neo liberalism is a macro level concept (used here as a paradigm) which has some influence on various urban worlds.

The paper argues that in order to identify the transformation related to neo liberalism and process of neo liberalization, it is useful to be more precise in the conceptualisation, possibly less abstract and to avoid an encompassing constructivist definition that leads to confusion, over generalisation, and too vague mechanisms or processes. Most cities, for the better and the worse, have been influenced by liberalism, the state and globalising capitalism but that must be combined with some forms of agency.

In this paper, two arguments have been put forward, amicably engaging with our colleagues Brenner, Peck and Theodore. Their strategy to give a vague ever changing

non definition of neo liberalism considerably weakens their claim that neo liberalism is the major force of urban restructuring, however smart the claim about “variegated neo liberalism” may be. Despite all the subtlety of dialectics, this can be seen as a serious contradiction. The paper therefore provides a more precise definition of neo liberalism by contrast to liberalism. Liberalism is rarely progressive and is concerned with the making of a social order dominated by bourgeois interests, whatever form that increasingly international upper class may take. With or without neoliberalism, globalised liberal capitalism is increasingly structuring the international order and the transformation of cities including inequalities. Political and social forces are at play to shape this order which for the moment seems more dominated by financial markets and market logics. Neo liberalism adds a different set of explanation for urban change, more related to a paradigm and a political project. Without essentializing it, other interpretations may be more fruitful for research.

Second, by contrast to national economic policies, urban policies and urban governance have not been reshaped so dramatically by neo liberalism. Rather, a more globalised capitalist and liberal order in the making appears as characterising the direction of change in many cities. There are cases and traces of neoliberalism, but not so often beyond the US/UK cases. Neo liberalism is an important question for critical urban research, but there is a risk of stretching a good idea too far.

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automatic use of the word to explain about anything related to urban change by a vague reference to neo liberalism. The paper does not come back on the history of neo liberalism (see Storper in this issue) The paper was mostly written while the author was visiting professor at the CEM, Centre for Metropolitan studies and at the Department of Political Science at the University of Sao Paolo (spring 2014) and at the Buffet Centre of Northwestern University, Chicago (spring 2015). The author thanks Eduardo Marques, Hendrik Spruyt and Bruce Carrughers for their support. Thanks to Alberta Andreotti, Claire Colomb, Gilles Pinson and the two referees for great comments.

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<sup>i</sup> That was also the strategy followed by Jason Hackworth for his book « The neo liberal city », 2007, also see Jessop 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> This is a classic position for scholars interested in the genealogy of concept and ideas. Famously dealing with the concept of state, Quentin Skinner (2009) and his group at Cambridge has developed the « Ideas in context » method: «...the term state. I consequently focus as much as possible on how this particular word came to figure in successive debates about the nature of public power.....to investigate the genealogy of the state is to discover that there has never been any agreed concept to which the word state has answered” (2009, p.325-326).

<sup>iii</sup> Indeed, there is a strong constructivist bias in most of the papers. However, in the 2010 paper « After globalization ? », Brenner, Peck and Theodore nailed down a more precise and conceptualization of neo liberalization (ie the process) in terms of « regulatory experimentation », « inter jurisdictional policy transfert » and « the formation of transnational rule-regime ». This conceptualization helps precisig how processes of neo liberalization have been extended (also see Dobbins and Simmons 2008 on that point), it does say much about neoliberalism.

<sup>iv</sup> see Storper (this issue), Stedman jones (2012), Dean (2014), Harvey 2005) , Peck, (2012), Bockman (2011), Centeno and Cohen 2012, Denord, 2007, Audier 2012, Dobbins and Simmons 2008

<sup>v</sup> Among many see Barry, 1976, C. Laval 2007, B.Hindness, 1988, M.Dean, 2010, Q.Skinner, 1978, Fawcett, 2014, Freedden, 2008

<sup>vi</sup> One could also develop ethical/philosophical elements such as conceptions of social justice

<sup>vii</sup> For a classic great critique see A.Sayer (1995)

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<sup>viii</sup> See Jessop 2002.

<sup>ix</sup> See Pecks's clear developments on the crisis and the search for more market solutions (2010, 2013)

<sup>x</sup> See the developments in Laval (2007) on the maximising of interest according to Bentham by contrast to Gary Becker.

<sup>xi</sup> A particular urban analysis of old form of neo liberalism, or an analysis of urban neoliberalism would be very interesting as sketched by Aalbers (2015). There may be distinctive urban roots of neoliberalism. This is a promising avenue but that is not our purpose here.

<sup>xii</sup> but see Peck and Theodore 2012 for an example.